



Shattered (Koa #5)

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Category: Dark Erotica

Description: Asher Wallace has been struggling with a recent leg injury that has changed his life. While the doctors tell him it's permanent, he refuses to believe them, biting back at anyone who has anything to say about it.

Lila Blake has been struggling since her divorce. Though over the heartbreak, she's still unhappy with her life, lashing out at those who try to help her. When her inconsiderate new neighbors wake her for the second night straight with loud music at all hours, she marches down there to give them a piece of her mind. Asher is vulgar and inappropriate, and Lila refuses to let him phase her. What starts as an intimidating flirtation comes to a head when Lila accidentally sends Asher an explicit video of herself. While Lila finds herself caught in a net of blackmail and anger, she sees something in Asher that makes her feel alive, even if it's hatred.

Lila knows exactly what she's doing as she dances with the devil next door, but her friends disapprove of her behavior, putting a bigger barrier between them than ever. After she's managed to push everyone away, she finds her life in jeopardy. And her only chance of survival?

Asher.

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Chapter 1

Asher

“Be careful with my shit!” I snap at the two movers carrying, and nearly dropping, my enormous flatscreen TV. One rolls his eyes, and Bane grips the sleeve of my T-shirt with a white fist as if to hold me back. “Why aren’t you helping?”

“Aren’t we paying them for that?” We’re sitting on our back deck in chairs we stole from the house next door, watching through the back door as the movers carry everything inside the front as slowly as possible.

I roll my eyes. “At this rate, we’ll be unpacking at midnight. Get off your ass.”

“Right, what’s your excuse?”

If eyes could cut through skin, Bane would have a hole where his face should be. While a decent friend would tread carefully around my fucked leg, Bane practically beats it with a stick. It’s like he never wants me to forget it.

“Do not make me regret letting you move here with me.”

“You would’ve gone crazy, hiding out here all alone.”

He may be right, but I’ll never admit that.

“I still don’t know why you were stupid enough to fuck Raven.”

I shoot a warning glare his way. “Bane.”

“Screw you, I’m allowed to be mad. It’s your fucking fault we had to leave Kingston and move in the first place, and why I haven’t gotten a paycheck in three months. You’re telling me you couldn’t get pussy anywhere else?” he growls.

“Bane, shut your fucking mouth before I shut it for you.”

Bane has been my best friend for years since he moved in as my roommate. We look more like brothers than Rocco and Rooney. We’re both tall and fit, with lots of muscle to show, and we have similar facial features, such as a square jaw, prominent nose, and brown eyes. Our only real difference is our hair, his being short and red and mine being longer and darker. We met when I put up an ad since rent is expensive and I had a two-bedroom. He went to college, though you wouldn’t know it. He started in forestry and quit after three months. From there, he moved on to personal training and then construction. He lost that job after getting drunk with two of his friends, one of whom operated an excavator. He talked that guy into swinging them around in his bucket and then threw them off a rock wall. They all lived, but their jobs didn’t. After that, I got Bane a job at the shop as the receptionist, where he worked until Raven took over when she got together with Rocco. Over the years of working there, Bane got into art, eventually becoming my apprentice. It’s been two years since he started on skin, and this career seems to be sticking for him. Thank fuck.

But even if he wasn’t my apprentice, I know Bane would have followed me after Rocco and Rooney turned on me. Neither of us has any family we actually like, so we’re all each other has, not that the stubborn asshole will admit it.

And neither will I.

I haven’t spoken to my parents in thirteen years since I moved out at eighteen, and

it's fine by me. They didn't give a fuck about me when I lived with them, so I don't know why they'd start caring after I left. While I've never lost sleep over it, it does sometimes rub me the wrong way that the two people whose job it was to give a shit about me just... didn't.

It's nearly five, and the movers continue to drag out the transfer of our things. Bane doesn't get up to help, and I don't give him shit for it. I know he'll be picking up my slack when unpacking.

There's a nice summer breeze out here; it feels cleaner than Kingston. It whips through the thick trees beyond my new backyard. There's a house beside me, the only other house along this bend in the road. It's deep yellow, with an enormous decorative sun facing the road. The lawn is freshly cut, the siding and shingles are clean, and even the silver SUV in the paved driveway is spotless. It looks so cheerful; the longer I stare at the property, the more I consider painting the brown exterior of my new house black to make it look like death next to the sun.

I turn my attention back to the movers just in time to see two of them carrying my bed frame through the doorway that leads to the den .

“What the fuck are you doing!?” I shout, making Bane jump beside me.

The movers freeze in place, the one in my view looking at me like a deer in the headlights.

“Why the fuck are you putting my bed in the den!? I told you it's going upstairs!”

“He told us to put it here,” the man says, motioning to Bane.

“I don't give a fuck what he said, put it upstairs!”

As the movers reluctantly redirect my bed, I feel my best friend turning to ice beside me. I slowly turn to him, my anger boiling.

“Don’t you have an appointment to get to?” Bane asks, running his fingers through his short red hair.

“Don’t fucking change the subject!”

Bane’s anger explodes across his face. “Just take the den as your bedroom, you stubborn asshole. Why do you make everything so fucking hard on yourself?”

“I can walk up a flight of stairs,” I growl.

“Until you overdo it, which you will, because you refuse to admit that you need something to help you get around like, I don’t know, a fucking cane? You’re gonna push yourself until there’s nothing left, and then you’ll fall down those stairs and break every bone in your body.”

Anger boils in my blood, and it takes all my strength not to punch Bane out for that one. “No one fucking asked you.”

“Fine, be a dick. Don’t you have an appointment to go to?” he repeats.

“It can wait. These guys will be done soon.”

“No, they won’t, and you know it. Go!” he snaps .

“I wouldn’t have let you move here with me if I knew you were going to nag me worse than my mother did back in the day.”

“Is that your line for everything now?”

“Fuck off. You’re still my apprentice; I am still technically your boss.”

Bane opens his mouth but makes the smart decision to shut it again.

My appointment is at the hospital. The parking lot has lots of free spaces, but there’s nothing available near the front except handicap spots. I can still hear what that asshole doctor in Kingston said when he told me to get a handicap parking pass. “You may not want it, but you’ll need it.” I’m pretty sure I told him to get bent.

I slam my car into park near the back of the lot and begin the long trek inside on foot. My damaged leg nearly gives out halfway up, and I catch myself on the bed of a truck, just managing not to fall on my ass as pain pulsates through my thigh.

Thankfully, I don’t have to walk much further before I’m directed to a stuffy waiting room. I sit there for a while, trying to discreetly rub my pained leg before I’m called into the exam room. A few minutes later, the doctor enters briskly, nodding a cold hello.

“Hi, Mr. Wallace. I’m Dr. Ramos; what can I do for you today?”

“You’re not the specialist,” I say simply.

“No, I’m not. She’s on leave at the moment, so I’m helping out. Thankfully, you don’t need a specialist,” he says as he sits at the desk.

“Perfect. My leg is fucked. How long before it’s un-fucked? ”

His brows pinch in confusion before he examines what must be my medical documents on the monitor on the desk. When he looks back at me again, he has that same abysmal expression that the bastard doctor in Kingston had when we spoke the last time.

“Your femur was shattered, it’s being held together with plates and screws. It won’t get any better than it is right now.”

Anger boils in me. “I want a second opinion.”

“I’m your third opinion, aren’t I?” His expression softens. “Asher, I know adjusting to something so serious can be challenging. We have resources that will help you.”

“Not interested.” Pain shoots through my leg when I stand up, and I fall right back into my chair.

“Why aren’t you using a walking aid?” he asks, almost bored.

“Not my style.”

“It’s been six months since your accident. You’re telling me you’ve never tried a walking aid? How many times have you fallen on your ass?” Ramos asks angrily as I stand again. “Do you wanna get injured worse?”

“I’m not using a fucking cane!” I snap.

“Would you at least sit down so we can talk? I have you for fifteen minutes, and there are some things we should go over.”

I hobble to the door before spinning in place and glaring at the doctor.

“I don’t think you hear me, doc. You can take your opinion and shove it up your ass.”

“You can’t keep running from this, Asher. You’ll only make it worse.”

“Eat a bag of dicks. ”

Halfway through the door, his hand clamps down on my forearm. Before he can speak, I turn around, burning a hole through his eyes with mine.

“My busted leg is not going to stop me from laying you out in a world of pain if you don’t let go of my fucking arm,” I hiss.

Ramos does the smart thing and immediately backs off.

By the time I make it back to my car, my leg is throbbing like hell. It does this when I walk too much, and it’s downright excruciating. I’m in no mood to be lectured, so I drive around for a while. When I return to the house, the movers are gone, and Bane is at the kitchen table, writing a list on scrap paper.

“How’d your appointment go?” Bane asks hopefully, not lifting his eyes.

“The doctor was useless,” I say, shifting my weight onto my good leg. All the movement has my leg throbbing.

Bane shakes his head. He’s tired of fighting this with me. “I’m going to pick up some groceries. Want the usual?”

“Yeah.”

Once Bane takes off, I go to the stairs, hellbent on mastering them before he sees me struggle. Thankfully, it has a railing on each side. Though the rails are narrow and challenging to brace against, I can use my arms to offset my weight and limp up the stairs. It takes longer than it should, and I’m tired when I reach the top.

Before going to my bedroom, I head into the bathroom beside it. Bane is the one who picked this house, so I didn’t know what I was walking into. My blood boils when I see the toilet low to the ground and the raised seat placed above it. The thing looks

untouched as if it was just bought from the handicap store or wherever people get this equipment from. In a fit of rage, I grab the thing by its handles and biff it into the bathtub with a massive crash.

There are no railings or anything to grab by the toilet, just a towel rail mounted to my right and the counter that I can reach, but it's too far away to be of any leverage. I yank down my pants and put all my faith in the mounted towel rail, putting most of my weight on it and utilizing the counter for balance. I lower myself about halfway down before my leg cramps, and I drop, tightening my grip on the towel rail. It rips straight out of the wall, and I'm gashed in the cheek by an attached screw as I bounce off the edge of the toilet and hit the ground, my legs tangling in my pants at my ankles. I toss the useless piece of shit rod and swipe my hand across my face, finding a sticky patch of blood. With pain lingering everywhere, I try to lift myself to the side of the bathtub and stumble, my left foot shooting out to hit the wall, sending pain pulsating into my busted thigh.

In a fit of blind rage, I somehow get myself to my feet before taking the towel rail and slamming it into the back of the toilet, cracking the porcelain. I use that rail to beat the fuck out of everything I can find, only stopping when the vanity mirror explodes in shards of glass.

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Chapter 2

Lila

When Ian and I bought this house, the first thing I did was paint sunflowers in the kitchen. Before we were even unpacked, I was on a ladder. This house was the first space that was mine, and sunflowers were always my favorite. At first, Ian agreed to put the sunflowers in the kitchen. Once he saw how much I loved them, he let me paint them almost everywhere. He smiled so much watching me.

Since he left, the sunflowers don't glow as much as they used to.

I'm making my morning coffee when Ian appears in my back door window, greeting me with a half smile. I'm still in my pajamas, a loose T-shirt, and baggy pants, but at least I brushed my hair for the first time in a few days. My ex-husband, in contrast, is impeccably groomed as always, with a clean shave, neat hair, and pearly white teeth .

He lets himself in, shutting the door behind him cordially. "Hey, sorry about this."

"It's fine," I say.

It's not fine. He hasn't set foot on this property since he left. We've seen each other, of course, but it's like the house is a boundary he doesn't cross anymore, which I've been grateful for.

Plus, I'm tired. I went to bed around one and was kept up for another hour because the dickheads who moved in next door were blasting music. That ugly old house is

the only one near mine on a sparse road, so the noise wouldn't have bothered anyone else. By the time two o'clock rolled around, I was getting ready to call the police, meaning my close cop friend Edgar, to come and sort the assholes out, but they thankfully shut it down. Whoever they are, they've already made horrible first impressions as neighbors.

"Coffee?" I offer.

He considers it for a moment too long before nodding. "Sure."

I pour a mug three-quarters of the way up and go for the sugar next, freezing in the process. I cock my head to the side, raising a brow, trying to rack my brain, but it's not there.

"I can't remember how you like your coffee." He usually drank tea with milk. He had coffee a few times per week, and I often made it for him, but I can't remember how.

"Lots of cream and sugar," he says gently.

Right. He drowns his tea in milk; he whitens his coffee. Even his alcohol he didn't like strong.

The opposite of how he likes his women, apparently.

Ian and I were married for four years. We explored BDSM early on in our marriage, and I fell into the role of the submissive. Ian tried to dominate me, but he was too soft to degrade me or treat me like a whore like I wanted him to. After we made some new friends at a kink club called Koa in our friend Turner's basement, I suggested an open marriage so we could explore our kinks further. He allowed me to do that but always refused to do it himself. When I broke down and suggested he sleep with his new employee, Allegra, to try to become more dominant, he finally agreed. They

started by switching roles, with Allegra as the domme and Ian as the sub, and that was where they thrived. When Ian told me the truth, that he's a submissive, I let him go. I knew he was falling in love with Allegra and that even though he still loved me, it wouldn't be enough. What I need sexually, Ian can't give me.

It's been about a year, and things have been okay between Ian, Allegra, and me. But they also know I am not okay, just like everyone else. Anyone with two eyes and a pulse can tell. I'm in misery. They all assume I'm still heartbroken, and I try to shut that down whenever possible. I'm not heartbroken anymore.

I'm just lost and alone.

I bring his coffee, and he takes it, thanking me. Then I return with my own and sit at the table across from him. These were our usual seats way back when. Unless friends are over, I sit at this table alone.

"How are you?" he asks.

I shrug. "Fine. How are you?"

He pauses. Something's up.

"Spit it out before I start to panic," I say.

"Everything's fine," he starts before sighing and averting his gaze. "I need to tell you something, and I'm not sure how you'll feel about it. But you need to know."

"You're pregnant?" I ask emotionlessly.

His brows pinch together. "Allegra's not pregnant..."

When he doesn't continue, I sigh. "Ian, I'm exhausted. Just spit it out."

He takes a deep breath before finally coming out with it. "I've asked Allegra to marry me."

My eyes widen in response. "Holy shit, you two aren't wasting any time."

He smirks. "Well, neither did we."

"No, you're right," I admit.

We married after only a year, though he wasn't transitioning from another relationship when he met me. I'm just... Angry.

But I'm not angry at Ian. I know how he loves. He falls hard and fast and gives everything, and Allegra does the same. Ian's a good man, a proper gentleman in every sense. He's even having this conversation with me now, so I force a smile.

"I'm happy for you."

He sees right through me, but he's got it all wrong.

"Thanks. We're announcing it tonight at Koa. If you don't want to be around for the announcement, I can let you know before it happens."

"Yeah, thanks."

He's not offended. Instead he offers a soft smile, and I force my own, wishing I didn't have to. Wishing the prospect of him and Allegra getting married didn't scare the hell out of me.

Shortly after Ian leaves for work, I hear some crashing on my back deck as I pull my scrub top over my head. I rush down to the back door in the kitchen, instantly relaxing when I spot a curtain of long red hair through the window. I roll my eyes as I open the door and step out onto the deck in my sock feet. It's just after eight, and the sun is already beating down, warming my cheeks.

Juliet has hauled an enormous weighted punching bag up three steps and onto my back deck, and I have no idea how she did it. She's tall and fit, sure, but she would not be the one I'd call if I needed heavy lifting done, that's for sure.

She positions it in the center of my deck before straightening her back and letting out a sigh, her perky eyes meeting mine as she finally notices her audience.

"Morning," she says in a singsong voice. The woman is thirty-four, five years older than me, but she acts like a teenager sometimes. She wakes up with boundless energy, which is exhausting when I need at least two cups of coffee before I'm a human being.

I try to formulate the question and don't know what I'm asking. Instead, I settle on a confused arm gesture and a "what?"

"Ian told me you might need something to punch this morning, so I swiped this from Gareth."

I sigh in disbelief. "Seriously?"

"Yes, seriously." Juliet drops into one of my deck chairs, making herself at home. "So, what is it? Is she knocked up? I wouldn't be surprised, the woman's fertile fucking Myrtle."

She's not wrong. Allegra's already been pregnant twice. "She's not pregnant."

“So they’re getting married,” Juliet says, noting the obvious next guess.

It’s not my secret to tell, but the look on my face must give her the answer as her brows lift.

“Just don’t say anything. They’re making the announcement tonight.”

She doesn’t react; instead, her eyes narrow on me with concern. “You okay?”

“I’m fine,” I say simply.

“You should call in sick, and we’ll spend the day together.”

I shoot her a glare. “You know I can’t do that.” I’ve called in sick four times in the last two months. If I do it again, Dr. Parr is going to be pissed.

“I could eat you out before you go.”

“What?” I balk.

“Oral. Fellatio. Do you want me to spell it out for you? Because I can, on your clit.”

“What a charming and generous offer,” I mumble.

“You enjoyed it at the lake, in front of everyone.”

I roll my eyes. “That was a show for the guys.”

“Macy thought it was hot too, she told me.”

“Juliet... What is this about?” I sigh.

Finally, she spits it out. “Turner may have wanted me to check in on you, too.”

My blood boils as I bounce to my feet. “Can anyone just ask me a direct fucking question!?”

She winces. “To be fair, you’ve been a little explosive lately. They just wanted to make sure you’re okay. ”

Juliet has been my friend for ages, but I wouldn’t exactly call her the sensitive one. “And they sent you?”

“No, they asked Macy, but I was right there both times, and I guess I beat her to the punch.”

“That makes a lot more sense.”

Hurt flashes in her eyes, and I regret my words. I shouldn’t have said that.

“Thanks, I really appreciate that,” she snaps, jumping back to her feet and heading towards her car.

“I’m sorry, Juliet,” I yell.

She stops, turning on her heels to shoot me an irritated look. “This is why Turner and Ian wanted me to check on you. I brought you a punching bag so you’d stop using people instead.”

She doesn’t give me time to apologize before she climbs into her car and takes off.

I consider avoiding the party altogether. Juliet’s pissed at me, and part of me doesn’t want to be there for the announcement. But if I’m not there, it’ll only feed more into

everyone's assumption that I'm heartbroken. So, despite how badly I'd rather cuddle up on my sofa alone with popcorn and some movies, I throw together a charcuterie board with what I have on hand, put myself together, and head over.

Turner lives on a large property in a beautiful house. I drive my car down the long driveway to the back of the house, where a parking area is packed with cars. Some loud chatter confirms that everyone is in the courtyard. All members of Koa have entry codes to Turner's back door, so I use mine to head inside. Past the entryway, I see Juliet and Turner in the kitchen. Juliet immediately averts her eyes and leaves through the door to the courtyard, which makes me feel like shit.

I step into the kitchen, feeling Turner's eyes on me the whole time as I set my platter on the table, adding to the monstrous spread of food.

"Can we talk before you go out?" Turner asks.

I sigh, finally meeting his gaze. He's riddled with concern, and I don't want to deal with it, but he won't let me avoid it. "I guess."

"I wanted to check in and see how you're doing. You don't seem like yourself these days."

"And what, you couldn't find anyone else to check on me?"

His expression sours with the beginnings of anger. "Don't be angry with Juliet. She's concerned. We all are."

"Well, you don't need to be, I'm fine. And I'd appreciate it if you all stopped talking about me behind my back."

I try to push past him to get to the door to the courtyard, and he stonewalls me,

blocking my path.

“Why don’t we go downstairs? You haven’t been to Koa in a while, have you?” he asks, gentler this time.

“No thanks.” When I try to push past him again, he still doesn’t stand aside to let me pass. “Turner...”

“When’s the last time you had sex?”

I steel. “Why is that your business?”

“Because you used to come to me at least three times a week, and you seem to have completely lost interest. You used to be a sex machine.”

Why is that my title? “People can change, you know. ”

He softens. “I get that. But I don’t think that’s what this is. I think you’re depressed.”

“Oh fuck off.”

“Lila, watch your mouth!” he growls. “I’m not here to give you hell. I want to help you.”

I glance out the door, seeing my friends are all out there. They’re laughing, having a great time.

“Y’know what, tell everyone I said hi. I’m not feeling good.”

“Lila!”

I turn on my heels and head for the back door, feeling the weight of the world on my shoulders. “I don’t wanna be here right now,” I growl, slamming the door behind me.

It’s after ten when my phone rings, and I accept the call and lift it to my ear.

“Hey.”

“Hey, want some company?” Macy asks softly.

“Sure. Key’s under the mat, I’m in bed.”

“With clothes on, I hope.”

I chuckle. “Get up here.”

A few minutes later, I hear her truck pull into my driveway. I listen through the open window beside me that faces my driveway and the house next door as she enters, kicks off her shoes, and softly treads up the stairs. My cracked door springs open a moment later, and she slips inside, her curly blonde hair taking up half her small frame. Wordlessly, she crosses the room and gets under the covers with me, staring up at the ceiling to match me.

“Ian must’ve told you ahead of time,” she says.

I turn towards her, and she matches me as our eyes meet, and I nod.

“You haven’t said much about this whole situation from the beginning, you know,” Macy says gently.

She’s right. I have kept my mouth shut about the whole Ian/Allegra situation. I’m still friends with both of them, aren’t I? I care about them both.

“What’s there to say? I let him go.”

She reaches out to take my hand, something she always does, and squeezes it.

“I hate this house,” I say, letting a couple of bitter tears spill.

Her brows knit together in surprise.

“It was never my house; it was our house. Being alone in here... It’s so fucking loud it’s deafening. Yes, I’m over him. Yes, I’ve let him go. But now it’s just me in this big stupid house, and everyone around me is in love.”

Macy winces as she realizes exactly what I mean.

“It’s not like you’re all throwing it in my face or anything.” Allegra and Ian repel like two magnets whenever they see me looking. “I’m just... Lonely for something that no one here can give me.”

“Love?” Macy asks softly.

I nod, my tone growing more playful as I try to pull myself together. “And mind-blowing sex.”

She chuckles. “You’re saying no one here has given you mind-blowing sex? ”

“Do you want me to tell you about your husband?” I joke.

Her mouth snaps shut, her eyes widening.

“Macy, I’m joking. Turner’s probably the best. But we don’t fit together that way. Plus, I couldn’t do that to Juliet.”

“Does she have feelings for Turner?” Macy asks in surprise.

“I think she does, but she’ll never admit it.”

“Why not?”

“Turner doesn’t do relationships.”

Macy frowns. “I hope that’s not true forever. He needs love just like anyone else.”

Just like me...

“Are you missing the party?” I ask.

“No. I was leaving anyway. It was getting pretty loud, way more than usual. Chaos still gives me anxiety.”

“I don’t blame you.”

Macy has gone through more devastation than anyone I’ve ever known. We met when she moved to Alton about a year and a half ago. Before she came to us, Macy had been held hostage, raped, and brutally tortured by her stepbrother Colin for days. He shot her in the back and left her to die, but Macy managed to survive and escape. We knew something was up when we met her, but no one could imagine. Eventually, Colin came back for her, abducting her from Gareth’s house while he was at work. We all came together to find her. Gareth got shot during her rescue, but he survived, and Macy got away with some broken fingers and minor injuries.

The story of what happened to her was her darkest secret, and it all came to light during her rescue. After she came home, she needed time to open up. It was hard to listen to, and it made me physically sick. Neela and Allegra hadn’t moved to town

yet, so it was just Juliet and me, and Juliet works away often. Macy and I bonded during that time. She needed me to be strong, and I was there for her when she needed me.

“Do you wanna talk?”

She pauses, her shoulders rising and falling with each deep breath. Eventually, she brings herself back down.

“Sometimes, I close my eyes and still feel him behind me. I can hear him threatening Gareth...”

Her eyes tear up, a deep sadness clawing its way out.

“I had a nightmare last night, the first one in a long time.”

“What was it about?”

Her lip quivers. “A play-by-play of him threatening Gareth.”

I remember every detail she told me about that story, and it gives me chills to think about it. Colin came for Macy while she was alone at Gareth’s house. She fought him off and got to safety, but Colin had her phone and threatened to text Gareth and set a trap to shoot him. Macy asked him to take her and spare Gareth, and he was true to his word. He took her away and left Gareth.

“How hard was it? To open that bathroom door?” I ask.

“The hardest part... But I couldn’t fight him; I never would’ve won. It was hard to wait for just the right moment.”

She's said those exact words before, and they haunt me every time. To be so terrified, and in so much pain, and to be forced to endure it, knowing there's no hope of escape... To have to wait for just the right moment...

I don't know what fucking clock my asshat neighbors are going by, but naturally, I wake up to Macy grabbing my arm as an obnoxious rock song comes blaring through the window, sending us both flying straight up in bed. Once my heart beats again, confirming it didn't stop, I glance past Macy, who's stiff as a board and wide-eyed. The clock on my bedside table reads almost one.

"These motherfuckers kept me up last night, and now they're even louder!"

Furiously, I throw the blankets off me, crawling out of bed to step up to the French window. It's large and overlooks the house next door and both driveways.

And finally, I see one of my neighbors.

He's outside, camped out on their back deck in a lounge chair, and I have a clear view of him from the deck lights. He's slumped in his seat with his feet up and a beer in his hand. He adjusts a large speaker sitting beside him. The guy is large in frame, clean-shaven, with sharp facial features, red hair, and fully tattooed arms. I watch him shout something towards the door, though I can't hear what he says. Then, the second man steps onto the deck, stopping just outside the door with a beer in his hand, taking my breath away.

Jesus christ...

He's also tall and built, with a colossal chest and thick tattooed arms. His dark crew cut matches his thick, downturned black brows. He has a huge cut on his cheek, and his eyes are dark and piercing as they move over the deck, taking in the scene of his friend and his sound system. I've never met a guy who screams danger as much as

this one, even when compared to Turner and Gareth.

And then, he moves .

With my bird's eye view, I can spot his limp. He favors his right leg, and I see the side of his wince as he steps, walking around his friend and shielding him from seeing, which seems odd to me. They're either roommates or partners, so why is he hiding a limp from him?

When I don't move, Macy hurries out of bed and joins me at the window, peeking out beside me, and she sucks in a sharp breath.

"Please keep your doors locked..." she says.

I know why she says that, because she's broken, and everyone in the world is a threat to her. But I'm not broken. "They don't scare me."

"Lila, what're you gonna do?" Macy asks nervously, grabbing me by the arm. "Lila!"

I shake off her arm, glaring at her. "I'm gonna tell them to fuck right off!"

"Yeah, that's what I was afraid of!"

When I push the ajar windows wide open, Macy grabs my arm.

"Lila!"

To Macy's horror, I don't listen.

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Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 3:14 am

Chapter 3

Asher

It took us a day and a half to unpack, but we managed to get the place looking not so bad. Neither of us wanted to be tripping over boxes and shit for weeks, so we got everything done in one go.

We finish after midnight, and I have to shower and change, my clothes drenched in sweat. Though I could hardly handle standing for another minute, it was worth it when I came out feeling refreshed.

Bane brings out a speaker and blasts some hard rock while we chill in the chairs we stole from the Sunshine House.

“I checked out our shop; it looks pretty good besides the barf pink walls. I’ll pick up some paint and throw the first coat on tomorrow,” Bane says.

“Go dark grey. I’ll frame and hang some of our designs on the walls.”

“When are you gonna have time to do that?” Bane asks.

“You’re taking all of our customers for now.”

Bane rolls his eyes. “This isn’t some self-deprecating bullshit, is it?”

I ignore his snide comment. “It just makes sense. I want you to get as much

experience as possible so I can let you go solo.”

“I’m already going solo. I hardly need you.”

“Great, well, soon you really won’t need me,” I grumble.

It’s not just for him. My spark is basically gone. I just can’t fucking do it right now. Everything feels so heavy.

“You wanna tell me what happened in the upstairs bathroom?” Bane asks, motioning to his cheek, pointing out the massive gash on mine that’s faded into a pink line.

“Not particularly.”

“I cleaned up the mess. You’re welcome.”

“Did you throw that fucking toilet seat in the garbage?”

“It came with the house, Ash,” he says, annoyed.

“Bull fucking shit.”

Our fight is halted when my phone goes off on my chest, and I check it. It’s from Jared, and it’s a picture of a HORRIBLE tattoo that I can’t even make out. It’s faded and splotchy; it looks like it was picked while healing or just butchered out the gate. A single word follows.

Jared: Help.

Asher: You better be fucking joking.

Jared knows better than that. He'd never pick a tattoo or go to an artist who would butcher one like that.

Jared: Yeah, I am. I knew that I'd get some kinda response from you tho .

Motherfucker. I've been ignoring him for weeks now. Shit's been too heavy. A moment later, he calls me, and Bane raises a brow as I answer, lowering the volume of the music from deafening to just ear-splitting. I have to max the volume on my phone to actually hear.

"Fuck you," I growl at Jared.

"Fuck YOU! Where have you been? Rocco and Rooney told me you're dead," he says casually, as though he never believed it.

"That doesn't surprise me. I'm not dead, I had to leave town, and shit's been crazy, but I'm finally settled. Sorry about that." It's a crap apology, but it's all I've got.

"Where are you, and are you back to work?"

"Bane and I moved to Alton, and we're back to work in a few days. What do you actually want?"

"My back is completely bare, I'm thinking an enormous dragon head, straight on, too big to comprehend.

It sounds like a monster project, exactly what I don't want right now. I just... can't.

"I won't be tattooing for a while; we're still trying to get the shop up and running. Bane's taking all of our clientele for now."

Jared pauses. “Oh.”

“Yeah. I’m sure Rocco can get you in, though.”

“I want the dragon in realism. What about Bane? Do you think he could pull it off?” he asks, completely missing the point.

“I know he could. But you realize Rocco and Rooney will have our heads if we pawn you.”

“Then don’t tell them. I never see them as is; they’ll never know.”

Jared’s right, and he’s not one to bullshit. I know he won’t cross us .

“I’ll text you Bane’s number, and you can review everything with him.”

“Thanks man, I’ll be in touch.”

Once I hang up, I copy and send him Bane’s number. “Jared wants a dragon head on his back.”

“And he’s settling for me?”

“Yeah, he is.”

He chuckles. “Fine with me. But we might want to do something about the chick next door.”

“What?”

Bane points to the Sunshine House, where I see the Sunshine herself, hanging her

head out of a window.

And she's pissed.

She looks like a doll, so tiny and porcelain. Her light hair is in a messy bun with pieces falling around her face. Her brows are sharply downturned, and her enormous fucking owl eyes pierce me like a goddamn knife. I can see her lips moving furiously, but I still can't hear her, even with the music lowered for my phone call.

"Turn that off," I tell Bane.

Bane shuts it down, and she shakes her head at me, angrily throwing up her arms.

"What?" I shout back, playing dumb.

She explodes. "Turn the fucking music down, you assholes! "

"Language!" I gasp. "It's not polite to yell and swear so late at night, Sunshine."

"Oh, get fucked, dick bag!"

I'm genuinely shocked. This chick doesn't know what tree she's barking up .

"Why don't you come down here and say that? Preferably with no clothes on." It's a direct challenge. I was trying to make her blush, but she only huffs and sticks her head back in the window. A moment later, she storms out of her back door, using the flashlight on her phone to light her way.

What the fuck?

She's not naked but wearing the next best thing: pajama shorts low on her perfectly

rounded hips and a thin top with tiny straps that don't reach her shorts, leaving a bit of skin showing. As she enters the light on the deck, I realize her nipples are visible through her shirt. Her tits are so small they're almost not there, a cute contrast to her wider hips. I muster every bit of muscle, bracing against the chair to help me stand in a way that looks normal in time for her to stop in front of me, face to face. She only comes up to my neck, and even then, she cranes hers up as she stops, leaving only inches of space between us.

“Get fucked, dick bag, I believe was what I said,” she snaps, on full offense. “It’s what someone says to two obnoxious guys who are blasting music at one in the fucking morning, you inconsiderate pricks !”

I can't take her seriously. She's got a lot of balls to be mouthing off to a couple of guys over twice her size without backup. There's a pickup with the SUV in her driveway, but I'm guessing it belongs to the other blonde peeking out the window of the Sunshine House with more brains and less balls than this one.

“You forgot to take your clothes off,” I say, teasing.

Her eyes narrow in rage. “Go fuck yourself.”

“I'd rather fuck you, Sunshine. You run, I'll give you a head start. ”

Something interesting flares in her eyes. It's not exactly disgust and certainly not embarrassment. Before I can place it, she masks it with a cocky sneer.

“I've seen you walk; I think I can outrun you.”

My expression steels as rage boils in me, the flirtation gone, and this fucking chick doesn't bat an eye, her glare still locked on me. I lean in just enough to crowd her, my eyes piercing hers, but she doesn't shrink beneath my gaze. She holds her ground,

and that pisses me the fuck off.

“Watch it, little bitch,” I sneer.

She raises a brow, almost unbothered. “What, am I supposed to be afraid of you?”

“You should be. We’re not gay, Sunshine, and you’re over here all alone tempting us,” I say, a clear threat, just as I hear a vehicle approach and stop in front of the house.

She doesn’t even bat an eye; she takes a short half-step back as her angry expression returns. It’s a clear challenge as she puts that tough girl mask back on.

“Just turn off the fucking music.”

“I will, under one condition. Let me put my number in your phone. Y’know, in case you ever need some cock.”

She rolls her eyes, and I still can’t figure out what she’s thinking. Then she pulls her phone from her shorts that sit far too high on her lush little thighs, and she opens a new contact on her phone and hands it over. I put my number in and return it to her.

“Asher,” she says, looking at my name before lifting her eyes back to mine, conniving. “Great, now I can block you.”

“Lila! ”

A man approaches calmly from around the corner. He’s tall and looks like he sucks dick for a living with his gelled-back hair and meek eyes. As he walks up the steps, he flashes me the badge at his hip. He’s a cop.

“Everything alright here, gentlemen?” he asks sternly, his hands firmly on his hips. The girl, Lila, keeps her eyes glued on mine, not even turning to see the new addition to the party.

I flash him a fake smile. “Of course. Our neighbor Lila here kindly asked that we turn down our music. I think it might’ve woken her up.”

The cop literally wraps an arm around Lila, pulling her back from me. Her furious posture vanishes, replaced with comfort. She still doesn’t look at him, so she must know who he is. I wonder if she’s fucking him, but I doubt it.

“Goodnight, gentlemen. Please, keep the music down,” the man says as he directs her down the steps. They bicker as they head towards her house, still audible, but Lila stops and turns on her heels, shooting an amused glare my way.

“Oh, and when you’re done with my chairs, put them back, and then stay off my fucking property.”

“Might I suggest a new coat of paint? Maybe black?” I say, motioning to her house. “Space called; it needs its sun back.”

She sneers at me, and the cop yanks her away, forcing her to turn around.

“Everything was fine!” Lila growls.

“Yeah, what could’ve possibly gone wrong?!” he asks shortly, raising his voice.

“They were being assholes! ”

“You need to knock this shit off, you don’t know them, they could’ve been psychos!”

The cops' analysis makes me chuckle because he's not far off. I watch him ensure she gets inside and hear him tell her to lock her doors. He waits there for a moment until the other blonde girl comes out. She's younger than Lila, maybe in her early twenties, while Lila looks closer to her late twenties. She's got long, curly blonde hair that engulfs half her body, making a curtain behind her as she hurries along with the cop. He walks her to her truck, just at the other end of the driveway, out of view. I hear it pull out and the sound of a car door opening and closing, but no engine. The cop's going to stick around for a bit to ensure we don't go after her.

But something tells me she'd like that.

"What a psycho bitch," Bane says, in awe of Lila's idiocy.

"Don't get any ideas," I steel.

I think I've found something to keep me entertained in this shit town.

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Chapter 4

Lila

E dgar wanted me to spend the night with him and Nash. At first, I thought he was ridiculously overprotective, but now I think he was concerned that I would be the problem, as if I'm going to go mouth off to those two asshats again. They've turned the music off, but they're still sitting in my chairs.

It's tempting...

I know I'm no prude, but whatever happened out there was way out of pocket. Where in god's name did Asher get the balls to flirt so offensively with me!? The anger has my whole body clenched as if I might implode.

In my rage, I text Juliet.

Lila: I know you're pissed at me, but I'm sorry, and I have the tea.

Juliet: You're forgiven. I'm sorry, too .

While I start to type, my phone rings, and I answer, putting it on speaker and laying it on the bed beside me.

"What happened?" Juliet asks, her interest piqued.

I explain the entire encounter to her, true down to every last word, and she eats it up

the whole time.

“I know what would make you feel better. Make a sex tape.”

And as if I couldn't get any more pissed off, Juliet manages to hit that nerve.

“Are you for real?”

“Oh, come on! You used to be a sex machine!”

“Juliet, how many times do I have to tell you? I'm straight!”

“At least a few more times.”

I can't listen to this shit anymore, so I hang up. In a fluster of fury, I scroll back through my phone to videos and pictures from years ago. I find one from a couple years back, a solo video I'd sent to Ian while he was at work.

I'm sitting in bed, fully clothed in plain black pants and a white top. My hair was shorter and lighter back then, but now it's longer and more dirty blonde. Even though it's only a couple of years old, I look different. I was still so bright back then, full of life.

There's no talking in the video; it's silent, other than the soft sound of my breathing. I slide my hand up my sternum, taking my shirt with it, exposing my stomach and the bottom of my breasts.

I make a show of removing my top, and with no bra underneath, my breasts come free. They're small, but I've always liked how delicate they look and how I don't need to wear a bra. I spend some time kneading my breasts, cupping them in my small hands, and pinching my nipples, bringing a flush of pink to both my nipples

and cheeks before moving down. I begin by sliding my palm into the front of my pants, making more of a show than anything, knowing it's impossible to touch myself effectively inside a pair of tight pants. Once I take them off, leaving me in just a thong, I turn around on all fours to give a POV shot of my ass and squeeze my cheeks before peeling the thong down.

I press my thighs together, giving a view of my pussy while it's closed, and run my fingers through my soft, smooth folds. Once I'm satisfied, I turn around to sit down and open my legs slowly to reveal myself.

The video is only a few minutes long, and the bulk of the rest of it is me playing with my pussy with my fingers, inserting them to gather some moisture, and using that moisture to create a slippery sheen over my clit as it swells to life. As I get closer to the end, my whimpers grow louder until I come with a satisfying, drawn-out moan.

After watching my pussy pulse from the contractions, I let out a breathless sigh, a sheen of sweat gathering across my cheeks, growing more obvious as I pick up the phone, bringing the focus straight up to my face.

"I love you, baby. Have a good day at work; see you later at Koa," I say before winking and turning off the video.

Once Juliet sees that ending, she'll realize the video is old and not for her, if my hair doesn't give it away early. Maybe this is harsh, but Asher set me the fuck off, and this is where I'm at.

After attaching and sending the video, I can now focus on Asher. He wants sunshine? I'll give him fucking sunshine. But it wouldn't hurt to get some help. I know Neela's got to be asleep since it's the middle of the night, but she'll get my text in the morning .

Lila: Hey, wanna fuck with my ass that new neighbors? I'm decorating tomorrow to make it look like the sun threw up on my house.

Neela: Hell, yes. I have to head into Madison for some supplies anyway. Can we leave around 10?

Oh wow, she is awake. Marina, her daughter, must be up.

Lila: Done. We'll take my SUV. I'll pick you up at 10.

Just as I send the last text to Neela, another text comes in, and I open it to see a response to my video.

Thanks, Sunshine, what an unexpected surprise. Didn't know you had it in ya.

It takes me a moment to register.

Oh no. No... There's no fucking way... I practically hold my breath as my eyes drift up to the recipient of the thread, where Juliet's name should be. But it's not Juliet.

It's Asher.

My vision blurs as I frantically click on the video to unsend it, and a notification pops up beside it.

He downloaded it.

My fingers pound the glass furiously as I type out my next message.

Lila: DELETE IT! NOW! IT WAS NOT FOR YOU!

Asher: Sure it wasn't.

That motherfucker. There's no way in hell I'm letting him keep that video.

They've moved inside, and my lawn chairs are neatly folded and stacked beside their back door, a clear middle finger to me. I charge straight up the two steps onto the back deck and immediately grab for the handle, finding it unlocked. Not a rational thought goes through my head as I yank the door open and charge inside, slamming it behind me.

I find them in the den, sitting on opposite ends of a long sofa. Asher's eyes flicker to me with amusement. He stands up as I stop in the doorway. He's slow and calculated in the movement, and even in my rage, I notice how much effort he puts in to make that movement look effortless, favoring his right leg and hardly putting any weight on the left, his bad one.

"Oh, look, Bane, she's here for a live show," Asher says. Bane's eyes don't even peel from the TV. But I'm not paying attention to him.

"Fuck you!" I snap.

"I almost didn't recognize you with your clothes on," Asher says, a cocky smile pulling at his lips.

I charge straight at him, stopping and craning my neck up to burn his fucking face with my goddamn eyes. With only a foot of space between us, my pulse is racing with fury. Bane chuckles, and my eyes narrow at Asher's.

"Did you fucking show him?"

It's like a switch flips in Asher's eyes. Suddenly, I'm being consumed by two black

orbs of pure predator. “You’d like that if I had.”

“Show me what?” Bane asks, taunting me.

As Asher turns to Bane, a taunting smile pulling at his lips, my anger breaks loose. I pull my hand back, and it claps as my palm collides with Asher’s cheek, forcing his head to the side. The room stills, and I swear no one breathes as a tense moment passes.

When Asher finally turns, he’s seething, his voice like molten lava.

“Sunshine, you are barking up the wrong tree. Get the fuck out of my house.”

“Delete the video,” I seethe.

“What video?” Bane asks.

As Asher turns his head to Bane and begins to open his mouth, I snap. I press two hands against his shoulders and push, but he’s far larger than me and hardly sways. Another silent, non-breathing moment passes before all hell breaks loose.

An inhuman noise flies out of my mouth as his hand collides with my throat, squeezing either side of my neck. I’m knocked off my feet, and at first, I think I might hit the floor, but instead, my head slams against a wall. My throat is closed off, and I clench my eyes shut. As he loosens his grip to allow me a sliver of a breath, I peel my eyes open, and they lock on those black orbs again as warmth rushes to my core, and a shaky moan slips from between my lips. The sinister grin from Asher chokes me more than his hand around my windpipe.

“I knew you were a dirty slut, but this is even better.”

His words light me on fire, and it's at that moment that I realize I have arms. They flail out, and I get a few hard punches to his chest before he releases my throat and grabs both my arms above my elbows, slamming them back into the wall. He leans his weight into my arms, keeping a little space between us, and even with a bad leg, he overpowers me almost effortlessly.

“Come on, Sunshine, just admit it. You're here for that cock I offered earlier.”

“I'm not your fucking sunshine!” I hiss.

He raises a brow. “Oh, I think you are mine. Because if you remember, I have a pretty inappropriate video of you on my phone.”

Bane, who hasn't moved an inch, speaks again, his voice raised with interest. “What's this fucking video?”

“Lila sent a pretty video of all her goods, including her face. It'd be a shame if that were to get out.”

My nostrils flare. “You wouldn't.”

“Well, a good girl wouldn't make a video like that. Which makes you a dirty little slut.”

“Go fuck yourself.”

“I'd rather fuck you, I told you already. Come on, Sunshine. Just admit you're a dirty little slut, and I'll let you go. I'll delete the video, and we can forget this ever happened. Just admit it.”

A rage unlike any I've ever felt takes over, burning up my entire body. He's not

getting shit from me. “Still planning on chasing me? I’ll still outrun you.”

It’s clear I’ve hit a nerve when his already black eyes darken right before me. The only problem is he doesn’t scare me. And the more I remind him of that, the more it pisses him the fuck off. I gather some saliva into my mouth, and he sees it coming and grabs my hair, tightening it. When I spit at him, it misses, and the pain firing through my scalp immobilizes me.

He leans back against the side of the chair beside him as he plunges a hand into my shorts, stopping on my bare mound as my blood runs cold.

“Bane, grab my phone, look up the video,” Asher says .

I’m powerless as Asher’s rough, calloused fingers brush against my clit, finding it slick. He presses hard, sending sparks through me, then follows the moisture to a pool at my entrance.

“Fucking soaked,” Asher says.

A moment later, the movie on the TV shuts off, silencing the room so I can hear the video. He cranks the volume to full blast as my own soft, sensual moans fill the room.

As if in a trance, my body sags, but Asher manages to keep me pressed against the wall, supporting himself on the side of the chair. The pain in my scalp doesn’t lessen, but part of me doesn’t care if this fucker rips every hair out of my head.

As long as I get away.

I pull on strength I didn’t know I had, strength I’ve never needed to use. It takes everything I’ve got to squirm away from his fingers, but I’m still trapped against the wall. Panic rises as sweat beads on my forehead.

There's nothing I can do as two fingers plunge deep inside me, filling me all at once and making a thunderous moan shoot from my lips as my entire pelvis clamps onto him like he's my life vessel.

"You are wound so tight, Sunshine. When's the last time you were fucked by anything but your battery-operated boyfriend?"

I can't find the words to answer as my body entire body tenses for a storm of a climax after less than four seconds. As the sound of my climax on the video finishes, my declaration of love to Ian plays.

"Is that your husband that I need to take care of?" he asks.

Jesus fuck. "Stop!" I growl, pounding against his chest, but he's like a brick wall. I'm completely powerless .

That thought pushes me off the cliff, contracting my entire body from my fingers to my toes before releasing in an explosion that leaves me quivering against the wall.

As the pulsing begins, his fingers become too much, and I cry out. "No!"

He doesn't stop, assaulting my pussy with his fingers and paralyzing me. "Take it," he growls.

"She's squirting everywhere," Bane says casually.

"Record this, you dumb fuck!"

"No, stop it!" I plead.

Suddenly, my head is hoisted against the wall, and his eyes are locked two inches

from mine.

“It doesn’t hurt, you’re overstimulated, and you can fucking take it like the nasty little slut you are.”

It’s too much, and it takes my breath away. The pleasure builds and builds with the pain until it runs me the fuck over, and I cry out as I come again, feeling myself squirting everywhere.

“Stop, STOP, please!”

Finally, he shows me mercy, his hand stilling and his fingers withdrawing from my pussy. And I almost feel it reach for him.

The room stills like the calm after a storm, the silence like the deepest breath of fresh air. I hold on to that to dull the quivering mess of the rest of my body as Asher bends over to set me on the floor so I don’t collapse. Then, he hops back on his good leg to raise himself to a standing position. When I look up at him, I find those dark eyes staring down at me, a menacing half-smile pulling at his lips.

“I think we’ll take this day by day. I won’t leak your video tonight, but you might want to see how I feel about that tomorrow night. ”

“You’re a fucking asshole!” I growl.

He smirks. “You have an out, Sunshine. Just admit you’re a dirty little slut. You’ve got a gutter mouth; it shouldn’t be hard.”

I won’t. I could say the words, but I refuse. And I’m not sure for exactly which reason...

With my pride absolutely shattered and my body shaking in betrayal, I throw myself up to my feet, peeling for the door with tears stinging in my eyes.

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Chapter 5

Asher

The moment Lila leaves, the house stills. Everything goes dead silent, and I can feel Bane's eyes burning holes into the side of my head. I've got a lecture coming.

"Did you just threaten her husband?"

Okay, that's not where I thought we were going to start.

"That video is old, couldn't you tell? Her hair is completely different, and she obviously doesn't have a husband kicking around. If she did, we'd have four black eyes by now."

"Speak for yourself. You didn't think you should confirm that first? I believe your last romp with a married woman didn't end well if you recall."

"Fuck off. She's not wearing a ring."

"Yeah, because the poor guy probably ran for the hills, the bitch is fucking crazy!"

"Ballsy or stupid, or a mix of both," I say, noting her complete disregard for her safety.

"You're not seriously going to leak her video, are you? That shit will send you to jail, and I can't afford this house by myself."

“Relax. I’m a dick, but I’m not that much of a dick, and I think she knows that.”

“Does she? You fucking assaulted her in our living room.”

“Were you even paying attention? I gave her an out. She wanted it.”

“So what, you like her?” Bane asks in disbelief.

“Oh fuck no, she’s a cocky little bitch with a mouth that’s gonna get her in shit, which is precisely what she wants. If she wants to self-destruct, I’m happy to oblige.”

I’m not that guy. I don’t need to force the ladies to fuck me. I get pussy easily enough. But the moment I heard that fucking gasp of hers when I choked her, I knew exactly what she was. A dirty whore, longing for a man to put her in her place. And if that’s what she wants, who am I to object?

Do I like her? Not by an iota. But destroying her is going to be fun.

Our new shop is a lone building, a little rough on the outside, across the street from a doctor’s office. The maroon paint is chipping, and the roof could use some work, but the first thing I want to do is replace all the windows and that rotten wooden door with the rattly handle.

The inside looks a little better. It’s just a big room with a couple of empty rooms in the back and a bathroom. A simple desk is positioned up front to the right of the door, where we’ll set up the cash. In the back are two stations with chairs, cabinets, and everything we need.

Bane got here an hour before me, despite me getting up a few minutes before he did. It doesn’t take Bane twice as long as it should to climb down some stairs. Imagine my fucking anger when I realized I needed to climb them again just to get a pair of socks

I forgot. I waited for Bane to leave. I didn't need another lecture.

Nothing is simple anymore.

"If you're good here, I'll find a hardware store and see about getting a new door and some new locks and windows."

"Yeah, I'm good," Bane says.

Why wouldn't he be? He doesn't need a cripple to help him paint.

With that settled, I head back out to my car. I mask my leg as much as possible, feeling the pain this morning after my little maneuver with Sunshine. Our encounter took a toll on my leg, but watching her squirm was so worth it. To have her come all over my hand against her will.

There's a hardware store near the mall, and my leg has time to rest while I drive over. I rub it roughly with my palm as if I could knead the pain like lumpy bread dough.

The femur is supposed to be the strongest bone in the body. It makes me want to yak when I remember the amount of force Rocco sunk into my thigh. I can remember the sound of bone cracking and the sickening pain as my kneecap was completely shattered.

I can still remember the shocked look on that ER doc's face when he looked at my X-ray, and the even more shocked look on Bane's face, who was right beside him. They could see the films, but I couldn't from my bed. Even Bane, who's got a few loose screws, could tell it was bad.

I don't understand. How can they keep telling me it isn't going to get better?

“You’ll be safer moving around with a cane or a walker,” the doctor had said.

I could use it to catch myself or use my arm to relieve some pressure on my leg. But how is this my life now?

Once I get to the hardware store, I’m relieved to find parking close to the doors, with only a few cars in the parking lot. I pull up beside a handicap spot, and get out of the car, using my hand on the roof as a brace. I’ve mastered this slow and casual walk that mostly masks my limp. I use it the whole way as I walk through the automatic doors. Thankfully, the store isn’t enormous, so it’s not too much for me. With the pain, every step is a gamble.

There’s a small aisle of doors near the back of the store. While there are no people around, I put all my weight on my good leg, giving my bad leg a rest while I stare at the doors on display, not giving a shit what they look like as long as they keep the shop secure.

After a few minutes, someone enters the aisle. I turn to see a rugged man, probably in his fifties, with short grey hair and a stern expression with downturned brows. His eyes meet mine as he approaches, and he gives me the slightest smile .

“Morning,” the guy says.

“Afternoon, actually.”

The guy nods. He looks tired, as if he just woke up, but it’s nearly noon. His brows pull together as he studies my face. “Are you new around here?”

“Just moved in.”

“Welcome to town. I’m Turner.”

“Asher.” After living in the city all my life, this small town feels weird.

“Where’d you move?”

“Cedar Road.”

His brows lift more in surprise. “Ahh, the brown house. Have you met your neighbor, Lila? She’s a friend of mine.”

Oh my god, could this be? “Are you her ex-husband?”

“No, just a friend.”

I find that a little surprising. I picture Sunshine with someone dark and edgy, and this old hunk sure fits the bill. It wouldn’t surprise me if she occasionally got some silver cock, though I guess she doesn’t want to change his diapers in ten years.

“So what brings you to Alton?” the man asks. He’s got this tough persona wrapped up in a friendly old guy, and it’s weirdly unsettling.

“I needed a change. My friend and I are opening a tattoo shop down on Main Street. We’ll be officially opening in a few days, but we’re painting and putting in some new doors and windows right now.”

“Well, good luck to you. I hope it all goes smoothly.” He takes another look at the doors, unimpressed. “These are all fuck ugly.”

After Turner leaves, I check out the doors again. They’re ugly, but I don’t give a fuck. I pick out a new door and windows, making an appointment for them to install them. Then, I make my way back to the tattoo shop.

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Chapter 6

Lila

I called in sick today, thankfully getting Dr. Parr's answering machine. After all the shit that went down yesterday, I knew there was no way I could sit at a desk for eight hours and not explode.

When I park in front of Neela's house and lightly honk the horn of my SUV, I spot Ty and baby Marina in the window, Ty helping Marina wave at me. I wave back to Marina as Neela exits her house and enters my vehicle, greeting me with a smile. She's wearing shorts and a T-shirt that display her dozens of colorful flower tattoos, and her long brown hair is up in a messy bun.

While I drive, Neela leads the way. She knows all the best places to shop because she's an interior designer. She wants us to check out a few shops in Madison, the nearest city, about forty-five minutes from Alton. Neela wastes no time once we're on the long stretch of highway.

"Alright, what's going on with this neighbor of yours?" she asks.

When Neela first moved to town, she was pregnant with Marina but didn't want anyone to know. She was a patient at the clinic where I work with Dr. Parr, so I knew, but I would never tell anyone. She was scared of me, and she'd lash out. Now, I consider her one of my best friends. She's an easy person to confide in; she doesn't judge.

“You can’t say anything to anyone about this.” Juliet’s a loudmouth, and Macy wouldn’t understand. And Allegra... Well, she doesn’t need to know about this.

“I promise. I’m also very intrigued. Go on...” she says theatrically.

I chuckle. “Alright. Well, these two guys, Asher and Bane, moved in next door to me. They stole my chairs and wouldn’t turn off their loud music. So, I may have yelled out the window at them, and Asher challenged me to go down to them naked.”

I’m keeping my eyes on the road, but I can see Neela’s eyes widen in my periphery.

“He tried intimidating me by flirting, but I didn’t fold. Macy was over, so she called Edgar, and he came and pulled me out of there.”

“Probably a good idea, by the sound of it.” I can taste the sarcasm in her voice.

“Yeah, well, there’s more. When I told Juliet, she wanted me to make her a sex tape to make me feel better. Fucking woman.”

Neela smirks. “And that surprises you?”

“Well, I may have sent an old video... But to the wrong person...”

“Who?”

“Asher. ”

I can’t look at her, but I see her jaw hit the floor in my periphery.

“Uh...” she starts before three more words come out garbled together, probably the beginning of three different questions. After some weird as hell noises, she manages

to spit out a single word. “HOW?”

“He tried to intimidate me! He wanted to put his number in my phone in case I wanted some cock, so I let him, and then I told him I was going to block him.”

“And you sent him a sex tape instead!?”

“And then I went to get it back. He and his friend were watching a movie, and I stormed in. Asher was being a dick, so I made a low blow of a comment. He snapped and choked me and pinned me to the wall.”

All the sarcasm and shock dissipates from her voice, leaving only concern. “Are you okay?”

“Physically... When he grabbed my throat, I may have moaned, and it was all downhill from there. He let Bane watch my sex tape while he trapped me against the wall and fingered me, and I came twice...”

Neela pauses again, though I think she’s waiting for more. “What happened after that?”

I shrug. “We fought some more, and I left.”

Neela goes quiet for a while as she digests my story. “You know that’s not okay, right?”

“It was weird... He told me to admit I was a dirty slut, and he’d let me go. I refused, that was so not happening.”

“So you got orgasms instead.”

She bursts into laughter, and I join her until my stomach hurts. It feels so good to break up some of the tension in my body. Despite two fucking orgasms, I've been on edge since running out of that house.

"You like him?" Neela finally asks.

"FUCK no. I hate his fucking guts!"

"Mhm, that's what I said about Ty. Then I got to know him."

Neela is a genius.

When we finish shopping, my SUV is packed with various decor materials. We decide to get everything done now since I'll need help. Ty is off today, so Neela's in no rush to get home to Marina.

It's around three by the time we finish, and we stand at the curb in front of my house to admire our handiwork. It really does look like the sun threw up.

The yellow house was our foundation, but it's almost swallowed by everything else. An enormous sunflower wreath covers the front door. All the front windows were covered inside with yellow decals: sunflowers, sunshine, buttercups, lemons, bumblebees, you name it. We found some yellow and green garland that we wound around my mailbox, and a half-sunflower decoration is nailed on top. The giant sun already on the front of the house is completely overshadowed.

We absolutely FILLED my gardens with yellow. There are two, uniform on either side of my front door extending to the sides of the house. Neela tends to them occasionally since she loves gardening, but it's mostly filled with green that manages itself. We filled the empty space with stakes and hung up every garden flag with yellow that we could find, some mounted yellow butterflies and dragonflies, and

some beetles in the dirt. The icing on the cake is an enormous, almost fluorescent yellow butterfly positioned on the left side of my house, pointed right at Asher's, taking up a considerable portion of bare siding beside my bedroom window.

"I'd call this mission accomplished. What do you think?" Neela asks.

"I think I love you, for starters."

Neela glances over at the dark house next door. "Well, your place will stand out, that's for sure."

"How can I ever repay you?"

"Payment?" she laughs. "The friend discount, of course."

"Obviously. What else?"

She considers it before a big smile spreads across her face. "Alright, come on," she says, heading back to my vehicle.

Asher and Bane's house was quiet when I left this morning, and no vehicles were in the driveway. Where do two assholes spend their day?

I end up right across the street from my workplace in front of a dingy old building with a new sign I've never seen before. Alton Tattoo.

"We have a tattoo shop?" I ask as we park right beside the door.

"It's new; I'm not even sure if it's open yet. But I saw the sign yesterday and figured I'd check it out."

I chuckle. “Do you have any skin left?”

“I’ll find some,” she says with a wry smile .

There are only a few small windows up front, so we can’t see inside as we exit my SUV and approach the door. Neela grabs for the handle, but it’s locked.

“Must not be open yet,” Neela says.

Before we can leave, the door swings open. Bane takes in Neela first, and when his eyes flicker to mine, he smirks. Bastard.

“Hey, Lila.”

“Bane,” I grumble.

Neela’s eyes jump between us. “What? This is your new neighbor?”

“This is the milder one,” I say simply.

“Asher’s not here, but he’ll be back soon,” he warns.

I roll my eyes, but he’s not looking at me anymore. Whatever amusement he had with me is now focused on Neela.

“Nice ink. You’re covered.”

She grins. “Thanks. I was hoping to book an appointment when you guys open.”

Bane considers for a moment before stepping aside. “Come on in.”

Though Neela hesitates, I motion her forward, and she slowly enters the shop with me at her heels. It's clearly not ready yet. It smells like fresh paint, and the furniture is scattered away from the walls.

"Don't touch anything," he says as he steps behind a desk by the door. He pulls up a heavy binder and gives it to Neela, so casually, as if I didn't get finger blasted in his living room against my will last night.

"You want more flowers? I have some you'll like," he says as he flips the binder open. "Color, right? "

"Yes," Neela says, as though it should be obvious. Her eyes light up as she takes in the designs I can't see from here.

"This one suits you, and it looks great with the others," Bane says. "Here, let me show you my portfolio first."

Bane shows Neela some of his past work, and she likes what she sees.

"I should tell you too, I'm still technically an apprentice," Bane says.

"Oh, I don't mind. The work you showed me looks great, and an apprentice in Fairway did most of my tattoos. She was amazing. I love that floral piece you showed me. Can I have that blown up on my tailbone, maybe eight inches across?"

"Course."

Neela practically vibrates with excitement. "When are you opening?"

"Hopefully, in a few days." He hesitates, glancing behind him at the shop before turning back around. "I've been dying to tattoo this one... if you're okay with the

mess in here, I can do it today, and I'll give you a bit of a deal. The station will be clean, of course."

"Done." Then she turns to me. "I can get someone to pick me up after if you want to go."

"I'm not leaving you here," I insist, my eyes flickering to Bane, and he notices.

But he doesn't bother reassuring me.

It takes a while for Bane to map out the tattoo. He prints the design in a few different sizes on some special paper. Once it's transferred onto Neela's tailbone, she approves it in an oversized floor mirror. Then she lays on a big table on her stomach, with her shirt pulled up to her mid back and her shorts down a little. With her face in my view, I sit beside a table with more binders.

I don't have any tattoos, and I've never been to a tattoo shop. I have nothing against them; it's just not something I've ever looked into. But as soon as Bane turns on his machine and starts inking Neela's skin, I can't peel my eyes away.

"Can I watch?"

"Yeah, just stay out of the way and out of my light," Bane says casually.

I didn't expect Bane to be so professional, but he is. He seems to be treating Neela like any other customer, and he didn't address last night in any way.

I stand up from my chair to approach the table. A lamp is on, shining directly on Neela's back, so I stand on the other side. Bane starts with black ink, which I can only guess is to outline the flowers. He pours some from a bottle into a tiny little plastic cup. Once he has everything ready and clean, he warns Neela before starting. I

focus on Neela's face as he applies the first contact, and she winces. It's clearly uncomfortable, but Neela tolerates it well, eventually relaxing a little on the table. I wonder if getting tattooed puts her in the same high as subspace.

The high I feel watching the machine work on Neela is entirely different. Watching the ink pierce her skin, leaving a permanent, unforgiving mark, makes my head rush with awe .

After watching Bane outline over the red stencil, I sit back in my chair, grabbing one of the binders beside me. It's labeled 'Asher - Flash.'

I open the binder to the first page and find a series of skulls outlined in black on white paper, with a signature that must be Asher's. The skulls are 3D and detailed, some with flowers behind them or in their mouths. When I flip the page, my jaw hits the floor.

It's a full-body tiger in a pouncing pose; its back end is high, and its front end is low as it hits the ground. The slightest snarl of its teeth gives it a vibe of danger. Badassery.

No one fucks with a tiger.

I flip through the rest of the art, amazed at Asher's skill. Though I hate to compliment him, it's clear this is pure passion, and I can't belittle it. But I keep going right back to that tiger.

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Chapter 7

Asher

When I return to the shop, I find another vehicle parked—a familiar vehicle. I crawl out of the car with my hand on the roof, bracing myself. This morning's errands took a toll on my leg, and I feel it now. It's harder to walk than usual, and this is when I usually fall.

I cannot fall in front of that bitch. Or Bane, or anyone for that matter.

I take my time outside since there's no one around, and I can't see shit through the windows, so I know I'm not being watched. I take a few steps to stretch out my damaged leg. Once I've gathered myself, I head inside. While I want to storm in there and scare the fuck out of Sunshine, I can hear the buzz of a tattoo machine through the door, so that's not going to happen. Instead, I open the door as quietly as possible, slipping inside almost unnoticed. Bane has a woman on his table as he tattoos her lower back. Sunshine is sitting down, watching them with her back to me.

Bane lifts his head as I enter, and he stops the machine. "Hey."

"What are you doing?" I ask, walking over as naturally as I can manage. Sunshine turns to see me, and she scowls, but I completely ignore her as I walk past.

"Finally got the carnations."

Once I see the piece Bane is outlining, I get it. It's a bundle of rugged pink carnations

he's wanted to do for months, but he's not sold anyone. The girl on his table glances up at me with her cheek resting against the table. She's young, and her arms and legs are covered in colored flowers. The piece Bane's doing will fit right in.

"Nice ink. Something tells me you'll be back," I say to the girl, noting her sheer number of tattoos.

"We'd better reserve her a parking spot," Bane jokes.

I've blatantly ignored Sunshine, walking straight past her and keeping my back to her. When I finally turn around, I find her staring at me with venomous eyes. One of my binders is sitting in her lap, closed. Instead of greeting or taunting her, I lunge forward on my good leg, getting close enough to snatch the binder from her lap, scratching her knee with my force. She's wearing some shorts and a tight shirt. I don't see a single tattoo on her or any in the video she sent.

"Did I say you could look at my shit?" I growl.

She actually rolls her eyes, and I can feel her friend's glare on my back.

"Watch it," the friend says.

"It's okay, Neela. This fucker doesn't scare me. "

Every time this bitch opens her mouth, I'm even more shocked. Is she trying to start shit? By now, I've pretty much confirmed she's self-destructive. She needs someone to lose control on her. Based on the way her body responded last night, it makes sense. She was overwhelmed, but it was apparent she was so deep in pleasure that she couldn't make a clear decision. I've never seen anyone sexed out of their mind like that.

And as much as I hate this bitch, I want that again. And I might know how.

“Don’t touch my shit. You don’t have the balls or the pain tolerance to get a tattoo.”

Just as I expected, she’s on her feet in an instant. To piss her off even more, I shove her to the side and flop down in her chair, throwing my hands behind my head and dropping the binder in my lap. It’s all a show because if she tries to stand up to me, she’ll easily knock me down based on how much pain I’m in right now. She takes the bait and yanks the binder out of my lap.

“You think I don’t have balls or pain tolerance? That’s cute,” she growls before turning around to her friend. “Neela, where’s the most painful place to get tattooed?”

Neela’s eyes flicker between us as she considers, looking a little amused. “For me, it was my ribcage.”

“I think a snatch tattoo would hurt more,” Asher says.

“If you think I’m letting you anywhere near my cunt again, you’re having a laugh.”

“Well, you didn’t exactly let me last night, but here we are.”

Her eyes are on FIRE as they blaze into mine, a clear challenge. Time stops as I wait for her next move. She opens the binder without tearing her eyes from mine, and though I keep my eyes locked on hers, I can see in my periphery what she’s opened it to—the tiger.

“I’d like this on my ribs, please,” she sneers.

I don’t doubt her stubbornness. But I think I can piss her off even more.

“I’m not booking you an appointment. You’re gonna pussy out, not show up, and you’re gonna waste my time. Now get out of my shop.”

“Then do it right fucking now. Unless you need to rest. I bet you’re tired.”

She doesn’t need to expand on what she’s talking about. It’s another blow at my leg. The bitch knows just what buttons to push.

“I’ll do your tattoo now. But don’t blame me when you can’t handle it and you go home with half a tattoo.”

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Chapter 8

Lila

A sher rudely instructs me to lie down at the second station. This one is a chair, and he reclines it back with no warning, so I gasp when I feel like I'm going to fall out. He spins me, so I face the back wall and can't see Neela or Bane. Asher disappears for a few minutes, preparing the stencils, and when he sits down beside me with three sizes of the tiger on the special paper, my heart takes off. It becomes real.

"Take your shirt off." When I pull it up to just below my breasts, he growls. "I said OFF."

"Excuse me? I'm not sure if that's necessary or professional."

I seem to know how to push Asher's buttons because when his eyes meet mine, they're black .

"Listen, you little bitch . We aren't open yet, so don't expect a professional appointment. You're in my shop, and you're gonna do what I tell you if you want this fucking tattoo. Now take your fucking shirt off. It's nothing I haven't already seen."

With fury in my eyes, I lift my shirt partially over my chest but leave it on. "I'm not wearing a bra. Hope my tits don't distract you."

"What tits?"

His response is so callous that it actually stings, making my heart sink.

“We’re setting up a room in the back for privacy for more intimate tattoos like this. But for you? Not much point moving all this back there. Bane and I have already seen your lack of tits, and I’m guessing your friend already knows what a whore you are.”

He keeps his voice low, but Neela still manages to hear, and she does not appreciate that. “Hey, watch it!”

“It’s okay, Neela. Asher thinks he’s a big scary guy, but it’s all an act,” I say, managing to keep my voice even though every bit of my body feels like it’s vibrating with nerves.

I watch Asher toss aside the larger stencils, deciding on the smallest one. His eyes meet mine, filled with amusement as he holds it up. “We’d better go with the small one. I can’t see you being able to handle the big one.”

I rip the small one out of his hand, startling him, and toss it on the floor. “I want the big one.”

He raises a brow in amusement as he picks up the largest one. As he approaches with it, he freezes, eyeing my shirt over my chest. “I told you to take that off .”

“It’s not in your way,” I say simply .

“It is in my way, and if you want this fucking tattoo, you’re gonna take your shirt off and do what the fuck I tell you!”

“Bastard.”

“Bitch.”

After my shirt is off, he grabs it from my hand, tosses it across the room, and it lands on the floor. Then he comes at me with the stencil, his movements fierce. Once the stencil is on, he peels the paper away. I can see now why he needed my shirt off. The tiger is centered on my chest, just beneath my breasts over my rib cage. Its back end is just slightly between them, and the tail threads up between my breasts. Just the top will peek up when I wear lower-cut shirts.

“Black and gray?” he asks.

“Yeah. How do you like my house? I decorated it just for you.”

“Just like you decorated my hand last night?”

Bane huffs. “Would you two shut up? I can’t hear myself think.”

Asher smirks, lowering his voice when he speaks to me again. It’s potentially the first serious thing he’s said to me with no bullshit. “Check the placement in the mirror while I prep. Make sure you like the position.”

Standing up and walking into the open with no shirt on feels weird. To my great relief, Bane pays me no attention as I approach the mirror. Neela’s closed eyes open, and she glances up at my face with concern, purposely ignoring my tits. I nod to reassure her.

Asher doesn’t scare me. I can handle him.

After I pick up my shirt off the floor, I return to the chair and settle in, placing the shirt in my lap. A moment later, Asher joins me.

“How’s the placement?” he asks, perfectly professional .

Despite how much I fucking hate his guts, I actually love the placement. I've never wanted to get a tattoo, but this looks so cool that I can't say I'm not excited. "It's perfect."

That's when his professionalism dissolves, the moment gone, and I know he'll taunt me for as long as this tattoo takes. He grabs my shirt off my lap and biffs it across the room again.

"Hey!" I blurt.

"I don't need you trying to cover up the whole time. Think you can keep your tiny tits out for a couple of hours?"

I scoff. "Do you think you can shut up about my tits?"

"If you can't handle me making fun of your tits, you can't handle the pain of a tattoo."

"That makes NO sense. But by all means, continue if you must."

He dips the needle tip in black ink and finally approaches my body. He starts with the tiger's tail, and he rests both his hands directly on my tits. Whether he actually needs to do that, I don't know.

But I hate that my body reacts to him.

I practically hold my breath as Asher starts the tattoo, and it does hurt. It feels like a sharp needle being dragged across a sunburn. I can't completely hide the pain on my face, but I'm able to downplay it. At the same time, the feeling of the side of his hand brushing against my nipple as he moves the machine makes it pebble beneath his skin. He uses his other hand to anchor my skin to keep it still. To my disbelief, he

stretches his thumb to my other nipple, brushing against the tiny bud until it begins to grow.

“You should be wearing a padded bra if you want to find another husband before your womb dries up. They’re gonna be disappointed when they find out you have tiny tits, so you’ll have to make up for that in other ways.”

“Asher!” Neela snaps as red blooms across my cheeks. The humiliation burns.

He removes the machine from me just long enough to roll his eyes at her, and it gives me a reprieve from the pain. But only for a moment. Of course, he opens his mouth again.

“She’s right. I should probably stop talking. I wouldn’t want you to get too turned on and leave a wet spot on my chair.”

“ASHER!” Bane snaps.

He chuckles.

We bicker a little more as he gets started, but after a while, we both fall silent, him in focus and me trying to brunt through the pain. I’ve never felt anything like it. For the first five minutes, I was worried about what I’d gotten myself into. The pain was so sharp, and it took everything I had to hold a straight face because I refused to wince in front of him. After a while, my body was washed with bliss. The pain felt a little less, and it became tolerable.

Asher made true to his promise that the appointment wouldn’t be professional. I watch him as he works, and though he mostly ignores me, I notice that he takes any opportunity he can to brush against my bare breasts. He uses them as armrests whenever he can, and I try not to let it get to me. He’s so close, hovering over my

exposed body, and I can feel the heat pouring off him. His plain grey T-shirt hugs him in all the right places, showing off his broad chest and thick arms covered in cohesive black and grey tattoos. His right arm is covered in greenery and tall, thin cedar trees with a full moon. An enormous snake takes over his left arm, winding and tangling around him in layers. The head is near his elbow, poised to strike.

My tattoo takes a lot longer than expected. I end up in that chair for over three hours, powering through the pain. Neela's tattoo is finished about an hour into mine, and while she stays with me, Bane leaves. Neela's quiet, and I tell her she can go if she wants, but she stays.

As time goes on, my tolerance for the pain weans. Neela has me eat a granola bar from her purse, and Asher offers to break a few times, but I refuse. I don't want to give him the satisfaction.

But truthfully, I'm getting tired.

"That's all," Asher finally says, turning his machine off for what I hope is the last time.

"It's done?"

He shakes his head. "You'll need another session once it's healed. We'll add some more depth and detail to it."

"What, you're too tired to finish it today?" I ask, taunting him, and he raises a brow.

"Shut your mouth if you know what's good for you."

He takes a few minutes to put a clear bandage over it. Then, to my surprise, he offers me a hand and helps me to my feet. I cross the room to the mirror, and what I see

nearly stops my heart.

It's amazing! It's so fierce, and I love how it's oriented on my torso and under my breasts, with the tail between.

"It's incredible," is all I can say.

"Keep that on for a few days, and don't get it wet. After a few days, wash it gently with antibacterial soap and put some unscented lotion on it. Do that twice a day. And eat and drink lots when you get home. "

"Easy enough. What do I owe you?"

He considers it, and suddenly, his expression shifts. The asshole is back. "I can think of some ideas."

"How about a number?" Neela asks defensively, fighting on my behalf.

"Watch yourself," Asher says, as though she's overstepping boundaries.

Prick.

"Whatever. I'm out of here. Text me a number, and I'll pay you."

But something tells me it won't be a number that he'll text me.

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Chapter 9

Asher

I hate to admit it, but I'm impressed. I fully expected Sunshine to be a total pussy when it comes to pain. Ribcage tattoos are brutal, but I barely got a wince out of her for three hours. Could I have finished the tattoo? Sure. She ate and drank a little, but three hours of a very painful tattoo with hardly any breaks left her depleted. Something tells me she'd sooner pass out than admit she had enough, and I didn't want to have to pick her up off the floor.

I'm relieved to find Bane's out when I head home around six, so my lecture can wait until tomorrow. The chairs we stole from Lila are gone from my deck, and I spot them on hers, near a weirdly out of place punching bag. I briefly consider stealing them back just to fuck with her, but I'm tired and sore, and my leg doesn't have it in me right now .

I'll text Bane to do it when he gets home.

Sunshine's SUV is in her driveway, but I don't see any sign of her. The absolute abomination of her house is just as obnoxious as it was the first time I saw it this afternoon.

I actually laughed.

Once I get inside, I tear off my shirt as I head into the den, toss it on the sofa, and flop down beside it. I want to get to bed but can't do the stairs until I rest.

Fuck this leg.

I pull out my phone and fire off that text to Bane before another one comes in from little miss Sunshine herself.

Sunshine: I'm still waiting for that number. And you're not gonna leak my video, right?

Asher: I can think of better ways you can repay me that don't involve money. Not like you can run, I know where you live.

I half expect her to hit me with another leg joke, but she doesn't.

Sunshine: I'm not a fucking prostitute. The video?

Asher: I won't leak it tonight, you have my word. Now shut up and rest.

Sunshine: Asshole.

I ignore that.

After a while, the gears begin turning. I need to make a move with the house, but I have no idea how to go about it. I can't paint. Nothing is easy anymore. I'm not asking Bane for help; he'll be busy with the shop opening, and he'll end up pushing the house project aside, and I wanna hit Sunshine hard.

I do a little digging to see if there are any homemakers in this little town, and I find the info for exactly one: Neela's Home Design. I'm guessing it's the same Neela I met this afternoon. If I ask for her help, she'll probably tell me to get bent. I'm not wasting my breath. After more searching, I find another in Madison, and email a guy named Morgan. I tell him I want to turn the exterior of my house into Halloween: the

blackest paint he can find, skulls, bones, spiders, anything creepy.

After that's taken care of, I watch Sunshine's video again. I've lost count of how many times I've watched it. As she starts to undress, unwrapping those tiny tits, I remember how much I stimulated them while I was tattooing her. Would I do that to any other client? No way in fucking hell. But Sunshine? Those nipples of hers are sensitive, and any time I'd even brush against them, they'd harden, and her breathing would pick up just a bit. Not enough to be obvious, but enough that when I looked, I noticed. Her cheeks were so flushed.

My cock hardens in my pants, and I yank them down, palming at my stiff cock. I stroke it at an even speed, watching her undress and flaunt her goods over the video. Her pretty little cunt looks so fucking good, smooth and soft. I almost want to kiss it.

Before I'd bite that clit.

God, the things I'd do to Sunshine. I'd strap her down to my bed so she can't move an inch and shove a gag in her mouth so she can't run it like the little bitch she is. Would I make her feel good? Sure. Only before I'd make her scream, maybe even cry.

The thought of pretty little Sunshine helpless and crying does me in, and my cock empties over my chest. I grab my shirt beside me and wipe myself off, tossing it on the floor.

As the video finishes, I'm reminded of a detail bothering me. She mentions Koa. I haven't heard of it, but I have a funny feeling I know what it is, and I'm a little surprised it's taken me until now to look it up.

When I search for the name, it leads me to a basic website. It's all black and plain, with limited words. All it says is Koa—Alton Nightlife, with a phone number, a link

to some forums, and no name. I can't get on the forums without making an account, so instead of going to the trouble, I decide to call the number. To my surprise, I instantly recognize the voice, based on his hello. He has a very distinct, gravelly voice.

"Turner?"

"Yeah, who's this?"

"Asher, from the hardware store."

"Hey, man. What can I do for you?"

I could tell him the truth, that I was looking around online and found the website, but I have an opportunity here to fuck with Sunshine even more, and I'm not about to give that up.

"I hope you don't mind; Lila gave me your number. She was telling me a little about Koa." I'm still not sure I know what this is, but I'm hoping he doesn't realize that.

"Not at all. Are you looking to join?"

"Yeah. I forgot to ask Lila, though, is there anything you need from me?" I ask, baiting him for more information.

"For new members, I need a police check and STD panel."

Bingo, right on the money. "Easy. Could I stop by to grab some more info from you sometime?"

"Yeah, of course. Come on by tomorrow; I'll text you my address. Bring Lila if you'd

like.”

“Thanks man, I’ll be seeing you. ”

But I certainly won’t be bringing Sunshine.

The next day, I head to Turner’s place around noon. His property is enormous, and the house is huge. I follow the driveway to the back, to a makeshift parking lot, and park near a shiny black car and a red buggy.

As I slip out of my car, using the roof like usual, I consider whether I need a higher vehicle. I take a minute to let my leg sort its shit out before I head up the walkway and knock on the door.

Turner answers a moment later with a cup of coffee in his hand. He looks tired as shit with his sunken eyes.

“Hey man, welcome. Come on in.”

He lets me inside and shuts the door behind me.

“You can leave your shoes there; the floors are clean,” he says. “Coffee?”

“Sure.”

I follow him into the kitchen, and he motions for me to sit at the table, so I do. He returns with two cups of coffee and sets one before me. It’s still piping hot, but I sip it anyway.

“So, have you ever been involved with a kink club?” Turner asks.

Jesus, getting right to the point. “No, but I’ve been into kink for a long time.”

I guess, technically, I’m a dom, though I’ve never explored formal BDSM. I’m the one in control at all times, and the girls I’ve fucked in the past all knew that. So does Sunshine .

“The club is in the basement, down there,” he says, motioning to a closed door near the fridge. “We’re limited in numbers. There’s only a handful of members now, and many of them are coupled up. What kind of partners are you looking for?”

He’s politely asking if I’m gay. “Submissive women.”

Turner nods. “We have a few, including Lila. Hopefully, we’ll be able to get some more members soon. Alton’s a small town.”

I already knew Lila was a sub, but somehow, it pleases me to have it confirmed.

“And you said I need a health clearance and police check?”

“Yes. I’ll send you the link for the police check. Once that all goes through, you should be good to join as long as we don’t run into any roadblocks. I’ll warn you right now though, and this is the same speech I give to all the new doms joining the club. You won’t be using any restraints until I’m confident we can trust you. There are panic buttons in each room, so if there is any funny business, my girls know what to do. I get a lick of suspicion with you, and you’re gone. You fuck with any of them, you’re gone, with two black eyes. These people are all close friends, and no one fucks with my people. Safe, sane, and consensual, or I will report the incident to the police. We even have one as a member. Am I making myself clear?”

His speech is very stern, but I can tell it isn’t personal. I agree with him and promise to be on my best behavior.

“Do you want a tour?”

Do I want one? Yes. Will I have one? Absolutely not. I’m not doing stairs in front of this guy.

“Another time,” I say simply. “I’ll get that police check to you and work on that health clearance.”

“Okay then. Once you’re a member, you’ll get an entry code. The ground floor is free for all the members, and there’s almost always someone here. You’re welcome to stop by and visit in the meantime as long as I’m here.”

“Sweet.”

Turner doesn’t know I have zero intention of joining this club. The moment he mentioned it was downstairs, I shut it down entirely. I’m not doing stairs in front of other people.

But I’m going to fail that police check anyway since I have some minor blemishes on my record. I’m unsure how stern this guy is, but it doesn’t matter. I need Sunshine to think I’m joining.

If I can pull that off, my plan will go through without a hitch.

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Chapter 10

Lila

“Feeling better?”

I lift my head from my desk to see my boss, Dr. Parr, stroll in.

The truth is, I hate my job. I’ve been steadily growing tired of being a nurse since I started. I liked it at first. Dr. Parr is great to work for. The job didn’t bother me much before when I was with Ian. Now that I’m going home to an empty house, work feels almost torturous. I never thought I’d be one of those people who hate their career, but I also never expected to be divorced.

“Much,” I lie through my teeth.

Dr. Parr approaches my desk to grab some paperwork and flashes me a disappointed expression at the same time .

“But you were okay to go get a tattoo,” she says, motioning to the tiger tail poking out of the top of my shirt, still covered in wrap. It’s a bit tender, but otherwise, it doesn’t hurt. Some fluid has gathered under the bandage, but I haven’t fiddled with it.

She must’ve seen my SUV across the street yesterday. It’s a common model, so I figured I could avoid that. She must know my plate.

“I’m sorry. It was a mental health day.”

She sighs. “Lila, this has to stop. I let it slide for a while after your divorce because I figured you were going through a hard time, but it’s been a year now.”

“I know, I’m sorry.”

“When you’re not here, it’s hell. Trying to do both your job and mine is frustrating, and then I run late, and no one’s happy.”

“I’m sorry,” I repeat, more sternly this time.

Dr. Parr doesn’t look like she believes me. “You can send my first patient right back when she arrives. My one-ten is a new patient. Can you get a complete assessment done on her?”

“Of course.”

She heads to her office, and I continue filing yesterday’s paperwork. Dr. Parr left a huge mess, but I can’t blame her. She probably still left late yesterday, and this would’ve taken her another hour to sort out. I’m glad it’s Thursday, and we’re working late today. She’s not so forgiving in the mornings.

When her first patient comes in, I send her right back and continue working. A few minutes later, the door swings open again.

“Hi, good afternoon,” I say as I scribble notes on a patient’s chart. When I don’t hear a response, I finish the note before lifting my head and finding a familiar face .

“Allegra?”

She enters sheepishly, her head down and her smile absent. She looks nervous as her eyes flicker to mine, partially concealed behind her chocolate brown waves.

“Hi, Lila.”

“What are you...”

She approaches the desk slowly, like she’s trying not to spook me. “I’m sorry. I wanted to speak to you the night we made the announcement.”

“Yeah, sorry I wasn’t there.”

She smiles softly. “It’s no problem.”

It takes me looking at my computer screen to realize she’s our new patient. What the fuck?

“Are you pregnant?” I blurt.

“No,” she says calmly.

They must be trying.

“I’m sorry. If this is weirding you out, I can find a different doctor. Neela had nothing but good things to say about Dr. Parr, so-”

“Stop,” I say, holding a hand up to her to stop her nervous ramble. “Relax. Come sit back here so I can take your vitals.”

She steps around the desk to sit down in a chair beside the machine. Once she’s seated, her red summer dress tucked over her knees, I approach in my rolling chair. I pop the blood pressure cuff on her arm and turn it on, and the cuff begins to inflate.

“For the record, I’m sorry I didn’t say anything about the engagement. Ian wanted to

tell you, and that was his place.”

“It’s fine,” I say simply. “Congratulations.”

“Thanks,” she says .

When the machine beeps, her BP is sky-high, like her pulse. The machine isn’t always accurate, so I take her pressure manually, finding that the machine was right.

“You need to relax; your vitals are up. Are you trying for a baby?” I ask.

“We’re thinking about it. But I figured it’d be a good idea to get checked out before we even decide. With my history and all...”

Allegra’s already been pregnant twice, and she lost them both. The first was late in pregnancy when she became Eclamptic, and the second was a surprise pregnancy that her jackass ex-husband ended when he kicked her in the stomach. He didn’t know she was pregnant at the time. He’s in jail now for assault and tampering with her birth control.

“Dr. Parr is the best. You’ll be in good hands here, and this isn’t weird. Don’t worry.”

“Too late, but okay,” she laughs.

“I know you guys try not to throw your relationship in my face, but you don’t have to worry about that. I’m really over him. Please, don’t tiptoe around me.”

She nods. “I’ll try.”

After taking her history, doing her assessments, and redoing her vitals once she’s calmed down, we chat for a bit while she waits. After Dr. Parr’s first patient leaves,

she calls Allegra back.

I try not to think about Allegra and Ian having a baby. While I want to be happy for them, it makes me weirdly sad.

Lonely.

When my phone buzzes on my desk, I pick it up, finding a text from Turner .

Turner: Your friend Asher came by. He's joining Koa.

The rage that tears through me nearly sends me through the roof as I hit the call button, hoping no one else walks in. Our next patient isn't due for ten more minutes.

When Turner picks up, I don't give him a second to say hi.

"Like FUCK he is!"

"What's your problem!?" he snaps.

"Asher's a total asshole!" And I wouldn't trust him to play by the rules, not that I'll tell Turner that if I don't have to. He'd rearrange Asher's internal organs.

"And what's that supposed to mean? Why can't he join?" Turner asks, challenging me.

Fuck. He's gonna make me tell him.

"It's none of your business," I say dumbly.

"Lila, you've got a problem with everyone right now."

“Well, for him, I have good reason.”

“Enough!” he snaps. “Unless you wanna explain what’s going on, I’m letting Asher join as long as his paperwork comes in clean.”

“Do not let him in, Turner!”

“Well then, you can come by later and tell me exactly why not.”

Fucker. “Do not let him in yet, okay? Promise me.”

“I promise. But you’re gonna have to do better than that.”

It takes everything in me not to storm out of work in a rage. If I leave, Dr. Parr will be pissed, and I’m already on thin ice with her. Though I’m on edge, I manage to get through the rest of my day .

And it’s his fault.

I don’t get Asher. He gets under my skin. He’s unhinged, probably dangerous, and I’m playing fucking games with him. That’s all this is. A game. He’s trying so hard to intimidate me, and I refuse to fold. He’s going to keep fucking with me and hold this sex tape over my head; I just know it.

Jokes on him. He will not break me.

He’s also caught me in a unique time where I have nothing to lose.

When I get home, I find one vehicle in the driveway next door. I don’t even look in the direction of my house as I storm up to Asher’s back door. It’s unlocked.

I've never just busted into a stranger's house like this, but after a quick survey of the bottom floor, I fly straight up the stairs like I own the place. I end up in a hallway of closed doors, with one open at the end. The moment I spot a head of dark hair in the bed, I storm into the bedroom.

The cool night breeze flows in from the open window. Asher sits up in bed, and the blankets over him fall into a heap in his lap, his bare chest visible. It holds my gaze like a magnet as I blatantly check him out, unable to help myself, but I peel them away as quickly as I can, just in time to see his smirk.

"Take a picture; it'll last longer," he says with that devious fucking smile.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing? Koa? What the fuck did you say to Turner!?" I snap, jabbing a finger at him from the foot of the bed .

"I heard about it in your video, so I figured I'd check it out. Looks like a great time."

The way he says it makes my stomach roll. "You stay the fuck away from Koa and leave my friends alone!"

Asher sighs dramatically. "Well, Sunshine, if you don't want me to join the dirty sex club you love so much, I'll have to get my rocks off somewhere else. Know any cunts looking to get finger banged?"

This. Motherfucker.

He moves to the side of the bed and stands up, revealing his naked body, including his enormous rock-hard cock, that I will not give him the satisfaction of ogling.

"Compensating for something?" Once the words are out of my mouth, I realize what I've said and how it could be interpreted—another dig at his leg. That's when he

flips.

He lunges for me so fast I don't have time to get my breath. I hit the bed, and I'm crushed beneath him as he lands on top of my chest, his hand on my throat, cutting off my air. His hard cock jabs me in the belly.

"Just admit it, Sunshine. Tell me you're a dirty little slut who loves to be choked and restrained."

When he removes his hand from my windpipe, I suck in a ragged breath, feeling lightheaded. When I can't find enough air to form words quickly enough, I lash out, gathering a glob of spit in my mouth and shooting it straight into his eye.

For a guy with a bad leg, he sure doesn't feel weak as he flips me over like a ragdoll. He drags my pants and thong down while I'm disoriented and then presses his weight onto me, crushing me into the bed.

"You're gonna regret that," he snarls.

"Good thing I can run faster than you."

He grabs a handful of my hair, yanking my head back and making me squeal. The other hand plunges between my legs, finding the pool there.

"Last chance, you dirty little cunt. You know what to say, and I'll let you go."

My body shudders with a huge rush. Fear, lust, hatred, anticipation, I don't know what it is I'm feeling. All I know is it's powerful, and I'm going to hold on and not let go.

"Go fuck yourself," I sneer.

He actually smirks above me. “You’re gonna regret that.”

He’s able to hold me down effortlessly with just his dead weight. He forces my legs apart with his knee, and suddenly I’m wide open, and his cock is breeching my entrance. I frantically struggle, needing to get away, but I can’t budge. I’m trapped. He enters me in one swift movement that makes my head spin and my cunt tighten.

“Ohh...” I moan against my own will.

“Bane has questionable morals, but he’s not awful. He wouldn’t have let this go this far last time. But he’s not here to save you tonight.”

Suddenly, I’m assaulted with thrust after thrust, and my moans turn into screams. My mishmash of moans of pain and pleasure fill the room, and Asher’s grunts match them as he pounds into me mercilessly.

“STOP!” I wail.

“That’s not what I want to hear, you know the words.”

I do. But I won’t .

When I don’t speak, he covers my mouth as he thrusts harder and harder, his pelvis hitting my ass like an earthquake. Tears sting at my eyes as I’m taken over with a toxic mix of pain and pleasure, wrapped up in one powerful exchange.

“You’re gonna take my cum, bitch. I sure hope you’re on birth control. Don’t really wanna breed a whore like you.”

Thankfully, I am, but I’m not giving him that comfort.

Just as Asher lets out a huge grunt, my orgasm sneaks up and knocks the wind out of me. I shriek in pleasure before everything tightens and my pussy explodes into contractions, pulling Asher's cock and cum deeper into me as he slows to a steady crawl. Once he's rode out his orgasm, I've done about the same, and he stops. He takes in a deep breath and rolls off me onto the other side of the bed.

I close my eyes as relief floods my body, making every inch of me tingle right down to my fingers and toes.

Asher's still and quiet beside me. When I crack my eyes open, he's on his back, his face turned to me, and his eyes shut.

When his eyes open again, they're gentle as they study me. When they lock on mine, fear overtakes me, and tears begin to spill softly down my cheeks.

But it's not him I'm afraid of.

He reaches out and cups my cheek in a firm, possessive hold, using his thumb to stroke my temple, such a delicate, fragile area. "You're so pretty when you cry."

Those words break something inside me and make my already overwhelmed pussy throb.

"Stay here," he says sternly before getting up .

He freezes. Because after that absurd pounding he rained on me, his leg is bound to give him trouble. For some reason, I find myself turning around and settling on my side, looking away from the door, giving him privacy to get up and move. It's a small mercy from me, one he won't return.

Once I hear him exit the room, another door opens and closes, and I realize he must

be in the bathroom. Without giving it much thought, I leap to my feet, yank my pants back on, and hightail it out of there.

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Chapter 11

Asher

I shouldn't be surprised that she took off. I thought she was depleted enough that she wouldn't move. Was pride, fear, or disgust that made her run? I did want to make sure she was okay, so I sent her a bait text, and she responded positively to it.

Asher: Can't follow simple orders? You'll be punished for that next time.

Lila: Bring. It. On. Dickbag.

Whatever this weird fucking tango this is that we're doing, it's entertaining at the very least. At best, it's the most devious fun I've had in a long time. Punishing Sunshine when she's being a total cunt with sex that she can just barely handle is waking a sleeping dragon.

I've never tolerated crap from women. When they become too much to handle and not worth the effort for the pussy, I walk. But this bitch... I can't stop. She enrages me like no other woman I've ever met because she refuses to fucking fold. So I've made a decision. I'm going to push her as far as we can go. As far as she'll allow me to take her.

And then beyond.

When I check my email, I have a reply from Morgan, the designer.

Morgan: No shade to your personal design choice. This sounds like a fun project. I have lots of availability this week if you're around.

Asher: Name your price to do the whole thing tomorrow.

The number he returns with is probably a joke, but I hold him to it. Even without work for the last three months, I'm doing okay financially.

Asher: Done. Send me an invoice. I'll see you here at 10am. Don't be late.

It's my move, Sunshine.

Morgan arrives right on time in the morning. Sunshine's SUV is gone, so she must be gone for the day.

"Who's that?" Bane asks as I head for the back door with a crooked stride.

I ignore him, opening the door. "Hey man, Morgan, right?"

"Yes, sir," he says. He's a tall guy, unbelievably scrawny, with a patchy beard and beady eyes.

"You got my payment?"

"Yes. I just wanted to clarify some design details with you."

"Make it black and scary. That's all. "

His brows pinch together. "I saw the house next door. Is this some kind of HOA war or something?"

I chuckle. “Something like that. I want this house to look like death next to the sun. Can you make it happen?”

“Yes, sir, I can.”

“Cool. We’ll head to work soon, but I’ll leave the back door unlocked. Help yourself to whatever’s in the fridge and the shitter. If a short angry blonde woman gives you any trouble, tell her to mind her fucking business.”

Once Morgan heads outside, I shut the door and feel Bane’s eyes tearing into my back.

“What are you doing?”

“Pissing off Sunshine,” I say simply. I sit at the table with him, stealing a piece of toast off his plate, and he scowls at me.

“Don’t do anything stupid.”

“Too late.”

He shakes his head, anger burning in his eyes. “At least this one isn’t married; at least, I hope not.”

Turner confirmed she’s divorced, and that’s good enough for me.

“I don’t know what you’re doing, but don’t do anything stupid. If you’re gonna fuck her the way you want, you need to talk to her.”

“Conversation is wasted on Sunshine. It’s not sweet talk that makes her spread her legs.”

He rolls his eyes. “You’re an idiot. I’m headed to the shop to finish painting.”

“I’ll be there soon.”

I wait until Bane leaves to finish getting ready, finding it easier to get around when he isn’t watching. Masking my limp isn’t doing me any favors, and it’s only making the pain worse, with too much pressure on my bad leg and too much strain on my good one.

When I get to the shop, Bane is finishing the final coat of paint. I set myself up at the desk and work on framing some of his pieces. After about an hour of work, I hear a loud truck pull in outside.

“The new doors and windows are being delivered and installed today. That’s probably them,” I say, breaking the silence.

Bane’s focus doesn’t lift from the wall. “Cool.”

I was hoping that’d mean he’d move his ass and go let them in, but he doesn’t. Instead, I hop out of my chair, seriously feeling the pain, and head for the door. The truck is parked just outside, and two guys in work clothes hop out to greet me.

But I’m not looking at them. Beyond one of the men across the street, some blonde hair catches my eye as it enters the clinic.

There is no way my luck is this good.

“Are you Asher?” one of the men asks, interrupting my thoughts.

“Yeah, hey guys. My business partner is inside; if he’s in your way, just tell him to move. Do your thing.”

“Sounds good.”

I bypass the truck and head for the road, looking both ways before crossing and heading for the door. The gold sign reads Dr. Elaine Parr - Obstetrician. No fucking idea what that means.

I brace myself at the door before waltzing in like I own the place. I walk into an empty waiting room and find a blonde head bent over at the check-in desk with a cup of takeout coffee beside a gold-plated sign that reads Lila Blake .

She may be facing me, but her ass is still up, and I can see her ass crack in the way those black scrub pants hug her cheeks. As a bonus, I can almost see down her white scrub top when she's bent over.

“If you're gonna bend over like that, I can make it worthwhile.”

It's as if my voice rips through her, and she bolts upright, her eyes wide as they land on mine. First with panic, then with pure anger.

“Asher, get out ! This is my workplace!”

“I know. What are the odds, eh?” I ask, taunting her further. “Now, why wouldn't you tell me you work here when I was tattooing you just across the street? It's only polite.”

“Shut your mouth,” she growls as footsteps approach from the back. This could not be more perfect.

A tall, sexy woman in a white coat enters from the back. She's got blonde hair, much longer and fluffier than Lila's, and far more curves, with a nice pair of tits that are wasted with her high neckline. The woman oozes kindness like a virus and greets me

with a smile.

“Good afternoon,” she says softly.

I waste no time offering her my hand, and she shakes it while I put on the fakest smile I can possibly manage.

“Hey, you must be Lila’s boss, Dr. Parr. She’s told me so much about you. I’m Asher, Lila’s boyfriend.”

I swear to god I hear Sunshine’s throat squeak.

Dr. Parr’s eyes widen in surprise, jumping between us, and Lila sinks a little in her place.

“It’s nice to meet you. I didn’t realize Lila was dating.”

Before Lila can defend herself, I have an answer. “We aren’t exclusive yet; this one’s making me work for it. She’s seeing a few guys, but I hope she’ll eventually settle for me. ”

Dr. Parr’s eyes widen slightly, clearly off-put by more information than she needed. Lila is quick to remedy that.

“Asher was just getting back to work, right, dear? ” she says through her teeth.

Dr. Parr approaches the desk, and Lila hands her a coffee and a bag of takeout, which she thanks her for with a nod. She must’ve sent her on a food run. With a sideways glance at me, she says an awkward goodbye.

“Have a good afternoon, sir,” she says as she heads out back.

“You as well, Doctor,” I say, my voice thick with fake kindness.

The moment the Doctor is out of sight, I can feel Lila’s eyes on me. If looks could fucking kill...

“Get the fuck out of here!” she snaps. “Don’t you EVER do that again!”

I know I could probably get her in trouble here, but I don’t give a fuck. I walk right around her desk, making her stiffen more and more as I approach. She swats at me as I reach for her hair, but I’m far stronger than she is, and I grab a fistful of blonde before she can fight me off. When I tighten it painfully, she moans under her breath.

“I’ve been gentle with you up until now. Do not make the mistake of thinking I’m incapable of truly hurting you, Sunshine. You may think you’re the one who started this war, but I promise you, I’ll be the one to finish it.”

Her body tenses, getting the message.

“It’s supposed to be a full moon tonight. Better make sure your back door is locked.”

With that, I release her hair, squeeze the back of her neck, and walk off, leaving her in silence .

My leg fucking kills when I get outside. I wait at the road for the car to pass before beginning my trek across. I’m on the middle line when my bad leg wobbles, and I drop.

I hit the ground hard, wincing as my bare knees hit the hot summer pavement, my bad knee slightly protected by the fabric of my shorts. I roll onto my side, cursing and fucking swearing, before I see a car coming right for me.

I quickly shimmy myself out of the lane so I don't get run the fuck over. To my surprise, the black car slows to almost a stop beside me, and a familiar face pops over the door.

"You alright?" Turner asks.

I use his car beside me as a brace to pull myself to my feet. "Just testing the road. Fucking hurts," I chuckle, brushing the gravel out of my skin.

Turner's brows sink. "Have you got a problem with your leg?"

And there it is. Whether it's Bane, Sunshine, or this old guy, the moment anyone mentions this fucking leg, I see red. I can't stand it.

"If I did, it's none of your fucking business," I growl.

Turner recoils, his brows lifting in surprise. "No, it's not my business. But you just wiped out on the road, you stubborn prick. It's okay to need help."

Without a thought, I lash out, my fist colliding with his side mirror. The whole thing shatters in place, and Turner roars in anger, pulling his car forward in surprise and nearly running my foot over in the process.

"The fuck is your problem!?" Turner snaps. He looks ready to jump out of that car and fight me, but I can't let him do that. He'll win. Instead, I walk around the back of his car and continue across the street.

"It's okay to need help!" I echo back to him, not looking his way. "You might wanna get that mirror fixed."

His car pulls off to the side of the road, but thankfully, I don't hear his door open. "In

case you're wondering, you can kiss your presence on my property goodbye!"

Perfect. Too many stairs there, anyway.

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Chapter 12

Lila

W hat. The. Fuck.

I pull over in front of Asher's house, unable to enter my driveway as I take in the scene. The house next door was always run down and ugly, with brown weathered siding. Not anymore.

It's black—not dark, but **BLACKER THAN BLACK**. On the front of his house, an enormous white skull decoration that looks about four feet wide is positioned to match the sun on mine. His exterior is also decorated with a giant creepy red beetle, a spider to match, and a bat.

His car isn't here, but my phone goes off as if he's watching.

Asher: Your move, Sunshine. And don't forget to lock that door .

Rolling my eyes, I pull into my driveway and slam my SUV into park. When I glance over, I find my lawn chairs on their fucking deck again. Would it be too dramatic to light them on fire in the driveway?

In my rearview mirror, I see a vehicle pull in behind me and Turner getting out of his car. When I exit mine, he stops and motions to both houses.

“Wanna tell me what this is about?”

“Your new buddy Asher is a fucking prick,” I say simply.

Turner winces, leaning against his car. “I’m not letting him into Koa. He had some blemishes on his police report, and clearly, he’s got you fired up. I get a bad vibe from him. Something’s off.”

“Thanks, Turner.”

“It’s not because of you,” he repeats, his voice cold.

I shake my head in anger. “Right, don’t do me any favors.”

When I turn to walk away from him, he grabs me by my arm and doesn’t let go. When I try to pry his hand off, I can’t budge it.

“You need to stay away from him. Whatever this is,” he motions to the two houses, “knock it off.”

“I just told you, he’s a prick!”

“Take all this shit down, and stay away from him. I mean it, Lila. The guy’s unstable, and I don’t trust him.”

“Well, thankfully, I don’t have to listen to you.”

Turner steels. “You do if you want to remain a member of Koa.”

“You cannot be serious,” I say, rolling my eyes.

“I’m dead serious. This guy is bad news, Lila.”

I could tell Turner about the sex tape, but I don't know what he'd do about it. He'd get the situation under control, for sure, but Asher would either be in jail or dead .

But I don't want that. I want to defeat Asher fair and square. I also don't need Turner forcing my hand. He doesn't control me or my life. So, without breaking a sweat, I unwind my key from my keychain. It's the key that opens the door to Koa. Turner watches me with confusion as I remove it. He doesn't take it when I offer it to him, so I stuff it in his pocket.

"Lila," he warns. "I don't trust you right now. You're not yourself; you're messing around with a dangerous man and lashing out at the people trying to help you."

I throw my arms up in disbelief. "If you wanted to help me, you wouldn't be kicking me out of Koa. You're forcing my hand, and I'm not your puppet."

When I try to shake him off again, he finally lets me go, and he doesn't say a word as I steal my chairs off Asher's deck and throw them on mine in a heap before stomping inside. Should I start locking them inside? If I want them to stop stealing them, yes.

Lock... As my hand lingers on the doorknob, staring at the lock, my mind practically short circuits.

I'm not an idiot, and he knows that. We both know what he meant when he told me to lock my door tonight. And while I should lock him out to piss him off...

I don't.

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Chapter 13

Asher

It's around two in the morning when I head over. I slept for a while in my den so that I wouldn't have to waste energy on the stairs.

When I reach for the door handle to Sunshine's house, I don't expect to find it locked. I smile when the handle turns for me, and I slip inside, locking it behind me. The considerate little cunt left a light on in her kitchen for her attacker. So sweet, so thoughtful.

I leave my shoes and socks at the door and tear off my shirt, leaving me in just some loose shorts.

I'm quiet as I move, leaning into my limp as much as I can while I'm alone. The stairs are dimly lit with light from the kitchen and another at the top of the stairs.

I know her bedroom's upstairs, so I begin my climb. Thankfully, she has a sturdy double rail in place. The stairway is wide enough for the rails to jut out from the wall, giving me ample room to brace it. It makes climbing the stairs easy, far more accessible than the narrow, rickety rail at my new place with not enough room to grab.

When I reach the top of the stairs, I tuck myself into a little corner by a closed door. It's not her bedroom. Since I know what window she yelled at me out of, I know which door it is. I take a couple of minutes to breathe, rest, and listen. I haven't heard

a thing, so I know I haven't woken her.

Yet.

When I'm ready, I open her bedroom door quietly. A fan provides the white noise for me to sneak in unnoticed. The curtain is open, and the side light in my driveway lights the room enough that I can see her. She's fast asleep on her back, her head turned to the side, and her mouth hanging open. Her eyes are tightly shut. The blankets are pulled down to her waist.

This is the first time I've been able to take a good look at her without her fucking yelling at me. In fact, it's the first time I've seen her at peace.

Sunshine's not a woman I'd usually go for. The chicks I've fucked in the past were taller and sexier, with curves and tits and a juicy ass. Sunshine, by comparison, is short and angry, with no tits to be found, and a modest but cute ass, with some wider hips. And somehow, her body appeals to me like no one else has before.

Her head's another fucking story.

Since she's fast asleep, I take the opportunity to piss her off some more. I head into her bathroom and flick on the light. Like the rest of the house, it's a little more aged. The walls are covered in little sunflower designs, including one that's all fucked up. Her shower curtain is a sunflower field, and even her toothbrush is yellow.

I start by flipping her toilet seat up and hiding her toothbrush, which was sitting in a cup on the counter, on the top of the mounted cabinet on the wall. She's too short to reach, so I know she won't find it.

I take a quick shower and dry off using her towel hung over the rail. Once I'm finished, I leave it on the floor. I don't bother putting my clothes back on, since it'll

be much easier if I'm not holding her down.

Once I head in, I rip her blankets off and climb straight on top of her, clamping her mouth at the same time. Her eyes open frantically, and my hand muffles what would've been an ear-splitting scream. Her whole body tenses, trying to throw me off, but she doesn't have a hope in hell. She's so much smaller than me.

"Don't scream again. Don't make me hurt you," I growl.

She swallows hard, and my hand travels down her throat as her eyes settle on mine, wide with fear. I hold her there while she squirms beneath me, her body shuddering, probably with need.

Fucking whore.

"Why?" she whispers meekly.

"Because you're a pathetic little slut who loves being forced," I say, my voice ice cold. "Just admit it, and I'll leave right now. I won't even leak your video tonight."

"I won't!" she growls.

"Come on now, little slut. It'd save you another pounding, and I bet you're already sore as it is. "

She fights some more under me. I have no idea whether she thinks she has a hope in hell of escaping or is leaning into the feeling.

"Come on. Did I hurt you last time? You can tell me," I say, taunting her.

"Yes," she whispers.

“Now I’m gonna hurt you some more.”

She shudders, a little squeak slipping between her lips as I grab a handful of her nice ass and squeeze. When she fights, I hold her down by her arms, managing to hold both with just one of mine, and I use the other to yank her shorts down, making her shriek in my ear.

I shove my knee between her legs, forcing them apart, and then guide my cock to her cunt, finding it soaking wet, ready for me. She can fight, she can tell me no, she can say she hates me, but her cunt doesn’t lie that it wants me.

“You disgust me,” she snarls, thrashing beneath me. She hardly budges me an inch.

“Stop fighting so much!” I snap right back, grabbing her by the back of her neck as I slip inside her. I glide in effortlessly. “If I disgust you, why is your cunt wet and ready for me?”

She squirms some more but doesn’t have an answer.

“That’s what I thought. Maybe next time, I’ll drug you.”

“You fucking wouldn’t.”

“Wanna bet? Here’s a spoiler, Sunshine. The list of things I will do to you is much shorter than the list of things I won’t. The sooner you accept that, the easier it’ll be for you.”

“Get fucked!” she growls. A few harsh thrusts have her yelping, clamping her mouth shut.

“Language,” I taunt her, reaching under and struggling to find her nipple over the flat

surface. When it begins to harden, I pinch, making her hiss. “Almost couldn’t find that tiny tit.”

“STOP!” she wails.

I have to give it to her; she really puts up a fight. If I didn’t know better, I’d almost think she hates this, but her cunt doesn’t lie, pulling me deeper inside while she tries to throw me like a bronco. All it does is tire her out and steal her breath.

“Stop isn’t what I want to hear. You know what I want to hear.”

“No...” she fights.

“That’s not it either.”

My leg is beginning to ache, so it’s time to wrap this up. When I thrust into her hard, she screams, and I cover her mouth as I fuck her, slamming her deeper into her mattress. She fights, but she’s no match for me, and eventually, I empty inside of her, biting my tongue to stifle my moan. She doesn’t deserve that.

When I climb off her, she doesn’t move. Her back rises and falls with her breaths, and her eyes are clamped shut as she battles exhaustion.

She’s hiding from me, but I won’t let her. I approach her slowly and grab a handful of her hair, tugging just enough to make her wince, but she doesn’t open her eyes.

“Sleep tight little whore. Don’t worry, I’ll be back.”

A cute whimper confirms she heard me.

I leave her in bed, grabbing my clothes on my way out. I easily descend the stairs and

pause by the door, an idea flickering in my head. A dusty old key rack is on the back of the door, and a single key hangs from it. Trying my luck, I open the door and stick the key in the lock, finding it turns.

I wonder if she'll notice it's gone, not that it matters.

I pull on my clothes, leaving my shirt on the floor. I want her to remember I was here. Once I'm ready, I pocket her spare house key and exit the house, leaving the door unlocked behind me.

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Chapter 14

Lila

I think I feel the pain before I'm fully awake.

And before I fully wake, I decide I don't hate it.

Sunlight is pouring in from the window, creating an orange glow on my bedspread. I sit up slowly, feeling the pain beneath me. When I slip my hand between my legs, I find my pajama shorts are gone, and I feel some cum dribble out of me.

How is this happening?

I head to the bathroom like a zombie, finding a mess inside. It looks like he used my fucking shower and left his sopping wet towel on the floor. After kicking the towel to the side, something catches my eye. Or rather, doesn't .

My toothbrush, which usually sits in a cup on the counter, is gone.

“Why?” I growl to myself. “Just... why?”

Before I can shower, I head for the toilet and fall straight in, submerging my ass in cold water.

“That MOTHERFUCKER!”

After the longest shower of my life, I charge next door, clenching my teeth. Asher and Bane are sitting at the table in their kitchen.

“How fucking juvenile can you be? My toothbrush !?” I snap, rushing to the table and slamming to a stop beside Asher.

They both chuckle, and Bane gawks at me. “That's what you're gonna be mad at him for?”

“I didn’t steal it,” Asher says. “Besides, you seemed to enjoy yourself based on how wet you were getting.”

My jaw falls open, and Asher only gives me that cocky smirk that makes me see red. That’s when he makes a motion to Bane, who gets up. Before I realize what’s happening, Bane loops behind me and locks my arms behind my back. I let out a piercing scream as he immobilizes me and shoves me towards Asher, still sitting at the table.

“I promised Bane a piece of you; I didn’t think you’d mind,” Asher says coldly.

I thrash, but it’s no use. With my arms locked behind my back, I have zero control or leverage, and the men are so easily able to overpower me. Asher turns his chair sideways, and suddenly, I’m spun around to face Bane, and Asher’s arm replaces his, immobilizing my arms. He perches me on his good knee, keeping his bad one off to the side. When I try to smash my head back against his, he dodges it and grabs my hair with his free hand, immobilizing my head against his chest as he breathes hot air into my ear.

“Nice try, Sunshine.”

“Let me the fuck GO!” I snap, trying to wiggle out of his grip, but it’s impossible,

and with the way I'm perched with his knee between my legs, it only stimulates my clit and makes me let out a shaky breath.

"If you wanna hump my leg, go right ahead, Sunshine."

He twists my hair harder until my back is arched, and the top of my head is pressed against his chest as my entire world goes quiet.

"Fuck you!" I snap.

"Thanks for the offer, Sunshine. You're gonna let Bane play with you now. Unless you want to admit you're a dirty little slut, and I'll let you go."

I fight harder. "Like fuck I am!"

When I don't cave, Asher hums with approval. "You can touch her, Bane, it's okay."

Suddenly my shorts and thong are ripped out from beneath my ass. When Bane grabs my legs and forces them open, I let out a squeal that makes Asher let go of my hair and slap his palm over my mouth, holding my head tight against his chest.

"Shh, don't scream. Just take it, little cunt," Asher says.

If Asher was ever gentle with me, Bane is not. He aggressively slams all his fingers inside me at once, stretching my opening easily due to how wet I am, and I fucking hate it.

I think .

I won't stop screaming, but Asher's hand keeps me muffled as Bane continues to force me open, his knuckles slamming against me with bruising force. Despite the

pain, I can feel my orgasm approaching, and my screams turn into frantic wails.

“The slut’s gonna come,” Bane says.

And I do.

The sound of my squirting fills the room with the collision of Bane’s fist with my cunt, and my screams blur into high-pitched moans.

“You act like you hate this, but you can’t hate it too much, cunt,” Asher says.

When Bane releases his hand from me with a rush of fluid, I take the opportunity to throw myself forward, knocking Asher off balance. He steadies himself before hoisting me to my feet.

And that’s when we fall.

Asher lets out a wail above me as we fall forward. I’m slammed from behind as I hit the ground hard, with Asher on top of my back, crushing me. I shriek, letting out the last bit of air from my lungs and having no room for my chest to inflate.

The men yell above me as Asher’s weight leaves me all at once. Bane pulled him off. I scramble to my knees, catching my breath as Asher wails in pain.

“Out, get the fuck out!” Asher screams. Like a wounded animal, he’s curled into a ball against the wall while Bane stands near, ready to help him to his feet.

“You stubborn moth-”

“OUT!” he roars .

And just like that, Bane throws up his hands and backs up. He looks down at me on the ground, his expression filled with rage.

“If you know what’s good for you, leave him alone,” he says to me before grabbing his shoes and heading out the back door, slamming the door behind him.

Asher breathes heavily, grabbing at his thigh. Bane’s right, I should run. Asher’s not going to let anyone help him, ever. He’s too stubborn, and that stubbornness will be precisely what kills him.

“Just let me help you up,” I ask.

"Fuck off."

“What’re you trying to prove!?” I snap. The glare he shoots me with might as well have been from a gun. “You have a bad leg, you asshole, and you’re gonna make it worse if you wanna flex those man muscles and try to hide it!”

Asher freezes, his gaze pinned on mine. “My leg is none of your concern, little bitch. If you recall, it didn’t stop me from fucking you last night. You watch your fucking tongue. Don’t forget I still have your sex tape.”

When my eyes sink into his, I see anger but something else. It’s a small crack, but it’s there, and I can’t describe it.

“You seem very insecure about your leg. Do you wanna talk?” It’s not a genuine offer; I’m mocking him if only to get a rise out of him, and there’s no mistaking it.

He only shakes his head, dropping his voice to a vicious snarl. “Leave me alone, you stupid bitch.”

“No.” I know he’s lashing out, but it doesn’t make it hurt any less.

“ASHER!”

Bane’s thunderous voice from outside has both our eyes popping out of our skulls. In a panic, I rush to help Asher. When I offer him a hand, he shoves it away and throws himself to his feet. He glances out the kitchen window into the driveway, and whatever he sees makes all the blood drain from his face.

When I try to stand up beside him, he shoves me back to the ground by my face. While I’m disorientated, he opens a drawer and pulls out an enormous knife, and when I open my mouth to scream, he slaps his free palm over it to shut me up as he crouches over me.

“Shut your fucking mouth!” he hisses, his mouth only inches from mine. His eyes pierce mine, holding me prisoner as my heart beats a thousand miles a minute. He hands me the knife, which I take with question.

“Stay away from the windows and hide in the upstairs bathroom. If you hear someone break in, call the police. This isn’t a game, I’m not fucking around, you will listen.”

His panic makes mine burn hotter. “Y-yes.”

When Asher rushes for the back door in a stride that should definitely hurt his leg, I snatch my shorts and thong off the floor, gripping the handle of the knife tightly in my hand, and practically fly up the stairs, tripping over my own feet. I launch myself into the bathroom, slamming the door shut, and punch in the click lock before putting my clothes back on.

There’s a small window that’s cracked open, and I open it more, realizing I can see right into the driveway, but they aren’t paying attention to me.

Asher joins Bane in the driveway, and the frightened expressions on their faces steal my breath as I see their source of fear. Two more men are in the driveway, sitting on motorcycles, their helmets in their laps. One is shorter, with neat hair and a cocky smirk that makes my skin crawl. The other is larger, with a full face of hair and piercings and long dark hair in a low ponytail. Even from up here, their eyes feel cold and dark. The casual way they linger there makes me nervous, as I notice that Asher and Bane are tense, waiting for them to make a move.

“What are you doing here?” Asher asks, his voice tight.

“We just thought we’d swing by and check out your new place. Interesting design choice.”

“We checked out your shop, too,” the other says. “How’s that leg doing, Asher? Still seems to be giving you some trouble.”

Asher’s face blanches, and something in his fearful, angry expression breaks me.

Bane squeezes Asher’s arm before he takes a hesitant step forward, putting himself between them and him. “Well, thanks for stopping by.”

To my great relief, they begin to leave, but that relief is short-lived when one speaks again.

“That’s a cute girl you guys got there. Nice set of pipes on her, too.”

My heart practically drops, and Asher’s face turns bright red as he springs forward to go after them, but Bane stops him, holding him back with every bit of muscle he has. Once the motorcycles are long gone, Bane slaps Asher in the chest.

“Are you fucking stupid!?” he snaps.

“They know about Lila,” Asher says, his voice strained .

That might be the first time I’ve heard Asher use my real name since that first night, and I wouldn’t say I like it. When I’m Sunshine, it’s all good fun. Being Lila to Asher is something else entirely.

“They were probably watching us through the windows. Lord knows she’s loud. Maybe they didn’t get a good look at her.”

“How do they know where we live, Bane? It’s not like we posted it on the internet! They must be watching us...”

Asher turns his head slightly before looking up at me, and I duck.

I wait in the bathroom for a few minutes, unsure what to do or think. Finally, footsteps climb the stairs, and a hard knock on the bathroom door makes me jump.

“Come on out.”

I open the door, and Bane holds out a hand, so I pass him the knife.

“Asher’s going to walk you home. Go.”

I nod, still flustered. When I try to slip past him, he grabs my arm in a bruising hold, making me stop. He turns his head, and I can’t help but feel like a mouse, shrinking beneath his harsh eyes.

“You okay?” he asks, a little gentler.

I have no clue what he’s asking, but I still nod.

Asher's waiting downstairs by the back door, a grim expression on his ordinarily smug face.

"What happened?" I ask.

He nudges my shoes toward me with his feet as I approach.

"You should know since you watched." He lifts a hand to stop me when I stumble over my words. "Just put your shoes on."

I do as he says, allowing him to walk me to my house. I keep my pace slow so I'm not rushing him, and I don't miss how he watches the road as we cross over the driveway. Once we get to the door, he pulls out his keys before I can grab my own and lets us into my house. I want to make a snarky comment about it, but I don't.

Once shut inside, he locks the door before turning to me. "Lock every door and window in this place, now."

I don't hesitate, following his instructions while he rummages in my kitchen like he owns the place. Once I'm finished with the upper level, I rush downstairs. He's pulled my two largest knives and set them on the counter. He grabs the largest one and hands it to me, holding the blade while offering the handle. I take it gently, careful not to cut him, and his hand falls away.

"Put that by your bed," he says.

He heads for the den with the other knife while I run upstairs. When I return, he's placing the other knife on the coffee table beside my sofa. He moves to the other side before sitting down. He can't hide his limp, likely from the fall, and I notice how he won't look me in the eye while I approach. I slowly sit down and turn to face him, folding my legs and placing my hands in my lap.

“Are you okay?” I ask, my voice shaky.

He nods quickly, easing my worry, but only stares into space.

“Who were those guys?”

Once the words are out of my mouth, I feel stupid. Why does it matter if he’s okay or who those men were? Asher has been nothing but evil towards me. I fully expect a backhanded response. What I don’t expect is the deep breath he takes before he gives me their names.

“Rocco and Rooney... ”

I want to ask him why he was so scared of them, but I know that’s not a good idea. Instead, I go around him. “Why was Bane so afraid of them?”

He pauses, considering whether or not to share with me. Eventually, he begins to unfold.

“They’re the ones who fucked up my leg.”

I never put much thought into Asher’s leg and how it happened. But to be attacked? That thought didn’t occur to me until Rocco and Rooney mentioned it so cryptically outside.

“Tell me what happened.”

And just like that, the moment’s gone. His brows pinch together, and his attitude is back. “None of your business.”

“Jesus christ, Asher, just fucking tell me. After what you did last night, you owe me.”

He considers it, and somehow, my line works.

“Bane and I used to work at their tattoo shop; until I fucked Rocco’s wife. They found us together and took a baseball bat to my leg. My femur was completely shattered.”

The word makes my chest seize up. Shattered . The amount of force and brutality it would take to completely shatter a femur is nothing short of horrifying.

“They did this to you?”

He nods, still avoiding my gaze. His eyes clearly show he’s trying not to break in front of me. “I fucked Rocco’s wife. Kind of asked for it.”

“You slept with his wife; you didn’t permanently injure him!” I blurt, immediately realizing the error of my words when he looks at me with black eyes .

“It’s not permanent,” he says, biting back an eruption.

“I know, I’m sorry.” It’s a lie, but fighting him on it is clearly not the answer. “Why did you sleep with her?”

“I was in a bad place. My knee was messed up from a motorcycle accident, and I was dealing with a limp - probably a temporary one, ironically. I was angry and probably a little self-destructive. Raven was there and into me, and I just said fuck it.”

My chest tightens as he mentions the girl’s name. Raven. Suddenly, I’m a bundle of anxiety. Why? I don’t get it. I don’t give a fuck about Asher. “What happened to Raven?”

He shrugs. “No idea. I imagine Rocco probably slapped her around, and he’s

probably got her on a short leash.”

“You haven’t spoken to her?”

“Not once, not since. She’s a bitch, she was only good for one thing.”

I hate that that makes me feel better.

“If you ever see those guys, do not fuck around. Run.”

I nod nervously. “Do you think they’ll come back?”

“I really don’t know, but I fucking hope not. Keep this place locked down. No more leaving doors unlocked. These are guys you should be afraid of.”

“Guys like you?” I challenge.

He pauses. “There are worse things than me, and you’re handling me just fine, no matter how much it’s pissing me off.”

Finally, I crack a smile. “I can handle a lot more than you.”

He nods, ending the conversation. “I should go.”

Part of me wants to tell him to stay. I know his leg is sore after his fall, whether he’ll admit it or not, and he should rest for a bit .

“Did you hurt yourself when you fell?” His eyes turn on me again, and I roll mine.

“Never mind. I know you did.”

“Just a little stiff.”

“Bullshit. Just tell me, what’s going to happen when you tell me your leg bothers you? Is the world gonna explode? Are you going to die? No. Stop being so fucking stubborn. Your femur was shattered with a baseball bat; of course it fucking hurts.”

“Little bitch... I’m not in the mood,” he says, pinching the bridge of his nose.

He’s sore. If I cared about him, I’d offer for him to stay. I know next door isn’t far, but he’s hurt. I have no idea why he doesn’t have something to help him, like a walker or a cane. It’d be so much safer for him. But I don’t know if my vagina can handle bringing that forward.

So, instead, I’ll try some good old reverse psychology.

“Well, get the fuck out of my house,” I say, my tone light and playful. I’m too tired to commit.

Asher takes the bait and leans back against my couch.

“This couch is pretty comfy. I think I’ll hang here for a while. Besides, I don’t want to leave you alone while they sniff around.”

I make a show out of rolling my eyes, but I think we both know I played him.

“You’re ridiculous,” I state.

“I’ll take some breakfast, too, since you rudely interrupted mine.”

I head into the kitchen, rip a banana off the bundle, and toss one at him. It lands in front of him with a thump.

“I’m tired. I need to lie down for a while. Do not try anything today, okay? I’m too

on edge. ”

I realize what I’ve said the moment it’s out of my mouth, and he sees it, too. The today means far more than just one word.

“I promise,” he says.

For some reason that has nothing to do with his leg, I believe him.

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Chapter 15

Asher

I watch some movies on Sunshine's TV once she goes upstairs. While my leg feels fine enough, I'm not leaving her here alone after this morning.

After a few hours, Sunshine appears at the bottom of the stairs. She's changed her clothes, and I swear she must be mocking me. She's wearing a knee-length soft yellow dress with thin straps. It's tight up top and flows out on the bottom. She's not wearing a bra, and I can barely see her nipples trying to poke through.

"Trying to give someone a black eye?" I ask, motioning to her dress, and she rolls her eyes. "Was the yellow necessary?"

She flashes me a tight smile. "If it irritates you, then yes."

A knock on the back door interrupts us, and Sunshine crosses the room to let Bane inside .

"You guys alright over here?" Bane asks.

"Yeah. Sunshine was scared they'd come back, so she wanted me to stay here to protect her."

She rolls her eyes. "Yeah, that's what happened."

“I drove around for a while but didn’t see them. Not sure where they are now,” Bane says.

“I don’t get it. Why come all this way just to fuck with us? They already got enough revenge on me.”

“I don’t know, but I don’t like it. I picked up three security systems, one for the shop and one for each house. I’m not taking any chances. These guys are too unpredictable.”

“You’re right,” I agree.

“Look, I’m not trying to piss on your leg, but you’re not gonna be able to do this, and I’m supposed to have Jared in an hour.”

Fuck. I forgot about that. “We should probably cancel for today.”

“He’s got to be halfway here by now, and I think the brothers are gone.”

“I could do his tattoo, but I don’t want you here by yourself in case those pricks show up again.”

“I’ll be alright. It’s not me they’re after, remember?”

I wouldn’t say I like it.

“I can ask my friend Edgar to cover you,” Lila tells Bane.

“He’s the cop?” I ask.

“Yeah.”

Bane turns to me. “Okay, you do Jared’s tattoo, and I’ll take care of this. Want me to send you the design I have ready?”

“Yeah, I’ll use it as a base and fuck with it. ”

“Well, he’s due at the shop soon, so you’d better move your ass. I’ll head out now.”

Sunshine calls her friend Edgar, who agrees to come by and station in front of our houses. With all that sorted, Bane takes off, and now I have to haul my ass next door and shower.

“I can go stay with a friend today,” Lila says.

“No, you’re coming to the shop with me.”

She scoffs.

“Don’t argue. Just for today, okay? This place isn’t secure yet, and I wanna know where you are. I’ve just gotta shower, and we can go.”

And my leg fucking hurts, and the stairs at my place are absolute shit.

“Promise not to bite my head off?” she asks.

“Why?”

“Would it be easier for you to shower here?”

I’m not a dumbass; I know she tricked me into staying here this morning, not that I would’ve left anyway. And now this? It’s weird.

“It’d save time.”

“I noticed. Go shower, and I’ll make us some coffee.”

“Yeah, if you wanna be my little slave this morning, that’s fine with me.”

She rolls her eyes perfectly. “Do you want help up the stairs?”

“I’m fine,” I say, my tone shorting.

“You landed pretty hard; you’re allowed to be sore,” she fights back.

“No, I don’t need help up the fucking stairs.”

I’d rather die.

Sunshine wanted to change out of her dress, but I forced her to keep it on. It looks cute on her.

Jared’s nearly half an hour late, which is fine by me. Bane sent over his design for Jared, and I use that time to alter it to a style more like mine. When I’m done, the enormous dragon head is entirely different.

Sunshine’s a little more relaxed around me now. When I sat down at the desk, she pulled another chair over and sat close, watching over my shoulder while I fucked with the design on my tablet. She’s not tense or bitchy, she just seems calm. Despite how fucked up it was that Rocco and Rooney showed up, it broke some of that icy wall between us, and we actually had some conversations without yelling at each other.

“You like?” I ask, offering the tablet to her that she’s been pretending not to look at

for the last half hour.

“This is so cool. Where is it going?”

“It’s a full back piece.”

She studies the design carefully, her mind going. “Can I make a suggestion?”

“I guess.”

“You should put some trees or something at the bottom of the piece for scale. It’ll make the head look so huge it’s terrifying.”

I had considered something like that, too, but hadn’t gotten there yet. “You don’t make a commission off ideas around here, you know.”

“You’d better pay me something if you’re holding me here against my will. ”

I know she’s joking based on that devious twinkle in her eye. It doesn’t falter when my eyes narrow on her.

“Oh, trust me, Sunshine. I can really hold you here against your will if that’s what you want.”

She chuckles. “Shut up and work on your dragon.”

While I continue to work, she flips through another binder, examining each page.

“This looks similar to something I did in high school.”

I look at the piece she’s talking about. It’s one of my more recent designs, the skull

biting into the apple I did on Jared. I usually remove the design from my binder when it's been used, but I hadn't gotten around to taking that one out yet, due to the shit show that went down right after he left the shop.

"Yeah? You like art?"

"I used to," she starts. "When I was in school, I took as many art classes as possible. But I fell out of it when I went to nursing school. Did you do these yourself?" she asks, delicately tracing her fingers over my inked arm.

"What I could. Bane did the rest, using my design. I did most of the snake except the back I couldn't reach."

"I like them," she says, paying particular attention to the snake.

"So why are you a nurse and not an artist?"

She shrugs. "Practicality, I guess? I tried to pick it back up at one point, but then I met my ex-husband, Ian. Things with us moved so quickly that the rest of the world sort of fell away."

"What happened with him? Was he a deadbeat?"

"No," she fires back quickly before softening a little. "Ian's a good man. Sexually, we didn't click. "

"He didn't treat you like the slut you are."

She rolls her eyes. "No, he didn't."

"Now THAT I can believe," I say with a smirk. I can't imagine Sunshine being with

anyone who doesn't use her up like the slut she is. "How did you not know you weren't compatible before you married him?"

She hesitates, averting her gaze, which only makes me more interested.

"Come on, Sunshine. Spit it out."

She rolls her eyes, her voice coming out short. "We both saved ourselves for marriage. Our wedding night was the first for both of us."

"And that is exactly why that saving yourself for marriage shit doesn't work."

"Yeah, well, I know that now," she says, angry. "Ian's engaged to my friend Allegra, a dominant woman."

"And how do you feel about that?" Once the words are out of my mouth, I feel like a dumbass. I don't give a fuck.

"I'm happy for them. But all my friends are giving me grief and treating me like I'm heartbroken when I'm not. I really am over Ian."

Our conversation is interrupted by a knock at the door. Before I can move, Lila jumps up from her chair to answer the door. I can see her hesitate when she spots Jared's face in the doorway.

"That's him," I say. Smart girl.

Jared eyes her up as he walks in, blatantly looking her up and down, and I snap my fingers at him, grabbing his attention.

"Down, boy," I say.

Jared grins, walking straight past Lila and up to my desk .

“I hate to tell you, but you’re stuck with me today,” I tell him.

He grins. “Oh no, what ever will I do?”

Rolling my eyes, I hand the tablet to him, and his jaw drops.

“This is fucking sick!”

“My assistant suggested we add some small trees for scale.”

Lila bristles, just like I knew she would. “Your assistant, my ass!”

“Short fuse on that one,” Jared says.

“Yeah, but she’s more fun when she’s fired up.”

Before she can open her mouth again, I reach under the desk and grab a sketchpad and some pencils, offering them to her, and she takes them.

“Here, to draw on while you’re stuck here.”

She nods a thank you before her eyes narrow on Jared and the tattoo on his arm, and her face lights up excitedly.

“Is that the same skull?”

“Yeah, it is.” I turn to Jared. “She got her first tattoo the other day, a tiger under her tits.”

Jared smiles wickedly. “I’d like to see that.”

Sunshine’s eyes flicker to mine. They’re wide, but it’s such a lie. I know that if I forced her to take her shirt off and show Jared her tattoo, her cunt would flood this shop.

“Yeah? Maybe later.”

The shop is officially open as of today. The new doors and windows were installed, brightening the place with white borders and clean glass. The walls are properly painted, though we haven’t hung any designs yet. The front desk is set up, just a hollow counter with chairs behind it and a laptop sitting on top with the cash. There’s a leather sofa by the door for walk-in customers to sit and wait or take breaks. In the back, our stations are set up, one in each corner, with rolling chairs for us and a stationary chair by each for a support person. We opted for one tattooing chair and one table, and we can easily switch them when needed. There’s a big wooden cabinet in the center of the back wall where all our supplies are kept, and a door on either side that leads to a bathroom and a kitchenette.

I expected Sunshine to wait at the desk, but she doesn’t. Instead, she waits in the chair beside my station, drawing on her sketchpad while I prep Jared. He’s face down on my table with his shirt off. I clean and shave the area first before applying the stencil. When he gets up to check it in the mirror, I notice Sunshine steal a glance at his chest.

Once I start the line work, Sunshine pulls her chair closer, and I notice her watching with complete focus. Usually, if a support person is getting too close, I’d tell them to back up. But the way I can see her so enthralled in my periphery makes me bite my tongue.

About two hours in, Bane shows up with the cop and another guy. This one is

younger than us, maybe mid-twenties, and a bit shorter than the cop, with a decent amount of muscle and teased brown hair.

“I fucking love this guy,” Bane says, motioning to the cop. “Helped me put both systems in and even called his boy toy to help.”

I fucking called that.

“I have a name that’s not boy toy,” the younger man says gruffly .

“This is Nash and Edgar,” Sunshine says. I stop tattooing to lift my head and watch her greet them with a warm smile. The cop, Edgar, grabs her for a hug.

“You hangin’ in there? I heard you had some unwelcome visitors this morning,” Edgar says worriedly.

“Fine. The guys want to be cautious,” Sunshine says.

That grabs Jared’s attention, and he turns to side-eye me. “Whoa, who?”

“Rocco and Rooney.”

Jared smirks. “I don’t know what you did, but you thoroughly pissed them off. Seriously, what did you do?”

“Shut up and put your head down,” I growl.

Thankfully, he does.

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Chapter 16

Lila

Though Edgar tries to get me away from Asher and Bane, he's far more polite about it than Turner is. I learned from him that Turner removed me from Koa's group chat, which I hadn't noticed yet. It feels like a slap in the face, but I don't think it's what he intended. He's trying to use Koa to get me away from Asher, which is a pretty stupid plan, considering I haven't even walked down the stairs to Koa in months.

"Nash and I were happy to help them get these security systems in, for everyone's sake, but I think you should stay away from them, Lila. From what Turner's told me, they seem like bad news," Edgar says.

"Thanks, Edgar," I say simply.

He stares me down. "No dice? "

I shake my head. "I can handle them. Trust me."

He's not convinced, but there's not much more he can say. "You need anything, you call me. I don't care what time it is."

I smile, leaning in for a hug and pulling him tight. "I know. Thank you."

Once Edgar says goodbye to Nash with a sweet hug and a kiss that makes my heart throb, he heads back to work. I offer to help Nash and Bane install the security

system, but after doing the other two, they were convinced I'd only slow them down.

Despite the few pages of drawings in my lap, I spend most of my time watching Asher tattoo Jared. There's no denying he's an attractive man, and I've got to wonder what's in the fucking water wherever they came from. He's a bit larger, with some meat on his bones, and his eyes are bright and cheerful. He's covered in dark facial hair, which matches the messy mop on his head. His tattoos take up most of his skin. Watching Asher add to them only makes him more attractive as he lies there and swallows all that discomfort. There's something so fascinating about it that makes it addictive to watch, and it almost makes me appreciate my tiger and the pain I went through to get it even more.

I can tell Asher is watching me when I get closer, but he doesn't protest. Instead, he lets me take a closer look. I kneel so that I can see the machine at eye level and how the needles pierce the skin, sometimes drawing the slightest bead of blood.

As a nurse, watching how precise Asher is in his routine and how clean he keeps everything makes me very happy.

A while after Nash leaves, Bane takes off. He shows us how to use the security systems before he heads back home.

Not long after, I get a text from Neela asking where I am. When I look at my texts, I see I have more from Ian, Allegra, Macy, Gareth, and Juliet, all just checking in, which seems odd. I ignore those and answer Neela's direct question. When I tell her I'm at the tattoo shop, she doesn't respond. A few minutes later, I hear a knock on the door, and Asher stops his machine, his posture tensed on red alert.

"Who's that?" he asks nervously.

I lean in my chair to peek at the door, finding exactly who I expect to see. "It's

Neela.”

“Oh, good.”

I leave Asher with Jared and head to the front of the shop with my sketchpad in my hand. I set it on the desk and disable the code before opening the door.

“Hey, what’re you doing here?” she asks.

“I’m crashing here today. And I’m guessing you knew that.”

She follows me to the desk, and we sit down, out of earshot of the men in the back.

“There’s something I want to talk to you about,” Neela says.

I know where she’s going with this, but I let her get it out. Neela is one of my best friends for a good reason, and there’s a reason I confided in her about Asher. She’s not overbearing. She’s dealt with some pretty crazy stuff in her life, and it’s put a good head on her shoulders. She’ll say her piece but won’t go further than that. She doesn’t push.

“Did you see that Turner removed you from Koa’s chat?”

“Yeah, I noticed. ”

She nods, offering her phone to me. “It’ll be easier to show you. You should know.”

I take the phone from her and find the chat open, with a long-winded message from Turner at the top.

Turner: Hey guys, I have some news you all need to know. Lila has been temporarily

removed from Koa. The two of us had an argument that went a little sideways. Lila's been in some war with her new neighbor, Asher. He's unhinged and potentially dangerous, and I know that because he flipped out at me and broke my car's side mirror just to be an asshole. I don't know what's going on between Lila and this guy, but we need to keep a close eye on her. Ladies, can you check in and see if she's okay? You're the closest to her.

Juliet: Yeah, last time I checked in on her, she bit my head off, so someone else can have a turn.

Gareth: What the fuck? Is Lila okay?

Edgar: Lila just called me. I guess the neighbors Asher and Bane had some unwelcome visitors this morning, and they're concerned they'll come back. She didn't tell me what's happening, but I'm going to cover Bane while he installs some security systems at their houses and tattoo shop.

Nash: Uh, pick me up on your way. I'm at the auto shop, and I'm coming with you.

Gareth: I second that, you shouldn't go alone. Nash, I'll get your morning covered.

Nash: Thanks man.

Turner: Girls, see if you can find out anything more from Lila. We need more information on these guys.

Neela: If she tells us anything that's between us.

Ian: Sorry guys, Allegra was giving me a massage, we're both reading now. What in the world is going on? Is Lila safe!?

Edgar: It sounds like she's safe for now at least, she said Asher is keeping a close eye on her today.

Turner: Asher is the problem!

The messages end there, but I can see someone else is typing, and I pass the phone to Neela before I can see it. I don't want to read anymore.

"I thought you should know," she says.

"Thank you." I had no idea Asher damaged Turner's car. It must be why he came by to see me yesterday.

"You know Turner's only doing this because he cares about you, right?" Neela says carefully.

"He's acting like he can force me to make the decisions he wants me to. I told him I handled the Asher situation, but he won't drop it."

"I know, and I have to agree, if he pulled something like this on me, I'd be livid. It's why I wanted you to know."

"I appreciate it. And don't worry, I won't mention that you showed me the messages."

"I'm not worried about that. But I have to admit, I'm a little worried about you too. Who are these guys who came by this morning? Someone they know?"

"Yeah. I guess they're dangerous guys. But with the security systems, I think we'll all feel a little safer."

“Are they worried these guys will come after them? Or you?” Neela asks nervously .

“I don’t think so. I think they’re just being overly cautious... They’re the ones who hurt Asher’s leg. They took a baseball bat to him.”

“Holy fuck, are you serious!?”

“Asher slept with one of their wives. He definitely had something coming, but I don’t think a shattered femur is comparable to an affair...”

“Is his leg gonna get better?”

“No idea. I’ve told you just about everything I know. If you haven’t noticed, he’s not a big talker.”

“No. But you don’t seem so angry with him today, either.”

I shrug. “I don’t know... I was at his place when the guys came by, and Asher gave me a knife and made me hide in the upstairs bathroom.”

“So he protected you like he should have.”

She’s not wrong, but it felt like more than that. I’d swear he was scared for my safety if I didn’t know any better.

With nothing more to say, Neela grabs the sketchpad on the counter and opens it to my page of drawings, eyeing them up with interest.

“Am I still invited to Marina’s birthday party tomorrow?” I ask.

She smiles, not taking her eyes off the page. “Of course you are. Just stay out of Koa,

okay? Don't piss off Turner more than he already is."

"I promise."

Her eyes narrow with interest on my sketchpad. I drew three pages, a mountain landscape, some butterflies, and an intricate tree with cherry blossoms .

"Is this Bane's or Asher's?" she asks. "I love this tree. I want it."

"Don't get too excited, it's mine."

"No, really," she says.

I pause in confusion. "It's really mine."

Neela's expression drops, confusion flooding her face as she glances between me and the sketchpad. Finally, her eyes light up in disbelief.

Her eyes dart to mine. "Wait, you did these?"

"Yeah?"

She shows me the pad as if I don't remember what I drew. But I don't know what I'm looking at.

"What?"

"Do you not realize how good these are? These lines are crisp and straight. The shading on the mountains. The perfect symmetry of the butterfly wings... The freaking branch pattern of the tree! I had no idea you're an artist."

“I’m not.”

She balks. “Uh, yes, you are ... You know, these would make great tattoo designs.”

“What, me? A tattoo artist? No way.”

She shrugs. “Why not? You hate being a nurse.”

Yeah, she’s not wrong...

But me, a tattoo artist?

The rest of the day goes by smoothly after Neela leaves. I continue to watch Asher and Jared as the dragon tattoo comes to life before my eyes. The work Asher does is absolutely breathtaking.

It’s around six when Jared notes he’s nearly had enough, and Asher manages to finish the outlining of the dragon, essentially like the first layer of my tiger. He’ll go back in and add more details later.

While Asher wraps Jared, I hear the alarm beep as it’s disabled, and Bane walks in with a large brown paper bag. Asher and Jared both nod a greeting to him, but he waves me up.

“Lila, come help me with this.”

I leave the men out back and join Bane at the desk. He moves my sketchpad and pulls some takeout from the bag. He lays it out and begins opening the containers. There are servings of drumsticks, barbecue wings, fries, and Caesar salad. He passes me a bundle of paper plates and a box of wooden cutlery.

“Dish this up, will you? Three plates with everything and whatever you want for yourself.”

“Sure, thanks,” I say, grateful. My stomach’s been rumbling all day.

Bane pulls all the food out and opens it, and I begin to dish it up. While we’re alone, I’m desperate to ask him about Asher. Why is he such a stubborn asshole about his leg? How do I help him? But I can’t. Going behind his back isn’t right. It’s precisely what I’m pissed at my friends about.

Thankfully, Bane comes out with it without the need to incriminate myself.

“Do you like him? Asher?” he asks .

I hesitate. Not because I’m afraid of Bane telling Asher what I say, but because I really don’t know. He’s a stubborn, stupid asshole. He’s blackmailed me, threatened me, and forced himself on me. And as much as I cling to our backward safeword, I have no way of knowing if he’d even honor it. But the more time we spend together, the more I realize he’s fighting his demons. His leg, Rocco and Rooney, they’ve done a number on him. He’s lost.

When I lose myself in my thoughts, Bane continues. “His leg has changed him. He’s not the same guy I knew. He’s hanging off the edge of a cliff by a single finger.”

“I’ve noticed,” I say simply.

Bane nods. “Our real families aren’t in the picture anymore. They’re crap. So it’s been us against the world for years. He’s my brother, and I’d do anything for him.”

He pauses, and I wait for him to get to his point. I know whatever he’s saying isn’t for my benefit.

“I don’t know what the fuck is going on with you two, but you need to be careful.”

“I’m not afraid of him,” I say.

“I don’t care about you ,” he says coldly. “I’m talking about Asher.”

I balk. “You’re worried I’ll hurt him?”

“He’s never been in a relationship, and he doesn’t take crap from women. Except you.”

He’s never been in a relationship... Until recently, Edgar was in the same boat, and we’ve had that conversation. He was so lonely, and he still had his family and all of his friends. I can’t imagine how lonely Asher must be .

“Don’t fuck with his heart,” he growls.

“I won’t. I promise,” I say sincerely.

That seems to settle him a little, and he gives me a half smile. “I do have to admit, it’s entertaining to watch you two.”

I chuckle. “Well, I’m glad you’re amused.”

Once the food’s ready, Bane leaves me up front while he joins the men out back, and he leans right into Asher. I watch Asher turn over his shoulder to look at me with interest. A chill washes over my body as a thought comes to my head.

No, he wouldn’t...

Or maybe he would.

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Chapter 17

Lila

Asher spends some time cleaning before he joins us up front for supper. Bane and Jared sit at the desk while I sit on the sofa with my plate in my lap, enjoying a generous helping of wings and salad. I laid Asher's plate on the sofa beside me, and once he joins us, I lift it out of the way so he can sit down. His version of a thank you is knocking his shoulder against mine and stealing the plate from me, which makes me chuckle.

"So, Lila, how'd you get involved with these two boneheads?" Jared asks.

"Not by choice," I say, nearly making Bane spit out his food.

"Lila's our neighbor. She didn't appreciate our music choices at all hours of the night," Asher says.

"No one likes it during the day, either," Jared says .

"Yeah? How would you know?" Bane asks.

"Because I've spent many hours in a tattoo shop with you lot, and your taste in music is garbage. The peace today was so nice for a change."

"That was Rocco and Rooney's music, asshole," Asher says.

“Liar, we all listen to the same shit,” Bane says, and he flicks a fry at him that misses and hits me in the nose. It lands in my salad, and Asher reaches over to snatch it and stuffs it in his mouth.

“How long have you known these guys?” I ask Jared.

“Too fucking long. God, it’s been what, ten years? Back when Bane was just a receptionist, and Asher was Rocco’s apprentice. I used to go to Rocco, you know.” He motions to a couple of his tattoos, one being a pattern of lines and triangles in black and another that looks completely abstract.

“Different artists, different styles,” Asher says.

I smirk at him. “Yeah, I can keep up.”

He nods in realization. “That’s right, I forgot, you used to be an artist.”

“How do you used to be an artist?” Bane asks.

I shrug. “I haven’t picked it up in ages.”

“Show me the sketchpad I gave you,” Asher says, elbowing me in the side.

“The one I moved?” Bane asks. He reaches under the desk and pulls out the same one. He must’ve moved it when he laid out the food. Instead of passing it over, he opens it, and his eyes widen. When Jared looks over his shoulder, his do, too.

“Wait, this is yours?” Bane asks. “I thought it was Asher’s. Did you freehand all this?”

“Yeah?” I say, confused.

Bane shakes his head. “Bitch, you’re an artist.”

He tosses the pad over, and Asher catches it mid-air. When he opens it, he has the same reaction of disbelief.

“You’re serious? You freehanded this?”

“Yes! Why does no one believe me?” I ask with a laugh.

“Because that butterfly is perfectly symmetrical,” Asher says. He shows it to me, pointing to the wings and how they match.

“Yeah, so?”

“Do you have any idea how fucking hard it is to freehand symmetry?”

“No?”

He chuckles, further examining the others.

“I want that mountain,” Jared says.

I never really took my art seriously. It was always just a hobby. But listening to Neela and all these guys compliment me makes me realize that maybe I shouldn’t have. Maybe I should’ve pursued something in the arts instead of nursing.

Once we’re all finished eating, Bane gathers the plates and utensils, disposing of them, before sitting back down with Jared. He pulls out his phone to show Jared something as Asher’s hand clamps down on my thigh through my dress, stealing my breath.

“What are you guys looking at?” Asher asks. There’s some amusement in his voice, as though he already knows the answer.

When I look over at Jared and Bane, they watch the phone with such focus that they don’t even hear Asher’s question. That’s when I realize.

“Asher...”

His grip on my thigh tightens, and when I panic and try to throw myself to my feet, he drags me back down, and I fall into his lap, straddling his good leg with my back to his chest. He holds me tight, breathing hot air into my ear.

“Jared wanted to see your video, so they’re watching on my phone.”

Suddenly, my heavy breathing fills the room, and my heart practically stops. The more I tense, the tighter Asher pulls me against him until I find my body sinking against his as my clit rubs against his leg.

“And she sent this to you?” Jared asks in disbelief.

“A happy accident,” Asher says. I can hear the grin in his voice as he speaks.

“Asher...” I growl.

“Don’t fight it, Sunshine. You can pretend, but I know what you really want.”

They turn off the video after the sound of my orgasm rips through the shop, and I find myself staring into space, unable to look any of them in the eye.

“Jared, come over. Let’s show you her pretty new tattoo.”

While Jared and Bane step away from the desk to join us on the sofa, Asher begins to slide the bottom of my dress up my legs, and I stop him.

“Feeling shy, little whore?” Asher asks.

“Asher, knock it off!” I fight.

“Would you rather I leak your video?” he asks.

My body betrays me as pleasure blooms through my core, and suddenly, Bane is sitting beside us, his hand clamped onto my arm .

“Ash...” I whimper as fear pulses through me, along with something else entirely. That’s when he brushes my hair from the back of my neck, and his lips are on me.

My entire body caves against him as his lips brush against my neck, making a full-body shudder run through me. When he clamps onto the back of my neck with his hand and brushes my dress strap away so he can sink his teeth into my shoulder, I let out a gasp that they can all hear.

“Come on, Sunshine,” he says, breathing against my neck. “You know the drill by now. You don’t have to be shy. All you have to do is admit that you’re a dirty little slut, and we’ll let you go. It’s as easy as that. It’s just the four of us here; you can tell us. Tell us what a dirty little slut you are.”

My head spins as I’m overwhelmed, and I shut my eyes, breathing deeply. It takes me time to decide whether I can handle this.

But in the end, I know I want it.

“No,” I growl, as menacing as I can manage in my state. “Screw you.”

“You’re gonna regret that, Sunshine.”

When I try to squirm out of his grip, he grabs both my arms, holding me still, and when I try to wiggle off his leg, it only stimulates my clit, making me moan, and the guys chuckle at that.

“I’ll hold her so she doesn’t squirm. Bane, show Jared her new tattoo.”

I hold my breath as my dress is pulled up. Bane yanks it up over my whole body and wraps the front around the back of my neck, leaving me completely exposed except for my thong, and it’s not much. As I struggle, Asher manages to lock both my arms behind my back with one of his, and he tangles his other hand in my hair, pulling back and forcing my face up towards the ceiling so I can’t see them.

But I can feel them. The cover is still on my tattoo, and I feel a warm set of fingers trace over it before brushing over my breast. Then my nipple is being rolled between two rough fingers, and I whimper.

“What a pretty tattoo between some pretty little titties,” Jared says.

“Let go of me!” I growl.

The hand releases from my nipple, and I realize it must be Jared’s.

“No, no, you can touch her as much as you want,” Asher says. “She acts like she hates it, but you’ll see, her cunts about to flood my leg.”

“He’s right,” Bane says, and suddenly, a hand slides into my thong, and a rough finger slips between my pussy and Asher’s leg, and I can feel the moisture.

“Soaked as usual?” Asher asks.

“Yep,” Bane says before I hear the sound of him sucking his finger clean. “Tastes good, too.”

Two fingers slip between the waistband of my thong, and suddenly, it’s dragged off my legs with a trail of fluid. Two strong hands force my legs apart.

“Is she on birth control?” Jared asks.

“Yeah, you can come in her. Unless Sunshine wants to say those magic words.”

“Fuck you!”

“Not the right words, Sunshine,” Asher says, teasing. “Go on, Jared, take your cock out. You can fuck her. ”

I swear I nearly faint, listening to Asher whore me out. Before I know it, I feel a cock at my entrance, and the little extra at the top confirms there’s a condom on.

They’re fucking with my head.

Asher doesn’t relent from his hold, forcing my head back. I shudder as Jared enters me, and to my surprise, I find his cock doesn’t fill me enough.

I want more.

“Fuck, Ash, she feels incredible, you lucky asshole,” Jared says as he begins to pump into me. My core tightens furiously, clamping down on him.

My head spins as Jared fucks me in Asher’s lap. He’s rough as he pounds into me. When he slows, my quaking chest begins to tighten.

“I think she can handle some more cock, don’t you?” Bane asks.

“I think so, too. Gimme a second, will you, Jared?” Asher says, his breath on my neck making me shiver.

Jared’s cock is removed from me, and suddenly, I’m lifted a little off Asher’s lap, and I feel his pants being pulled down, probably by Bane. Once his cock is free, he lowers me onto it, sinking into me inch by glorious inch.

“Fucking soaked, dirty little cunt. Let’s see if you can take it up the ass.”

“What!?” I squeak.

“Unless you can’t handle it. Unless you’re ready to admit you’re my dirty fucking whore.”

When I refuse to fold, I’m lifted off his cock, and then I feel it against my asshole. I try to keep myself relaxed as he slowly breaches my hole, being considerate enough to go slow and steady. I feel myself fill more and more until I’m resting on his lap again, his cock nestled tightly inside me.

Then Jared spreads my knees, his cock lining up with my entrance. I let out a groan of pain as he enters me again, stretching and filling me like I’ve never felt before.

“Goddamn, fuck she’s tight with her ass filled!” Jared says. He begins to pump slowly and steadily, making me screech with pleasure and pain that has nowhere to go except out my mouth.

“Bane, I think she needs her mouth shut,” Asher says.

I have no idea what he means until my hair is released. When I look forward, Bane’s

pants are off, and he's standing on the sofa with a foot on either side of Asher's legs, above Jared, with his cock staring me in the face.

Holy. Fucking. Crap.

Bane bends down to grab my chin between his harsh fingers, his eyes burning into mine.

"Don't fucking bite me, cunt."

"You'll regret it," Asher adds, tightening his lock on my arms.

I give a slight nod of understanding before my lips are forced open, and Bane's cock enters my mouth.

Feeling this full has my head spinning, overwhelmed. Asher releases my arms long enough to wrap his around my chest, locking my arms at my sides but crowding me even further. I focus on the feeling of him beneath me as Bane and Jared begin to thrust.

My whole world explodes, and I find myself sinking deeper and deeper into my mind and body as I'm used and abused. Asher doesn't move, his cock anchored tightly in my ass, providing pressure, but no friction, which I think would really do me in. He lets Bane and Jared pump into me with abandon.

When my core begins to tighten, I gasp around Bane's cock, and he chuckles above me as tears start to drip down my cheeks.

"The little cunt's gonna come soon," Asher says, and all three men laugh.

They fucking laugh.

“Dirty little bitch, loves to be used like the slut she is,” Jared says.

“She’s crying,” Bane laughs.

A furious contraction rips through me, making me growl around Bane’s cock, and suddenly, my mouth is flooded with his cum. I have no choice but to swallow it, or I’ll choke, and I’ve never felt more violated in my life. That thought pushes me off the cliff and into the fire, causing me to clamp down on Jared, and he roars simultaneously.

When Bane pulls out of my mouth and jumps down, Jared follows, removing himself from me. Then Asher comes last, lifting me off his cock and back onto his lap. As tears drip from my eyes, I have the urge to hide, so I remove my dress from my neck and arms and turn around on Asher’s lap, burying my face in his shoulder. As giant sobs wrack my body, he wraps his arms around me.

“Is she alright?” Jared asks worriedly.

When I nod against Asher’s shoulder, he answers for me, his voice tight with blooming anger. “She’s overwhelmed, she’ll be fine.”

When Jared sits beside us, Asher’s hold on me tightens.

“Should I stay?” Jared asks.

“No. You’ve had your fill. I’ve got her. ”

I can’t see anything, but I can feel the tension in the air, which seems odd. Asher just whored me out, and suddenly, it’s like he’s angry about it.

“Text me later so I know she’s fine,” Jared says.

“Will do,” Asher says, a little gentler.

Bane speaks up after I hear Jared leave and the door shut behind him. “You good, man?”

“Fine.”

Bane chuckles. “Jealous?”

“Shut up and help me get her home to bed, and then you’re leaving. I’ll take it from there. You’ve had your fill, too.”

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Chapter 18

Asher

Lila was completely out of it after we fucked her. If there was ever a moment I desperately needed my legs to work, it was then. As badly as I wished I could get her home, I knew I needed help. After putting her clothes back on, I had Bane carry her to the car and then from the car straight up the stairs to her bed. She was half asleep, breathing fine, just completely exhausted. I followed them up the stairs and thanked Bane before sending him out, happy to watch him leave. Seeing Sunshine in his care felt like a gut punch.

Once we're alone, I strip her out of her clothes. I help her into some clean underwear, which has to be more comfortable than a thong, especially after the beating she just took. Once she's comfortable, I pull the blankets over her, tucking her in. Then I head to the other side of the bed, stripping myself down to my boxers, and climb in beside her.

I won't leave her. Instead, I turn on the lamp on the table beside me, and I study her while she sleeps. She's on her back with her face turned toward me, her lips slightly parted, and her shoulders rise with each intake of breath. The more I stare at Lila, the more I admire her features. The softness of her face, the fire in her eyes, her cute button nose. She's beautiful, whether asleep at peace or yelling at me in rage.

I've shared her twice now, and it's made one thing very fucking clear. I'm never doing it again. The first time with Bane was rudely interrupted. But with Bane and Jared? I thought I could handle it, but we were partway through when I became

fucking feral with something I did not expect ; jealousy . And now? Thinking about her with another man makes me feel fucking ill .

The night I met her, I decided I hated her and wanted to destroy her. And still, no matter what I throw at her, she comes back for more. She doesn't back down. Even when she's overwhelmed enough to break down and cry in the middle of sex, she's so strong-willed. The way she tells me off and puts me in my place makes me feel something.

I've never given a shit about a woman in my life. By the time I was old enough to like them, I hated my life, hated my parents for not giving a flying fuck about me, and that anger just consumed me. When I started having sex, it was always rough and angry. It was how I felt inside. I knew I was a menace, but the pleasure filled me with something I desperately needed. Something short-lived and hollow.

But with Lila, I feel something different. It's like it's not the pleasure that fills me anymore. Whatever it is, it isn't so hollow.

"You did good," I whisper, feeling the overwhelming urge to praise her. To my surprise, her eyes flutter open slightly. The tiniest smile creeps across her lips.

"You're not all bad, you know," she whispers, shutting her eyes again.

I chuckle, shaking my head. This woman does things to me. "Yeah, well, don't go telling anyone."

"I wouldn't dare," she says softly, scooting a little closer to me.

I run a hand over her chest, gently grazing against her breasts. "Beautiful..."

"What, no teasing?"

“They’re small. I never said they aren’t perfect.”

The sweet little smile I pull out of her takes my breath away. I wrap my arms around her and pull her in so she’s tight against me. When she turns to rest her head on my chest and drape an arm over my stomach, I tighten my hold on her. One hand holds her against me by her lower back, and the other tangles in her hair, making her hum. Her warmth feels incredible.

“I hope you had fun tonight. I won’t be sharing you again.”

I feel her smile against my chest, and her hand moves to my arm, squeezing it gently. “Will you stay with me?”

Jesus fuck, is this what butterflies feel like? She drew them, and now they’re in my stomach. I don’t hate it. “Yes. I’m not going anywhere.”

She turns her head just slightly to press her lips to my chest, and that’s when the butterflies fucking explode.

“You better not snore. I’ve lost enough sleep because of you.”

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Chapter 19

Lila

When I wake up, I'm still snuggled into Asher's chest. He's fast asleep, and it's nearly noon. We slept in. I hate to admit it, but it's the best sleep I've had in ages.

As Asher continues to sleep, I rub his arm, enjoying the warmth beneath my fingers. I take the time to study his face, memorizing every nook and cranny. He's so peaceful as he sleeps.

If only he had some peace in real life, too.

When he eventually wakes up, he smiles when he looks at me.

"Morning Sunshine."

"Afternoon, actually."

His eyes widen. "Shit, did I oversleep?"

"I did, too." I need to be at Turner's in an hour for Marina's birthday party .

"Will you be okay today? You can come to work with me if you want. Bane has a few appointments."

"I have a thing." I'm not telling him I'm going to Turner's if they've already

squabbled. “But I’ll be fine.”

He nods, looking almost disappointed. “Right. If you need anything, call me.”

“I will.”

Before I can get up, Asher reaches around me and pulls me into his warm chest. He squeezes me tight, and for a moment, I wonder where we go from here.

It’s Marina’s first birthday. When I head over to Turner’s, I’m one of the last ones to arrive, and the parking area is filled with cars. We gather for events on a pretty regular basis, but today, everyone is here.

Marina is the first baby. So naturally, she’s been spoiled like the princess she is since the day she was born. She’s such a happy infant, always smiling and cooing, melting every heart around her.

When I try to get in, I find my code doesn’t work. Turner must’ve changed it. The moment it beeps, keeping me out, my chest tightens. It feels like a slap to the face. I’m tempted to go home.

“Lost?”

I turn around to see Ian walking up the walkway. He must’ve been sitting in his car when he arrived, and I didn’t see him. He’s got this loaded smile on his face that I instantly glare at.

“Yeah, I got kicked out,” I say coldly, pulling down the long sleeves of my shirt that had slipped up my arms. It’s too hot for sleeves today, but I have some good bruises forming from yesterday, and I don’t need a lecture.

Ian winces, uncomfortable. “How are you?” he asks. So fucking loaded.

“I’m fine. Can we go in now?”

As if on queue, the door behind me opens, and I turn to see Turner standing in the doorway, his attention fixed on me.

“You can come in, but I wanna talk first.”

I roll my eyes, irritated. If he thinks he’s going to back me into a corner, he’s got another thing coming.

“Fine.”

Turner lets both Ian and me inside. He motions me to follow him upstairs into the den on the second floor. I take the furthest seat away from him, feeling defensive.

“What’s this about?” I growl.

“First of all, you can cut the attitude. I didn’t have to let you into my house tonight, but I did.”

“Don’t do me any favors,” I say coldly. “If I’m not welcome, I’m fucking out of here.”

“Lila, shut your mouth.”

“No. You shut yours. You had no fucking right to go behind my back and confront all our friends about my business that I told you to STAY OUT OF.”

My accusation makes him pause as if he wasn’t expecting it, which gives me some

satisfaction.

“Who told you about that?”

“I saw it. And I’m not telling you who showed me. You had no fucking right,” I repeat .

“Lila, do you not get it? I’m scared for you.”

“You don’t have anything to be scared about.”

“Yeah, then what’s this?” he asks, roughly grabbing my arm and yanking up my sleeve to see a nasty bruise forming.

“You don’t know what a bruise is?”

“I’ve never seen this much on you. Whatever the hell is going on-”

“Is none of your business!” I snap. “Jesus christ, Turner, I’m so sick and tired of you trying to make everyone else’s decisions for them. You’re not God! Stay the hell out of my life.”

“You don’t get it,” he says tiredly.

“No, I do,” I say simply, rising to my feet. “I hate you.”

Turner recoils, visibly wounded. I feel a pang of regret, though I shove it deep down.

“I’ll stay for an hour, then I’m gone. Don’t worry; you will never see me in this house again.”

Before he can rebuttal, I turn on my heels, storming out.

The party is outside in the courtyard. Juliet, Edgar, and Nash are swimming. Marina is under an umbrella at one of the tables in her dad's lap. Neela and Ty are socializing with Allegra and Ian, and Macy and Gareth sit across from them in their own little world.

I sit at Marina's table beside Neela, and she happily knocks me in the shoulder.

"You came."

"Wouldn't miss it. "

Turner enters the courtyard from the kitchen, and I feel his eyes burning into me, but I ignore him.

The party goes by casually. Everyone is in and out of the pool while Neela and Ty help Marina open her presents. She gets a toddler car from Gareth and a toy piano from Macy, which is fitting for them. Nash and Edgar got her the largest stuffed animal they could find. Allegra and Ian got her a children's clay set, which Neela is the most excited about. She grins when she opens mine, a set of colorful and fun children's books.

"Thanks, Lila," Ty says.

"You're welcome. I hope she likes it."

As the night goes on, I can feel everyone's eyes on me, which puts me on edge. Eventually, I head inside to grab a drink from the fridge, and when I turn around, I find Macy and Juliet walking in, their eyes fixed on me.

“What?” I snap.

Juliet huffs. “Hi to you, too.”

I frown, feeling guilty. “Sorry, hi.”

“How are you?” Macy asks, and I bristle.

“Ask me what you really want to ask me. I know everyone’s been talking about me behind my back.”

“We’re just worried about you,” Macy says with a frown.

“Well, stop.”

Juliet’s eyes narrow on me, and she grabs my arm, yanking up my sleeve. Her eyes nearly pop out of her head.

“Jesus fuck, Lila!” she snaps.

I shake her off. “Piss off. ”

“What did Asher do to you?” Macy growls. “Lila, we can talk to Edgar. He can help you!”

It’s the last straw before I fucking snap.

“Would you all LEAVE ME ALONE!? I like rough sex! We’re not all broken like you, Mace.”

I regret the words as soon as they’re out of my mouth, and I see the hurt flash in her

eyes.

“Mace...”

“No,” she says softly. She opens her mouth to say more, but instead, she turns on her heels and leaves. When the door slams behind her to the courtyard, Juliet turns on me.

“That... was not fucking cool,” she barks.

As Juliet storms out to the courtyard, I turn and head for the back door, feeling defeated and alone.

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Chapter 20

Asher

A knock on my bedroom door wakes me, and the first thing I register is that my leg kills. It hasn't hurt this bad since recovery, so I know I'm fucked.

"Dude, wake the fuck up!" Bane snaps in my doorway, wincing.

I sit up in bed, clutching my leg beneath my blankets, out of Bane's sight.

"What!?" I snap.

"I have a group of six in an hour, and I feel like garbage. Can you take them?"

"What? No! Your appointments, figure it out."

"Dude, I have a splitting headache and feel like I'm going to hurl. Please. I'm not doing them, and I can't cancel six appointments on day two."

No, he's right, he can't. And if he won't do them... fuck.

"What are they getting?"

"Nothing custom, just shit they found on the internet, all small. Shouldn't take more than a couple hours."

“Fine. But you fucking owe me.”

Once he takes off, I swing my legs around to the side of the bed. The smallest amount of pressure has my leg throbbing, and I have to clutch it and hiss through the pain.

“Fuck...”

Waking up in Sunshine’s bed yesterday was so much better than this. I spent three fucking hours last night debating whether to call her or not and then another hour trying to convince myself that I only wanted to call her so I could fuck her.

I grab my pain meds from my night table and down them dry, with an extra one for good measure. It usually takes about half an hour for the drugs to kick in, and I don’t have that time to waste this morning.

I’m just finishing in the bathroom when I hear Bane downstairs.

“You’re gonna be late!”

“Fuck off, mom!” I bite back. He’s right; I’m almost out of time.

Normally, I wouldn’t do the stairs with Bane right down there, but I don’t have a choice this morning. Despite my pain meds kicking in, I’m still sore. I tread carefully, easing myself down the first couple of steps while still out of Bane’s sight. From there, I try to look as natural as possible as I descend, and my leg pays the price for it as I move down a few more, nearing halfway.

And that’s when my leg gives out .

My bad knee hits the wood, and I tumble, reaching out desperately to grab the rail, but I miss, unable to loop my fingers around it. I crash down the stairs like a runaway

piano, and I swear Bane reaches the bottom before I do.

When I finally hit the floor, the pain begins to flare out, consuming every inch of me from the roll, and I screech out in pain, clutching my bad leg and gritting my teeth.

“Fuck, are you okay?!” Bane blurts out.

“Fine,” I snap.

He offers me a hand, and I swat it away, and his eyes flare in anger.

“Fuck off,” I snap.

“No, you fuck off.”

I grab the stairs behind me, trying to find something to leverage myself up that isn’t Bane, and as I raise myself up, I give out again, flopping to the ground.

“FUCK!” I roar before putting my fist through the wall beside me.

“Asher, what the fuck!?” Bane snaps, offering me a hand again.

“I don’t want your fucking HELP!” I snap before wadding up some saliva in my mouth and spitting it at his jeans.

Bane flies backward away from me. “Can you even get up?”

I don’t want to try again in front of him, so I don’t, and he throws up his arms.

“That’s it, I’m fucking done.”

“Finally!”

He makes for the door but stops, my words piercing him, and he spins around on his ankles .

“I swear to god, Asher, you are going to kill yourself if you don’t get off your high fucking horse and just let the people who care about you HELP YOU!”

“I don’t need your help!”

“No, of course you don’t. Go fuck yourself. I’m going to do those appointments. If you’re still on the floor when I get back...”

He doesn’t finish his threat, only huffs and storms out the door.

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Chapter 21

Lila

I 'm sitting in my vehicle checking my emails when I see Bane storm out from the back towards his vehicle. He's absolutely furious and doesn't see me as he takes off in a rush.

Something's wrong.

My heart races as I throw myself from my vehicle and bolt for the house. I don't know the code to get in, but I try the same code for my home, hoping they just used the same code. Thank fuck, it opens.

I barge into the kitchen, leaving the door wide open, to find Asher lying on his back, his head on the floor. He's not moving.

Before I can fully panic, he screams.

“Get the fuck out, Bane!”

He's absolutely furious; it's evident in his voice, and I consider bolting for the door in fear .

But I won't.

“It's me,” I say simply.

That fact doesn't ease his anger. "I don't care who it is, I said GET THE FUCK OUT!"

His voice isn't as strong this time. I feel it. His dumb ass must've fallen down the stairs, and by the sound of it, his pride broke his fall.

"Are you okay?"

I approach him cautiously, unsure of what he'll do. He's a volcano, and I have no idea what will come out, especially once I spot the fist-sized hole in the wall beside him.

"Do not take another fucking step," he finally hisses.

I stop short, keeping some space between us, and watch as he turns around and sits up against the wall. His face twists in pain as he moves, and I can't stand to see it.

"Just let me help you," I urge, taking another hesitant step forward.

He manages to prop himself up to a sitting position, his back against the wall. His legs stretch straight out in front of him, and he clutches one with his hand in a white-knuckled grip. His face contorts in pain, and I find myself wincing.

"You don't understand. No one understands," he says, his voice hardly audible in a whisper.

"Then talk to me. Help me understand."

"No." He's so firm with that no.

"If you're not gonna talk, let me help you off the floor. "

“Fuck off.”

That’s when I lose it. “Asher, I swear to god, if you don’t let me help you up off this floor right fucking now, I’ll call an ambulance, and you know they’ll just sedate you; I sure as fuck would!”

His nostrils flare as he glares up at me, and I swear he’s going to breathe fire and incinerate my entire body.

“Do not fucking touch me.”

The irony of his words is not lost on me as he struggles to brace against the stairs and pull himself up. He stops halfway, unable to lift himself, and growls as he struggles. I see the moment he’s going to either pull something important or fall and hurt himself more, so at my own risk, I step in, sliding under his arm and using my whole body to push him up. I can feel the fury pouring off him as he reaches a stand, finally able to relax.

“Let me help you upstairs.” I nearly add that he should lie down, but I choose life and bite my tongue. Still, he tries to shrug me off, but he’s tired enough, and I’m rested enough that he can’t budge me. “Asher, I wasn’t fucking asking.”

Something in him caves, and though he won’t look at me, his whole body softens at that moment. Finally, but reluctantly, he allows me to help him up. We climb side by side, with me holding the weight he can’t handle. When we finally reach the top, I help him into his bedroom, and he collapses on the bed. He huffs when I sit beside him, shutting his eyes toward the ceiling.

“Never invited you to stay!” he hollers like a fucking child.

“You just fell down the stairs, you stubborn prick. I’m not leaving you here.”

“Y’know, that first night you charged over here to confront me, I wondered if you were ballsy or just stupid. You’re leaning stupid. ”

“Shut up.”

Much to Asher’s disapproval, I settle into the bed, facing him on my side with my head on one of his pillows. It smells like him, a scent I find strangely comforting.

“You don’t know when to stop. It’s gonna get you hurt one of these days,” he grumbles.

“By who? You?”

He lets out a harsh breath, still refusing to open his eyes. “I don’t have to outrun you. You come right to me.”

It takes me a moment to realize he’s referencing the dig I made to him when I confronted him that first night, that I could outrun him, and suddenly, my chest feels tight.

“I didn’t mean anything by that, you know. I would never think less of you because of your leg.”

That actually gets a smirk out of him. “I can’t exactly hold that against you. I may have sexually harassed you.”

I shrug. “Nothing I couldn’t handle.”

“Oh, I know, Sunshine. Like I already told you. It pisses me off how well you handle everything I throw at you.”

I can't help but smile at that. "It's my superpower."

"Yeah. I wish it were mine."

My heart breaks for him at that moment. As cruel as he can be, I can see it's because he's hurt. His shattered femur put in such a massive roadblock for him. Hell, he's so stubbornly strong that he won't use a cane or something to keep him off the ground. Everything must be so different for him now. It's like a whole new life.

When he turns his head and pries his eyes open, they melt into mine—a deep brown. A frightening urge washes over me, the desire to lean in and press my lips to his. I don't kiss people. It's always been my rule not to kiss hookups. But Asher isn't a hookup. He's been a constant.

As furious as I've been, meeting Asher has been the most fun I've ever had. Even when he pisses me off beyond belief, I still come back for more. I refuse to surrender.

But I'm also scared for him. If he doesn't come to terms with his leg, he's going to make it so much worse, and where will it end?

I have to be careful here because I know how defensive he is. But I can't stand to see him like this. I choose my words carefully. "Why don't you want to use a walking aid?"

His anger is immediate. "Because I don't f—"

"No, stop," I say, cutting him off calmly, and he's quiet as he waits for me to speak. "We're just having a conversation. Let's try again. Why don't you want to use an aid?"

He considers, and though his feathers are still ruffled, he speaks calmly. "It's

embarrassing.”

“But why?”

“I don’t know!”

“Asher,” I growl. “It’s me. I’m not judging you; I’m worried about you. Help me understand.”

He considers it for a long time, but he doesn’t have an answer for me. A tear tickles my nose as it rolls down my cheek, and before I know it, I have to force back a sob, clenching my lips together. I shut my eyes, spilling more tears as I close the distance between us and place my arm over his soft T-shirt.

And finally, I break.

“Kiss me?” I plead .

His eyes flicker to my lips, and he presses his together, moistening them with the tip of his tongue. As if in a dream, he leans in, and I meet him, his lips molding with mine, holding so tight. Even in a kiss, I’m his prisoner.

And it’s perfect.

He turns on his side and wraps his arms around me, pulling me into his chest so effortlessly and tangling a hand in my hair, pulling just hard enough to make me moan against his mouth.

I swear an earthquake is ripping through me, leaving every piece of me shuddering. More tears spill down my cheeks as every inch of me gives in to him.

“Please...” I whimper.

When he breaks our kiss and reaches for my pants, I grab his wrist, and he stops with me, even though he could easily overpower me. That’s when I realize it’s not sex that I’m asking Asher for. I want him to open up to me. I want him to let me help him, but not out of a place of pity.

I find myself closing in on him, desperate for the warmth of his body, and he meets me halfway. He pulls me into his arms, and his lips consume mine. His kiss lights me on fire like no other kiss has. The way he holds me so possessively, like a willing prisoner, I think he feels it, too.

“Asher...” I whisper against his lips.

He breaks our kiss but keeps his mouth against mine, and I swear my heart might burst out of my chest as I’m consumed with fear. Fear of losing him, or worse...

Loving him.

BANG !

We’re both jolted with fear, and we shoot up in bed. The two men from the other day, Rocco and Rooney, are standing in his bedroom doorway, having slammed the door against the wall. Before I can process what’s happening, both brothers pounce for Asher, and I’m crushed beneath one of them as the other sprays some kind of aerosol right in Asher’s face, which seems to knock him out instantly, wiping the brief panic off his face. The second the weight lifts off me, I’m yanked backward, my arms locked behind my back by two rock-firm hands.

NO! JESUS, FUCK, NO!

I won't go down without a fight, thrashing within an inch of my life and probably pulling half the muscles in my body in the process. The effortless way the brothers overpower me has my whole body heaving in panic.

"Smart enough to get a security system, stupid enough to leave the back door wide open," one brother says.

"LET ME THE FUCK GO!"

"Knock the bitch out, too!" one of them growls.

The sound of the aerosol is the last thing I hear.

I wake up with what feels like lead in my lungs. When I attempt to throw my body upright to cough, I'm knocked back down by my neck, my air stolen. I wheeze as I slam back against cold metal.

"Lila?"

After managing a few deep breaths, the heavy ache in my chest is less, and I can open my eyes straight into a nightmare. I'm completely naked, with a metal collar around my neck attached to a cold metal table. Beside me, attached the same way to another, is Jared. He's also naked, facedown, and white as a sheet. The fresh dragon tattoo on his back is gone, deformed beyond recognition under a thick layer of raised, dead, burnt skin.

Oh my god, what did they do to him?

"Lila, does Asher know where you are?" he asks, his voice hoarse and afraid.

"I don't know, they knocked him out..." I whisper, struggling to find my voice.

“Where are we?”

Glancing around, I find we’re in some dungeon with stone walls and floors. A single steel door is shut, obviously locked.

“They have this cabin; we’re in the dungeon underneath. This is where they torture people.”

“Torture who!?”

He turns his head to the wall behind me with an insidious look on his face, and I turn, my heart racing to a dead fucking stop.

Skulls. There’s a shelf of skulls extending the whole wall like trophies. There’s got to be two dozen of them.

“Whoever they want,” he says, his voice dead. “I heard about this place but never imagined it was this bad. They livestream these snuff films on the dark web, and people pay for them. It’s sick.”

The door suddenly swings open, and my chest seizes up in sheer terror as both their eyes lock on me.

“Oh good, you’re awake.”

The sinister voice makes my body shudder.

When they shut and secure the door behind them, they separate and come at me from opposite sides. Rooney motions up to the ridiculously high ceiling, where a security camera is mounted, a red light blinking at me.

“Say hi to your boyfriend. He’ll be watching live soon.”

I want to be brave, not to give these bastards the satisfaction of begging for my life. But I think the fear ripping through my veins right now might just be what kills me.

My lip quivers. “Why are you doing this? I haven’t done anything to you!”

Rocco chuckles. “No, sweetheart, this is all about what we will do to you .”

A violent full body shudder tears through me, and a sob slips from my lips.

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Chapter 22

Asher

The world comes back in pieces, and my panic starts when I begin to come to. The sound of a harsh voice cuts into my ears. It takes ages to find myself, and finally, I find my senses, able to open my eyes, blinking away the piercing halo of light behind Bane's head.

"Dude, WAKE UP!"

He slaps me across the face, and while my anger flares for a moment, I'm beyond caring.

Lila. Where the fuck is Lila?

I open my mouth to speak, but nothing comes out.

"Ash, what the fuck happened?" Bane asks. He knows something's wrong. He must've come home and found me unconscious.

"Where's Lila?" I groan.

"Not here. Again, what the fuck happened?"

Dread consumes me. "They took her."

Bane's eyes widen as I try to find the strength to sit up. When my phone starts ringing, Bane throws it in my lap, nearly hitting me where it hurts.

"It's rang three times since I walked in here."

I can't answer the phone fast enough, knowing it's got to be them. I accept the call and put it on speaker, but I can't find the words to speak.

"Did you have a nice nap?" The voice that comes through the speaker is cold and soulless.

"What time is it?" The question flies out of my mouth before I can register it, and I don't realize why I even care until it's out. How long have they had her? What have they done to her?

"Your girlfriend is a feisty one, you know. I had to knock her out, too."

Bane's eyes freeze on mine as he takes in the conversation. He knows how bad this is as much as I do, though I'm not sure he's half as terrified as me.

"Why?"

There's a snicker on the other line before Rocco speaks. "This seemed only fair, Asher. You fucked my girl."

"And you smashed my leg!"

"And you stole my clients," Rocco says.

"Jared called ME!" I roar. That's when my voice softens to nothing but desperation.

"Guys, please... What do you want? I'll come to you right now; you can put me in an

early grave for all I care. Don't hurt Lila. ”

“An early grave for you is boring. Watching you fall apart for your little lady here? Priceless.”

My insides twist and cave in at the thought. And I find I can't stop myself from begging, no matter how futile it is.

“Guys, please... She has a fuck ton of friends; they'll figure out what happened. You won't get away with this!”

“That'll be up to you, Ash. I'll tell you one thing for certain. If you go to the cops, you'll never see her again.”

No. Fuck, no, this cannot be happening.

“Here's what's gonna happen, Ash. I'm going to absolutely fuck up your girl. I'll even be generous enough to send you a livestream link so you can watch.

Panic, as I've never felt in my life, fills me until I swear my chest might explode. “DON'T YOU FUCKING TOUCH HER!”

“That's up to you, Asher. We'll give her back after we've had our fun; if we decide not to kill her, anyway. Unless you call the cops. If I get a whiff of suspicion, I promise you, you'll never see her again. Don't forget to watch.”

Sheer terror rips through me. “Wait WAIT WAIT!”

The room fills with a heavy silence as the call disconnects. I can't breathe. All I can think about is Lila... What are they doing to her?

My phone vibrates, and I lift it in a panic. I find a text with the link.

“Bane, I can’t!” my voice breaks.

He snatches the phone from me, and I don’t fight him as he tends to it before letting out a deep breath.

“It’s okay, she’s alive. They have Jared, too. ”

He hands the phone back but looks over my shoulder as I take it in. The video is a clear aerial view of a dungeon with two big tables. Lila and Jared are both naked and strapped down to them by collars around their necks. Lila is in a ball on her side, pulling desperately at the collar, but she can’t get it off, and by the hopeless way she tries, I’m guessing she’s tried for a while now. Other than her split lip, swollen cheek, and the huge gash out of her forehead painted in dry blood, she looks unharmed. Jared is not. He’s on another table, out of reach, and his back is butchered. His dragon tattoo is gone, replaced by mountains of damaged, lumpy skin. What would even make a person’s skin do that? It’s the only injury I can see on him, but it’s bad. I can see part of his face, and it’s twisted in agony.

“I think they’re at the brothers’ cabin,” Bane says.

“What fucking cabin!?” It’s where they wanted to take me before, but Raven begged them not to.

“I’ve heard rumors from a couple of their druggies, but I figured it was just bullshit...” Bane aggressively slams his hand down on my table as a thought comes to my head.

“There’s one person who might know where it is... If she’s still alive.”

“Raven?” he asks.

“If they didn’t kill her.”

“You think they would?”

“I don’t know. This could be their average level of crazy, or maybe they’re on some psychotic suicide mission.”

I shake my head angrily. “We’re gonna need more muscle if we want a hope in hell of taking them down.”

“You’re right, and I know just the guy.”

He said it himself. No one fucks with his people.

Thank fuck I know exactly where Turner lives, so we head there first after I trip-run so fast down the stairs that I see my life flash before my eyes. The pain is excruciating, but there’s no time to slow down.

Bane drives since I can’t focus. I direct him to Turner’s house and honk the horn as we pull in. A few cars are out back, but only one person emerges from the door, watching with confusion.

I roll down the window as Bane swings his car around and slams it to a stop halfway up the walkway right in front of Turner.

“We need your help, now !”

He straightens himself up, a furious glare brewing on his face. “What the hell do y-”

“It’s Lila !” I plead, cutting him off.

His jaw drops, his face paling. “What the fuck happened?”

“She’s been taken. We think we know where they took her, but we need help. Man, I know I was a dick before, but I am not fucking around right now; we’ve gotta get her out of there!”

It takes him a moment to grasp the situation, but finally, he nods, stepping into the back of the car and slamming the door. Bane peels out of the driveway.

“Do you know any more guys with muscle?” I ask.

He considers it. “They all have families that need them alive.”

“And you don’t?”

“No one who needs me,” he says. “Can the three of us take them? ”

“I think so. But if they have a gun...”

Turner nods, turning his attention to Bane. “Pull over, I’m driving.”

“The fuck you are, we need to get there fast,” I say.

“And we won’t with princess driving. PULL THE FUCK OVER!”

Turner wasn’t wrong. I thought Bane was a fast driver, but Turner’s faster.

The video is still open, but nothing’s happening. Lila and Jared spoke a little at first, but Jared’s in bad shape, and I think he’s in and out of consciousness.

The only sound from the video now is Lila's crying. It comes and goes, her sobs consuming her and then tapering off to lend her some air. Her fear is palpable. The stream shows how many people are watching, and the number keeps growing, holding now at over two hundred. Two hundred sick fucks are watching Lila cry, terrified, waiting to be tortured or killed.

"Raven, fucking call me, it's an emergency!" Bane growls from the backseat. He's been calling and texting Raven, but she won't answer. She's usually glued to her phone. "If they killed Raven, we'll never find this cabin," Bane growls.

"Thanks, Bane, very fucking helpful!" I snap.

The possibility of Raven being dead was only a fear before; now, it's starting to feel like a real possibility. If we find her dead...

The sound of the door opening in the video steals my breath, and I watch in horror as the brothers walk in.

"We're ba-ack! Sorry we were gone so long. We were reading all the comments on our feed," Rocco says in a sick, cryptic voice as he twirls his ponytail in his fingers.

"Go to hell," Jared says, his voice weak.

Rocco approaches him like a stalking predator before dragging his nails down Jared's mangled back, cutting him open and spilling blood. He roars in an all-consuming pain, and Lila screams with him. All I can do is watch, helpless.

"The votes are in, Jared. The people had some great suggestions for how to end you. Do you want to hear them?"

"Go to hell," he repeats.

“Maybe later, and I’m okay with that. We made bank off you today.”

“What the fuck are they talking about?” I growl. What comments? When I minimize the video to look at the page, Bane reaches over his shoulder to snatch the phone from my hand. “HEY!”

“Ash, do not look at that,” he warns. I try to snatch it back, but he slaps my hand away. “ASHER! Do not read the comments; it’s just gonna freak you out more. People are sick. I looked at it earlier when I first checked the stream. People pay for the guys to do things to their captives. By the look of it, they do this reasonably often.”

The sound of Jared’s scream fills the car and makes Turner veer off, but he corrects it quickly.

“What are they doing to Jared?” I demand.

Bane shakes his head. “Don’t, man.”

“BANE!”

“Someone paid to funnel acid down his throat. That’s how they’re finishing him. Want to watch!?”

I don’t need to watch. The sound of both Jared and Lila’s screams fill the car, as Lila pleads with the brothers not to kill Jared. Her pleas fall on deaf ears.

Eventually, Jared’s screams stop, and a heavy silence fills the car.

“Is Jared dead?” I ask, knowing he is.

After a pause, Bane nods, his face pale, and my heart drops. The sick part of me doesn't care that Jared's dead. All I can think is that if he's dead...

Lila's next.

"Asher?"

A taunting voice from the video grabs my attention, and Bane passes it over slowly. I hold it to my face, watching Rocco stare into the camera as Rooney approaches Lila. He runs his hands over her naked body, and she squirms, wincing beneath his touch as he fondles her tits.

"Are you watching? If you're watching, call my phone, or your girl pays the price."

"BANE!" I cry.

He's fast, knowing we can't use my phone and still watch. He dials and holds it up to show me it's Rocco's number. But when he holds up his phone on the screen, nothing happens. And I see the very moment the desperate hope on Lila's face fades.

"Wow, Lila. I was sure he'd follow the rules. He sounded desperate to get you back, but he's not putting in the effort to make sure that happens."

Lila sobs, overwhelmed to the point that she can hardly breathe.

"I guess you're just another disposable whore," Rooney says.

"Which is good news for us. We don't like giving back our toys. Never have," Rocco says.

"ARE YOU FUCKING CALLING HIM!?" Turner roars, making Bane and I both

jump.

“He must have us blocked. He’s playing with us,” Bane says.

“What the fuck did you two do?” Turner snaps.

“It doesn’t matter right now, okay? We’ll explain everything later; we need to get her out of there first,” I say as my phone beeps, the battery dying. “Fuck... Do you have a charger?”

“No.”

“Send me the link,” Bane says.

I do as he says, but the link won’t open on his phone, and my battery is at fifteen percent. If it runs out...

“Let’s check the comments and see where we’re at,” Rocco’s voice says, grabbing my attention again. I watch as he reads off his phone, terrified of what he’s about to say. “Hans wants us to start hot. Hans, you’re funny. That was a given. Will wants to see you bleed.”

“How much fucking longer is this drive?” Turner asks. He’s angry, but I can hear the fear making his voice shake. He clearly cares about Lila. I don’t have the heart to tell him that even at the speed he’s going, we’ve got at least another two hours to Kingston, and we still don’t know where she’s actually being held.

When I watch Rooney dig in a cabinet, my chest seizes. When I spot the grisly knife in his left hand, my breath hitches.

When I spot the torch in his right, I stop breathing altogether.

Chapter 23

Lila

You think you know what fear is, and then you realize you had no idea.

I've only met Jared once. But watching him die had me screaming enough to blow out my own throat. It was so violent, so cruel. The way he gurgled as he choked on the burning fluid was enough to make me gag with terror. They even poured it into his eyes, and I watched as the fluid smoked and reacted to his body. I can't imagine a worse way to die.

Now he's dead, and they're approaching me.

I wanted to hold onto the slightest hope that maybe they wouldn't kill me. Maybe they were just fucking with Asher, trying to scare him. But there's no hope in this prison. The casual way they killed Jared without thinking twice has me in a chokehold. There was no hesitation, no mercy.

And the skulls...

"Your turn, princess. Rooney's been dying to use his new torch."

They approach me from either side, Rocco with a jagged knife and Rooney with a black handheld device resembling a drill. When he presses a button, a blue flame emerges from the end, and my heart explodes into terror, making breathing hard—fear of unbearable pain with no escape.

“Asher? Are you there?”

Rocco’s voice is almost the worst part, how taunting and cold it is. He’s called out for Asher several times and has gotten no response. Asher’s not coming for me.

And for that, I don’t know what to think. Maybe that aerosol shit killed him, and he’s just gone. Maybe he’s decided I’m not worth saving. After all, I’m just another disposable whore.

“Right, I guess we get started. I don’t think Asher’s watching. That’s too bad for you,” Rocco says.

I’m paralyzed with fear as they position me on the table, running their dirty, grubby hands all over my naked body in the process. While I try to squirm away from them, there’s nowhere to go and no winning when they can overpower me so effortlessly. Still, the panicked part of me struggles with everything I’ve got, pulling away from their bruising fingers and attempting to evade them. But it’s all futile. They flip me on my back and secure metal cuffs around my ankles and wrists before fastening them to the four corners of the table. The chain attached to the metal collar around my neck is now draped over my chest with a bit of slack .

No matter how hard I fight, I can hardly move an inch. I can’t get out of this.

“That’s a pretty tiger tattoo there, Lila,” Rocco says, his beady eyes trailing over my chest. He rips the clear bandage off my tiger, making me shudder. “It’s gonna have to come off.”

I can’t help the words as they fall out of my mouth. “Come off!?”

Rocco nods, and I shut my eyes to avoid his piercing gaze. “We took Jared’s off with acid.” He raises his voice, speaking directly to the camera. “What will it be? We can

use acid, boiling water, the torch... Maybe we just cut the whole thing out?"

I shake my head frantically, fear consuming me. I don't want to give these bastards the satisfaction, but I'm way past that. "Please, please don't do this!" I beg.

"It's too bad that you don't get a vote," Rooney says. He stands beside me as he scrolls through his phone, liking whatever he's reading. "The viewers want to watch you cry. Some big bids are going in, and we can stack them."

"Well, come on, let's hear them," Rocco says with interest. "She should know what she's in for. Asher should know too, if only he were watching."

My heart sinks as fear takes over my body as I listen to Rooney read off the screen.

"Judd seems to want to see you cry. One hundred thousand to drive splinters under each of your fingernails."

Rocco steps away momentarily, and my eyes shoot open in fear, landing on Rooney staring at me with amusement. When Rocco returns, he's got a little container in his hands.

Pointed toothpicks .

"Don't forget to cry, baby. They want to see you cry," Rocco says.

He grabs my hand, and while I fight to curl my fingers away, he straightens them almost effortlessly. I let out a mangled scream as the first toothpick is jammed deep under my thumbnail, eclipsing any other pain I've ever felt in my life as though my whole thumb has been set on fire.

"STOP!" I wail. When I yank my fingers away and curl them in, the end of the

toothpick sticking out catches on the table and bends, separating more of my nail from the nail bed and blinding me with agony.

And then he shoves another under my second finger.

There's no reprieve, no mercy. The pain is unlike anything I've ever felt. Just when I think it's over, he shoves the last one under my last free fingernail, he moves to the bottom of the table.

"Might as well do her toes, too."

Somehow, they hurt more. And even though I'm nowhere near dead, I imagine this is what it feels like. Unwavering pain. My breaths come fast and heavy, trying to keep up with my racing pulse. I don't realize I'm crying until Rooney swipes a thumb over my cheek, pulling a river of tears.

"You really are pretty when you cry. I think I know why Asher likes you," Rooney says. "Too bad he doesn't like you enough to save you."

I let out a wail, overwhelmed with pain and fear as tears pour from my cheeks like a faucet.

"Oh, poor girl, we've hardly started. No need to be like that," Rocco says.

"I got the payment to bleed her. Care to do the honors?"

"I think it's your turn," Rocco says.

Rooney holds up the tool in his hand. "I'll have fun with my new toy. It looks like it might win for her tattoo removal. Sixty percent want the torch."

Rocco puts down the toothpicks and approaches me with the knife. The blade has to be eight inches long and serrated, like a bread knife. I clamp my eyes shut as he places the blade flat on my inner knee before slowly dragging it up my inner thigh. He stops far too high up my thigh and turns the blade on its side. I feel every slice as it shreds deep through, macerating my tender flesh, and my scream burns in my throat, popping both my ears. I can feel the blood pouring from me, draining me. For a moment, they only watch me bleed. Then Rooney points the torch between my legs.

When the blue flame fires out and singes my bleeding flesh, the white-hot blinding pain pushes me deeper and deeper into my body. When Rooney yanks his pants down and jumps on the table, I realize they're just getting started.

I try to fight, squirming beneath him, but I can hardly move, and each movement feels like my thigh is splitting open. Then he tears inside me.

“NO!”

He's way too big, both in girth and length. I feel myself ripping apart as he forces his cock through my bone-dry walls and slams against my cervix like a punch to my insides. When he pulls out and slams in again, harder this time, my vision whites out.

“STOP!” I cry .

“We'll stop when you're dead,” Rocco says coldly. When I try to force my legs shut again, he leans over my head to grab my knees and forces them open as far as he can while his brother rips me apart.

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Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 3:14 am

Chapter 24

Asher

Turner stuffed tissues in his ears so he wouldn't crash the car. It was for the best since every single one of her screams was like a rusty knife twisting in my gut, and I couldn't imagine trying to drive through it. He pulled over at some point so I could move into the back with Bane and keep the video away from him. I continued to watch, and Bane called every time they demanded it, sometimes two or three times, just to be safe.

Not that it fucking mattered.

They're telling her I abandoned her, that I'm not coming to save her. That she's just another disposable whore. The worst part is she doesn't fight them about it.

She believes it .

When I first met Lila, I thought she was just another bitch. Some inappropriate fun. Now, everything's changed. You can't be this afraid for someone you don't care about. She's infuriating. She pushes every one of my buttons, and she doesn't fold when I lash out at her. She's not afraid of me. And the way she kissed me...

I have to save her. If she dies... The thought makes tears spill down my cheeks. They've been a near constant, and I don't even give a fuck that I'm crying in front of Bane and Turner. From what I can see of Turner in the rearview mirror, he looks on the verge. He cares about Lila. But I'm not sure what he feels is even a fraction of

what I am right now.

The drive feels endless. Every moment we're stuck in the damn car while I watch Lila being brutally tortured is torture in itself. It's impossible to watch, but I can't tear my eyes away. As long as I can see her struggle and hear her screams, I know she's still alive. But as time goes on, her screams, which are already hoarse from her shredded throat, weaken, along with her struggles. She's tired.

I know I'm going to have nightmares about this because it's the most fucked up shit I've ever seen. They started by shoving toothpicks under her fingernails and toenails, and by the panic in her eyes, I knew she was already in agony. From there, they started cutting her with a serrated fucking knife as if they couldn't find anything crueler. They'd let her bleed until I feared she wouldn't have any left, and then they'd use a torch to cauterize the wound, burning her alive. And then, after each one, they take turns raping her, covering their clothes in her blood. From what I can see, she can handle Rocco, but Rooney is too big for her. The violent thrusts he hits her with make her howl worse than her damaged flesh .

After an eternity, Turner takes the tissues out of his ears and speaks.

“We're here, where am I going?”

I turn to see a highway sign for Kingston, and though we're almost there, I can't help the sickening feeling in my gut that we're almost out of time.

“Get off the ramp and turn left at the stop. Keep driving til you reach the end.”

The end of the fucking world.

Some part of me hopes we'll find them here at home, but it's not the case. When we swerve into the driveway, the only car there is Raven's. The blinds of the modern

two-story house are all closed, and everything is black. I'm out of the car before it's fully stopped, abandoning my phone with the video while Lila is cut open again.

I can't feel my leg as I run. In fact, I haven't felt anything but panic since waking up.

I'm already pounding on it when Bane and Turner reach the door. Just as I expected, I don't hear a thing. I just hope she's hiding and not dead.

“RAVEN, OPEN THE GODDAMN DOOR!”

Turner thinks fast and grabs a large rock from the grass, pitching it through the window, and he sticks his hand in and unlocks the door.

“I've got upstairs, you two check down here,” Bane says, taking the lead .

Turner finds the basement quickly and heads down there, leaving me with the main floor. I rip open every door I find until I hear a loud bang from up the stairs. By the time I reach the bottom, with Turner hot on my heels, I find Bane dragging Raven down the stairs by her hair, screaming bloody murder. When she reaches the bottom, Bane shoves her to her knees, and I grab her by the throat, cutting off her air and slamming her head against the wall.

“Where is the cabin?” I demand.

When I release her neck, she coughs, her eyes wide with panic. “What cabin?”

I shake my head, my fury growing. “Raven, I'm not fucking around. Rocco and Rooney took my friend, they're gonna kill her!”

When she doesn't speak, Turner disappears behind me, returning a moment later with a knife. He points the tip of the knife at her eye, making her struggle in fear.

“You have two minutes to tell us where the cabin is,” he says firmly.

She shakes her head, growing angry. “You’re bluffing.”

“I’m not,” I say, snatching the knife from Turner’s hand. Raven squirms but can’t get away. “Tell us where the fucking cabin is!”

Finally, she bends. “They’ll kill me!”

“Either they do or we do,” I say coldly.

I take the knife and drag it across her cheek, leaving a shallow cut that oozes blood, and she winces at the pain; as if it’s a fraction of what Lila’s going through right now.

“You’re coming with us,” I finally snap.

I hate to take a woman hostage, even a bitch like Raven. But we don’t have a choice. We find some tape and use it to secure her ankles and arms. Bane sits in the back seat, dealing with her as she struggles. Reluctantly, she directs us. When we get there, we’ll lock her in the car; she’ll be out of the way.

I missed part of the video when we stormed the house, and now something’s happening, though I’m briefly stunned when I lay eyes on Lila’s chest.

Her tiger tattoo is gone, and she’s completely depleted, her breathing heavy and her eyes shut.

“If we bleed her any more, she’s gonna die,” Rooney says. “We shouldn’t have cut her so much. We could’ve dragged this out for a few days, but she’s lost too much blood.”

“We’ll keep her corpse. She can entertain us til she rots.”

Bile rises in my throat at the thought as my head spins.

“Should we just finish her off with a bang? What do the donors want?” Rocco asks.

“The highest bid is Hans, four hundred thousand for a close-up of drowning her.”

No. No no no.

“We could take her to the bathroom, do it in the tub. Nice lighting. What a boring way to go, though.”

“Yeah, I wanted to mutilate her more for Asher, but money talks.”

“We got two hundred thousand to flay off all her skin. Maybe we’ll get fifty for doing that when she’s dead.”

“Any other takers?” Rocco asks loudly to the camera. “We’ll drown her first, but we can always do more to her corpse.”

“How fucking close are we?” I ask with terror in my voice .

I whip my head around to the back seat to see Bane clock Raven in the head when she doesn’t answer quickly enough. She groans as she straightens herself back up.

“She’ll be dead before we get there,” she says coldly.

“Asher...”

He’s looking over my shoulder at the video, and I see why. They’re moving her.

“No...”

“What’s happening?” Turner asks, his voice strained.

I can’t think. Can’t breathe. “You need to drive faster,” is all I can spit out.

“I can’t.”

I know he can’t, he’s already driving faster than he should be. We’re no good to Lila if we’re dead in a ditch. But we’re out of time.

I watch helplessly as Lila’s freed from the table. She’s pale and weak, and her movements are sluggish as Rocco and Rooney help her up. They each take an arm and have to carry her out of the room with her feet dragging on the ground.

The moment she disappears through that door, my phone battery dies, and my heart shatters as the screen goes black when I need to see it the most. This is the part where she needs to fight. But she’s too far gone. There’s two of them, and one of her, and she’s nearly dead.

“She’s gonna die, Asher,” Raven says. “There’s no way we’ll get to her in time. All you’re doing is walking into a slaughter. Rocco and Rooney will kill you all.”

“Bane, tape her fucking mouth shut. She can direct us with her head,” Turner snaps .

My jaw falls open, and I cover my mouth with my hand, trying to hold back whatever’s about to come out as terror overwhelms me.

Lila...

“There’s still a chance,” Turner says. The hollowness in his voice tells me he doesn’t

really believe it, but he's not going to give up.

And neither am I.

This is all my fault. I underestimated Rocco and Rooney, and now Lila's paying the price. She's so scared, in so much pain, and they're walking her to her death. I'd do anything just to take her place. I think it's time I admit it.

"Asher?"

They're all waiting for me to decide.

"Look, guys, this may end up being a suicide mission. If you want to back out, I won't hold it against you, but I'm going in there. Once she's back in my arms, I'll decide if she's dead or not."

"Asher, they'll kill you," Bane says.

My voice catches in my throat as I speak. "I won't leave her."

Turner nods, slapping me on the shoulder.

"We have to be smart about this. If we run in there without thinking, we're gonna die."

"You're not backing out?"

"Never," Turner says firmly. "We'll either save her or avenge her."

I nod, tears spilling down my cheeks. When I turn to Bane, I can see the conflict on his face. He may not care about Lila, but he does care about me, and he knows I'm

not walking away.

“You’re my brother. You know I’ll do anything for you. I’m in.”

Chapter 25

Lila

Despite the horrific pain firing through my feet from the toothpicks dragging on the ground, I can't find any of my muscles to move as I'm dragged out of the room and up some stairs, and then a second set of stairs. Everything feels cold and dark.

I'm about to die.

They're bringing me to a bathroom to drown me, to make a video for some rich, heartless prick. My life is their entertainment. I can't imagine a worse way to die: naked, bloody, and tortured. I should be horrified that this is being streamed online, but I'm not. I think it's because I know I won't be alive to deal with the aftermath.

As I'm hauled up by my arms, a puppet for their games, I think of Macy. Before her attacker shot her, intending to end her, she said she felt a wave of calm, and I feel it, too. The pain is too much, overwhelming my body to a point I never thought possible. At this point, death feels like mercy.

Despite the mercy, I'm still afraid to die, enough to turn my heart to ice.

I wasted so much time being angry, and it's my biggest regret. My friends love me, and they wanted to be there for me, but I was horrible. I lashed out and let my loneliness get the better of me. If I'd just opened up and spoken to them... The last thing I said to Turner was that I hate him, and that's the last memory he'll have of me. I told Macy she was broken. I made Juliet feel like a bad friend, and she's not.

And Asher...

When he first moved in, I hated him with every fiber of my fucking being. And somewhere along the line of war and the wild song and dance we did, something grew there. Despite how terrified I was, I felt it. Somehow, that hatred became something else entirely.

I think I fell in love with him.

He's a complicated man, I know that. But he's just like everyone else: hurt and needing someone to love him. And the way he kissed me told me he felt it, too.

That's when I realize something. I let these fucks convince me he wasn't coming for me, but it was all an act. It must've been. Asher cared about me in some shape or form, enough to fight for my safety before. He'll blame himself for this and be more lost than ever.

Asher, please don't hate yourself for this. You never could've seen this coming. You tried to keep me safe. It's not your fault. I know you think your life is over because of your leg, but it's not. It's just a different life.

I'm sorry I never told you how I felt. I don't think I even knew until this moment. I was so scared to love you, afraid it would consume me until nothing was left. What we had may have looked like abuse from the outside, but to me, it felt like magic. You gave me something I've desperately been looking for. You made me feel alive.

And just before I was taken, you made me feel love.

Don't let this destroy you. This is my end, but it doesn't have to be yours. Please. Find a way to be happy, and once you find it, don't let go.

You were my happiness. My sunshine. And if I'd lived, I'd never let you go.

I peel my eyes open as a door opens in front of me, and I try to dig my heels in as if it'll save me, but I'm still pulled into the bathroom nearly effortlessly. My feet are assaulted with pain as I'm shoved to my knees in front of a bathtub. It's filled right to the top, and the bright lights above me emphasize the steam from the water that burns my eyes. It's hot.

One grabs my hair and yanks my head to the side, pointing it straight at a camera on a tripod.

"Say hello to your fans, Lila. Over two thousand people are ready to watch you die. Any last words?"

I can see my reflection in the camera's lens, exhausted and terrified, and I hardly recognize the shell I've become. I don't speak, only stare as tears spill down my cheeks.

"Time to say goodbye," Rocco says coldly.

Without warning, my head is shoved underwater and assaulted with unbearable heat, and in a panic, it goes down my throat. I snap my eyes and mouth shut and fight like mad, flailing my arms and trying to grab the hand around my hair despite the pain from the toothpicks. My struggles aren't even enough for them to bother restraining me .

As my chest begins to burn and desperation fills me, I'm yanked out of the water, instantly coughing, choking, and grabbing a heaving mouthful of air that feels like smoke as it goes down my scalded windpipe. My head is forced to the side again, where Rooney holds the camera near me. It's dripping water.

It's a fucking underwater camera.

“Burn in fucking hell,” I tell them both before I'm dunked again.

They do it a dozen times, torturing me while I struggle and fight because, without air, I don't have a choice. They even top up the water when it gets too low.

As I run out of air and life, one single thought screams out in my head louder than the fear.

I love you, Asher. Please be okay.

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Chapter 26

Lila

The world is in and out as my head spins due to lack of oxygen and the rapid movements. When I'm suddenly released, I yank my head out of the water and land backward on my ass, stabbing me with a toothpick from my foot. I realize something's happening.

Then I hear a bang.

I look at Rocco and Rooney, who are frozen and wide-eyed. Thinking quickly, I drop into a painful heap, playing dead.

"Stay here," Rocco says to Rooney. Before he opens the door and storms out, I hear the cock of a gun.

I crack my eyes open to see Rooney in the doorway, his back to me. He glances back at me once, but I snap my eyes shut in time, and he doesn't move. When I peek a moment later, he's not watching me .

He thinks I'm dead or dying. And I remember something Macy said about waiting for just the right moment.

This is the moment.

There's only a couple of feet between me and Rooney, and I don't have much

strength left to work with, so I do the first thing I can think of. I pull myself up on my knees as tall as I can manage, and I throw my mangled body at Rooney's back, folding his knees and knocking him over like a bowling pin. I put every bit of force I can muster into it and manage to launch him into the hall on his face while he shouts. Then I grab the bathroom door and slam it shut. With everything left in me, I pull myself up on the doorknob to click the lock only a moment before Rooney yanks on the handle.

It doesn't budge.

For a moment, I feel safe as he beats on the door. It's old, so I know it won't hold for long.

"Open the fucking door bitch!"

I only have seconds, maybe a couple minutes to work with, and though I can hear some crashing and banging around on the lower level, I block it out, needing every bit of my focus.

I need to get the toothpicks out of my nails, and I do so quickly, ripping several out at once and letting out a mangled scream to channel the pain. It takes only a few seconds to remove all twenty. Once they're out, I pull myself up by the bathroom counter, unsteady.

I look around desperately for something I can use as a weapon. There's nothing. Thinking on my feet, I decide to grab the shower curtain rod. It's straight across and secured to the wall on both sides. When I wrap both hands around it and drop my weight, it comes loose like nothing, and it slams into my head as I fall to the ground in a heap. I gather myself quickly, thinking fast as Rooney bangs on the door.

I grab one end of the rod, finding it's weak, hollow metal. It takes all my effort to

fold one side in on itself, causing the opposite side of the circle opening to gather almost a point. I try to jab it in my finger and find that, with enough pressure, it'll break skin.

Perfect.

The door's getting looser, so I quickly stand up and hold the rod out in front of me. And just in time, the door crashes open.

Rooney charges into the room, and I rush at him, jabbing the rod into his stomach. He lets out an immediate howl of pain as he recoils, which only gives me more leverage to push it in deeper. I force him into the hall, and he lands on his back. Thinking quickly, I yank the rod out where it was embedded in his stomach and bring it up straight before slamming it down into his neck as he knocks my knees out, and I fall.

His struggles are replaced with gurgling as he lays on his back, his eyes going blank. I yank the rod out before he can grab it and throw it into the air to bring it down between his legs, which makes him screech. His body convulses, and I know he's done. With relief, I toss the rod aside and move up to his head, staring into his cold, soulless eyes as he holds his neck with both hands, trying to hold his blood in, but it's pouring out too fast. I must've hit his jugular.

"I hope you get what you deserve in hell, bastard!" I hiss.

Those are the last words he hears before I jab my pained thumbs into his eyes, pushing until they pop like cherry tomatoes, and his body goes limp.

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Chapter 27

Asher

Raven is surprisingly cooperative in directing us to the cabin. Though she protested our decision, she still led us straight to it without any hesitation.

I spend the remainder of the drive with panic firing through my entire body. I can't help the sick feeling in my gut that we're too late. I try so hard not to think about it, to pray that she's still alive.

But the truth is, no matter how badly I need her to be alive, I'm not confident she will be.

It's a sickening feeling.

I don't know what I'll do if I find her dead. Lila has somehow transformed from my enemy to someone I can't see myself without, and I never saw it coming. Hell, I didn't see it happen. Somewhere along the way, my fascination with destroying her turned into a fascination with watching her survive me. Little did I know, I really would destroy her. Just not directly.

I've seen my fair share of horror movies, and Lila is living one. If she survives this, what kind of life will she have? How will I get her through this?

"How many doors to the cabin?" Turner asks once we get close.

Bane peels the tape from her mouth to let her speak. “Two, one in the front, one in the back.”

“And do you have a key?”

“Of course not. I’ve only been there with them.”

Her snarky attitude makes me whip around. “Were you there while they tortured people? Did you know?”

She recoils, a wounded expression on her face. “It was a don’t ask, don’t tell situation, okay?”

“It’s fucking murder!” I snap.

“Yeah, and do you think I would’ve lived if I’d started poking my nose into that? I know Rocco seems like a peach, Asher, but he’s not a good husband. Why do you think I came to you?”

I turn back around, unable to look at her. “You could’ve gone to the police.”

“No, she couldn’t, Asher. You know that,” Bane says.

“How many innocent people had to die?” I growl.

“The people they usually take aren’t good people. It’s not like they’re killing children. They’re killing drug addicts who steal from them.”

“Yeah, and what do you call Lila!?”

“Collateral. You pissed them off. ”

“And you didn’t? They’re torturing Lila; what did they do to you?”

“I told them you forced yourself on me... If I hadn’t, I’d be dead!”

“So Lila gets to pay the price for your loose morals?”

“Asher, are you not fucking listening?” Raven growls. “I told them you raped me, and they didn’t do anything further than busting your leg. But the moment Jared walked into your shop, you started a war. How do you think that makes me feel? This isn’t about me. This is about money.”

“You’re pathetic.”

“Maybe. Ash, if they live, they’ll figure out I helped you. They’ll kill me.”

“Don’t worry. I promise they’re not walking away from this.”

After watching everything they did to Lila, I’m ready to watch them suffer and bleed. I’m tempted to burn them both alive with that fucking torch. But that’ll take time, and I don’t have that. Priority has to be getting Lila medical attention.

If she’s still alive.

My pulse pounds in my ears as we pull in. The cabin is deep in the woods off a dirt road, secluded from the world. We pull in behind the brothers’ vehicles, not bothering to hide.

Bane has secured Raven, so she can’t get out of the car by herself. She’s not going to cause a problem for us. The moment the wheels stop turning, I’m out of the car, racing as quickly as I can on my mangled leg, ignoring the overwhelming pain .

Bane joins me at the front, and Turner takes the back door. We wait a moment to give him time to run around the house. Bane joins me at the solid wood door, holding a large rock. There's a window off the deck to the left, and he wastes no time. He peeks inside before smashing the rock through the window, breaking all the glass. Then he practically dives face-first through it. I hear some struggle on the other side before the door opens, and I charge inside.

At first, I don't hear anything. We're on an open lower level, and I watch as Turner emerges from the back. We freeze as the floorboards above us creak, and Turner quickly finds knives in the kitchen. He slides them across the floor towards us before hiding, and Bane rushes to grab them, handing one to me. It's a bread knife. How fucking perfect.

My heart stalls as footsteps travel closer to us. Two legs suddenly travel the staircase to the right of the cabin, and before I see his head, I see the gun in his hand. The moment he stops at the bottom and lays eyes on Bane and me, he stops in his tracks, looking briefly furious before confusion settles on him. He's still covered in her blood.

"Rocco," I snarl.

"How the fuck are you two here?"

"You're not very good at covering your tracks," I say simply.

"Raven, huh? You broke into my house?"

"If you thought some locks would keep me from saving Lila, you might be the dumbest man alive."

"It's a wasted trip. Your girl's already dead. Rooney's disposing of her body now."

No. She can't be dead. We can't be too late. We just can't ...

"She's innocent." When I open my mouth, I don't recognize my voice.

"She's human. None of us are innocent. But she was your penance."

My penance... Penance for what? I fucked around with his wife, so Lila had to die a painful death? Jared came to me for a tattoo that he never would've gotten with the brothers, and so Lila had to die? She had to be raped and brutally tortured, torn apart, burned, and then drowned in a bathtub?

"Are those tears, Asher?"

I don't feel them until he mentions them, and I realize they're pouring from my eyes like a faucet. When they lock on his, he grins wickedly.

"In all the years I've known you, I've never seen you give the slightest fuck about a woman. But this is the one? She's got fire, I'll admit. And beautiful eyes, until the light left them."

"Shut the fuck up!" Bane snaps.

"Nice cunt, too. At least, it was until Rooney used her all up. Did you hear her screams? He ruined her."

Just as the rage in my heart boils over, movement grabs my attention, and Rocco screams out in pain, falling backward. Red splatters from his midsection, and a knife thrown at the speed of fucking light falls from his stomach.

Turner.

I dive face first for the gun, racing Rocco, who's scrambling to reach for it. Bane drops for it beside me. Rocco manages to grab it, and I slide forward to punch him in the face, cracking his nose open like an egg, and he howls in pain. As the three of us struggle in a series of punches, hits, and flying knives, Bane cries out. Just as he does, Rocco is tackled away from us. Turner lands straight on top of him, straddling his stomach, and lands punch after furious punch to his head, and the fury and strength he puts behind them and Rocco's resulting screams satisfy me.

There's another knife on the ground, and I have an opportunity to brutalize this fuck. I don't hesitate to take it.

I crawl up on my knees, ignoring the firing pain. I yank down his pants, finding his small flaccid dick. Without hesitation, I wrap my hand right around his penis and balls, yanking them hard, and he screams as he realizes what I'm doing. In one swipe of the surprisingly sharp knife, they're removed from his body in an explosion of blood. Wherever the fuck he's going from here, he's going neutered.

The screams from him pierce me to the core as I move up beside Turner to his head, nudging him to stop his onslaught of punches. His face is already half caved in and soaked in blood. I pry his jaw open with little struggle and stuff all of it in his mouth, closing his jaw on it, and he screams.

"That's for Lila, you sick fuck!"

"Jesus christ," Turner says in awe as we watch the motherfucker take his last breaths, choking on his own dick. He deserved so much worse than this.

When he falls still, and the room goes quiet, I hear Bane's heavy breaths. I turn around to find him against a wall, his hand wrapping around a knife handle embedded in his abdomen. His eyes meet mine, pained.

“Bane! DON’T PULL IT OUT! ”

I slide across the floor to him with Turner right on my heels, but we’re too late as Bane yanks the knife out, showering blood. Turner reaches him half a second before me and presses his hand on the wound, stopping the blood.

“Bane, are you okay?” I ask in terror.

“I’m fine,” he says breathlessly. “Go find Lila.”

When I hesitate, Turner nods at me. “I’ve got this. Take the gun and find Lila; watch out for the other guy.”

Right, Rooney.

At that moment, I hear a slight knock on the floor above us, and we all lift our heads. A moment later, Turner nudges me. “Go!”

I grab the gun off the floor and cross the room to the stairs, with pain exploding through my leg. I push it down, my adrenaline fueling me, even though I know I’ll pay for it later.

The stairs round a bend, and when I turn to ascend the last few, I briefly freeze, spotting a dead body on the floor.

My heart stops as I tumble up the last few steps, preparing to take in the scene. The body is lifeless.

It’s Rooney, and he is deader than dead. He’s covered in fresh blood pooling around him. He’s been stabbed in the neck, the stomach, and the dick. His eyes are closed.

Not closed. Gone.

Did Lila do this? If she did, she did a fucking good job.

As I admire her work, I spot something behind Rooney and walk a few more steps to see over. That's when I let out an inhuman cry as all the air leaves my lungs, and tears instantly burn my eyes.

It's her .

She's on her stomach, her head turned away from me. Her broken, naked body is absolutely painted in blood, even her blonde hair. She's not moving.

As my world comes crashing down, I fall to my knees, not feeling the collision. I slide around her, finding her eyes shut, a few good slices on her face with old, dried blood. I can't stop shaking to tell if she's breathing, but when I reach down to touch her arm... it's cold.

"No... Please..." I cry.

My entire body trembles like mad as I manage to pull her into my lap, cradling her with my back against the wall. She's so tiny in my arms, and when I move her, she's lifeless. Deadweight.

She's gone.

Her body is so cold, and her face is red, like a horrid sunburn. It's from the water. Seeing the rest of the wounds I've already seen and feeling her cold body in my arms makes me shudder. I rest my head against hers and let out a wail of a sob.

"Sunshine... Lila... Please come back to me..."

She's so broken, so brutalized. And I can't help the tears of pure grief that fall from my eyes like a faucet. Tears of rage, but also tears of loss. It's a gut-wrenching loss that makes even my stupid leg seem unimportant.

With a knot in my throat, I hold back my sobs like a dam and press my lips to each of her eyelids and then hard on her forehead, clenching my eyes shut.

"Please, Lila... Don't leave me here alone."

When I feel her forehead shift and crease, I pull away, feeling the slightest glimmer of hope. Please, please don't be my imagination. Please, God... If you're out there somewhere, please don't take her from me. I don't see the point of being here without her.

I hold my breath as I watch her eyelids slowly part, and something deep inside me breaks as those big, sad, broken eyes peek open, slowly coming into focus on my face. A small, broken, bloody hand drifts up, pressing against my cheek. It's sticky and smells like iron, but I put mine over it, enveloping her cold hand in heat.

"Lila, I've got you," I cry, bringing my lips to her forehead. Her hand reaches up and rests on my bicep, and I see the blood still slowly oozing from her fingernails.

"You found me..." she whispers, her eyes fluttering shut as the slightest smile slips across her lips.

"I've been with you this whole time. I never left. God, I'm so, so sorry."

"Rocco?" she asks, choking as her fear spikes, and I remedy it immediately.

"Dead. Turner beat the fuck out of him, and I cut off his dick and shoved it down his throat."

Some of the tension lifts from her body, and her little smile returns as she realizes both her demons are gone.

“Did you kill Rooney?”

She nods tiredly.

“Incredible job. Let’s get you out of here.”

She gives me a weak nod. “Did you say Turner’s here?”

“And Bane. We were so sure you were dead, I was terrified.”

Feeling her shift in my arms, I can breathe easier. She’s alive.

A creak in the floorboards grabs our attention, and Turner approaches cautiously. He pulls off his shirt and drapes it over her in my arms as he sits on the floor beside us. His brows are deeply creased as she reaches for his hand, and he takes it, tenderly stroking the palm of her hand with his thumb.

“We’re gonna get you out of here,” he says softly, a tone I’ve yet to hear from him.

She nods so slightly, resting in my arms. As I relax a little easier, Turner’s eyes meet mine, filling with tears.

“Asher...” his voice seizes up.

My chest tightens. “No...”

Turner nods. “He bled out. There was nothing I could do. I’m so sorry.”

The world drops from my body again as sadness fills me, the same that makes Lila's split lip quiver.

Chapter 28

Lila

The hospital sheets are soft beneath me, and the sound of soft beeping from monitors surrounds me.

I don't remember much after Asher and Turner found me. What I do remember is never being alone, and that with every minute that passes, I feel a little bit lighter, and the pain diminishes a little further.

When I find the strength to open my eyes, Asher's are already staring back, filled with softness.

"Ash?" My throat aches.

He squeezes my hand, letting out a soft breath. "Don't talk too much. You're in rough shape."

I look down, finding clean, white sheets. When I pull my arms from under them, I find I'm in a hospital gown. My skin is clean, my fingers are wrapped in bandages, and my damaged fingers are capped. I feel the same ones on my toes when I try to wiggle them.

"What happened to all the blood?" I ask.

"I cleaned you up. You probably don't remember, but the nurses tried to give you a

sponge bath before they bandaged you, and you got scared, but you let me do it.”

I nod softly. I don’t remember, but I’m glad. “Thank you.”

“You’re pretty beat up. They’ve been giving you blood, antibiotics, and pain meds.”

I nod. “Where’s Turner and Bane?”

The light leaves Asher’s eyes, and that’s when I remember, like a horrible nightmare rushing back.

Bane is dead.

“Turner’s with the police now. He took care of things at the cabin, he burned it down and made sure their bodies were destroyed enough to keep all our hands clean. You don’t have to worry about the police’s suspicion. They saw the feed, and they know what happened. They’ll have to talk to you soon, too, but for now, rest.”

I nod, choked up. “I’m so sorry about Bane...”

His eyes shut, and he shakes his head. “I don’t wanna talk about him right now.”

I get it. He’s got to be overwhelmed. “How did you find me?”

“Raven.” The name makes my heart sink, and he must see it because he squeezes my hand. “Don’t give me that look, Sunshine. It’s not like that. We may have taken her hostage and threatened to kill her if she didn’t lead us to the cabin.”

“You did what ? ”

“Turner’s idea, not mine. Brutal but effective. She’ll be collecting a fat life insurance

check and plans to leave the country. I don't blame her."

We're interrupted when a man in blue scrubs opens the door and rushes in with a blood pressure machine, making my heart race. Asher tenses beside me. The man doesn't look at me as he crosses the room to the side of the bed opposite Asher; he only looks at some papers in his hands.

"Hello, Miss Blake, I'm Brent. I'll be your nurse tonight. Let's get your vitals."

When he grabs my arm, panic fires through me like a gunshot, and I let out a squeak as Asher reaches across the bed to shove the nurse's arm off me.

"What the fuck is wrong with you!?" Asher growls.

I shut my eyes, not wanting to see this.

"Sir, you need to leave while I examine my patient."

"You're not going to touch her. Get the fuck out of this room and get us another nurse."

"We don't swap nurses around here."

Before Asher can rip his head off, I pry my eyes open, staring up at Brent, but he's not looking at me; he's glaring at Asher.

"Did you even read her chart? Do you know why she's here? I know you didn't, or you wouldn't have come charging in here like that, grabbing at her. Get the fuck out, we want a new nurse. A female nurse."

"I want a new nurse," I say, and finally, Brent looks down on me. Hearing it from my

mouth makes him fold, and his expression softens.

“Alright, ma’am. I’ll have a new nurse in here soon. ”

“Thank you.”

Brent leaves, closing the door behind him. As I sigh with relief, I feel something shift on my chest. Slowly, with stiff movements, I pull up on the front of my gown to look down at my bare chest. An enormous bandage is covering my destroyed tattoo. It doesn’t hurt anymore, but I know what’s underneath. I glance down at my arm, finding blood being pumped into my veins.

When I begin to panic, Asher approaches me, pulling back the blankets. I’m on a small hospital bed, but somehow, he manages to squeeze in beside me. He uses the bed controls to lift the head of the bed and then pulls me straight into his lap. I can feel the back of my gown opening and my bare skin against his clothes. Initially, I resist, pained and scared. But when those strong arms close around me, they block out the rest of the world. I sink into his chest, listening to the sound of his heartbeat.

“You’re safe, Sunshine,” he whispers, making me sob. With that comfort, I can finally calm down, my pulse slowing to match his.

After another nurse checks on me, we’re left alone for a while. It feels like hours later when a knock on the door startles me out of my thoughts and makes me jump. The door opens, and another familiar face steps in.

“It’s nice to see those eyes,” Turner says.

He approaches my bed and places a heavy hand on my shoulder as he sits beside us.

“You came. ”

He smiles softly. “Of course I did. I really wish you fucking people would stay out of trouble every once in a while.”

That would probably make me laugh on any other day.

“Do you want me to call your folks?” he asks softly.

“I’m not gonna die, am I?”

He actually smirks at that. “No. You’re over the hump.”

“Then no. They’re across the country, and they don’t need to see this.”

“What about your friends?”

That makes me pause.

“Edgar’s department was called to Asher’s house an hour ago as part of the investigation. He hasn’t said anything to anyone, but he’s scared, and he knows something happened and that you were involved. I told him you’re alive but haven’t said anything else.”

“Just tell them I’m fine. I’m not ready for all that.”

Turner nods. “Alright. How are you? Is there anything I can get you?”

I feel as small as a mouse as I voice what I desperately need. “I need to pee.”

“Need some help getting there?” Asher asks.

I nod, humiliated in the worst way. To my relief, they don’t look bothered as they

move out of the way. Asher helps me pull the blankets back, and shimmy onto the side of the bed. My whole body feels as heavy as lead. They each hook an arm under mine, and I'm easily lifted to my shaky feet. Just when I feel the back of my hospital gown separate, they each grab a side to cover me, and I'm tied back up.

Chapter 29

Asher

Lila lets us help her into the bathroom, and then we give her some privacy, remaining outside the closed door. Once she's finished, we get her back to bed. Her movements are so heavy; she's so weak. The poor girl looks like absolute crap.

And I did this to her.

She's exhausted, and after the nurse checks on her, she falls back to sleep with us sitting on either side of her, watching over her. My leg fucking kills, and Turner must figure that out by the amount I'm fidgeting in place, desperate for the slightest relief of pain, but it doesn't come.

"Is your leg alright?"

It's funny how the last time he asked me that, I broke his car mirror. The thoughts bring me right back to Bane and nearly take me out. I haven't registered that he's gone. He's been my best friend for years, and now he's just gone. And it's all my fault.

"It fucking hurts," I admit, my voice breaking. Now that Lila's safe, I can think straight and feel the shame sinking in.

"My friend, Macy, was kidnapped a couple of years ago, and my best friend, Gareth, almost died saving her. If I'd lost him, I think I'd burn down the entire fucking

world.”

“Would you shut up?” I snap, tears burning in my eyes that I try to hide.

“Are you going to avoid this, too? Like you’ve avoided your leg?”

“Turner, I may be crippled, but I still have two fists that work just fine.”

“Is that what you need? Then let’s go. Outside, right now,” Turner says coldly.

I roll my eyes. “Get bent.”

If looks could kill, the glare that Turner hits me with would dissolve me.

“I wasn’t gonna say anything, but clearly, you haven’t learned a damn thing,” he growls, jabbing a finger toward Lila. “This is your fault. You did this to her. And don’t think just because we saved her together that we’re friends. I don’t like you, I don’t trust you, and until you grow the fuck up and stop avoiding your issues, you will never get anywhere with her.”

“What, you think you can keep her away from me?”

“No, but she can. You think she can deal with this and you at the same time? She’s hanging on by a thread! ”

I shake my head, frustration burning me to the core. I need to throw my head to the sky and scream. This is such a mess. I let out an angry grunt as I bury my face in my hands.

“Deal with me... She’s dealt with me just fine until now!”

“And look where we are. Your best friend is dead, and Lila’s not much better.”

There it is. The moment my heart shatters.

I’ve tried so hard to shove it down to deal with it later, but Turner hits me with it like a punch, chilling my blood. Because he’s right, this is my fault. They took her to hurt me because I was an idiot. Because even back then, I couldn’t accept my limp. It wasn’t bad, and it was probably temporary. I couldn’t face it, and because of that, I fucked Raven and had my leg fucked, which is why I left Kingston and why Rocco and Rooney came after me. I roped Bane into helping, and now he’s dead. I should have just said no to Jared’s tattoo, but I didn’t, and now he’s dead too. But worst of all, Lila.

They tortured her. She was put through an unthinkable amount of pain. She was so scared. How does a person get over something like that? And who the fuck am I to add one more problem for her? My leg.

Not just my leg... Me.

How many times have I yelled at her? Violated her, even if some part of her did want it.

When my eyes meet Turner’s again, all his hatred pierces me.

“Leave, Asher.”

I shake my head, more tears filling my eyes. “How can I leave her now?”

“Because she’ll be better off without you. ”

I glance back to Lila in a penetrating sleep, and my heart fucking shatters. Some part

of me believes that he's right. She will be better off.

"She'll be taken care of," he reassures me.

I believe him. It's the only reason I turn and walk out the door.

I don't make it far on my damn leg. I end up in a long, quiet hallway, sitting on a bench, attempting to massage the pain away, but it won't go. Eventually, I give up and lean my head against the wall, shutting my eyes. I let myself go numb, lost in my mind. There's no room in me left for the grief coursing through my veins, and it comes out in the form of tears and pained grunts.

"Sir, do you need help?"

I open my eyes to find an older, large woman in scrubs with concern in her eyes. But I only shake my head, unable to speak. She seems to understand and walks off, looking disappointed.

Everything seems so clear now. I'm at a crossroads. If I go left, if I get my leg taken care of, and let it the fuck go, I can try to be the person Lila needs me to be. If I go right, I keep going the way I am...

Well, I fucking can't.

There's no way for me to ever make this up to Lila. And she may never forgive me for this. This is when Bane would come in and call me a fucking idiot and tell me to get my damn leg checked, start using something to walk, and get the fuck over it. And he would be right. All these mistakes I've made have ruined everything .

It's time for me to become the man I need to be. And maybe, just maybe, this man will be good enough for Lila to forgive.

It costs me an arm and a bum fucking leg to get back to Alton with no car. Once I get home, I head to the hospital, finding the parking lot full, with no handicap spaces available. I pull the car to the front, where a worker stands outside in a vest. I roll down the window as I approach and wave him down, wanting him to walk up so I don't have to shout. I don't know why this is so fucking hard.

"Yes, sir?" the man asks as he approaches the window.

"I'm going to need a wheelchair to get inside. Can you help me out with that?"

"Yes, sir, I can bring one out for you."

"Thanks," I say, feeling a breath of relief.

He finds the car quickly and parks the wheelchair where I can transfer into it. I don't want to walk another step on the fucking thing when I'm in this much pain, and it could be damaged. For the first time in my life, I need to be responsible and not think of just myself.

"Do you know if Dr. Ramos is working today?" I ask the man as he pushes me through the parking lot.

He chuckles behind me. "Dr. Ramos? He's always working."

"Good. I need to see him."

The man helps me navigate the hospital, and I ask if he can park me where I can find Ramos. He's in the Gastroenterology and Liver Unit. I wait for a few minutes in an empty waiting room and get questioned twice by the cranky receptionist, who says he's about to leave for the night. I tell her I just need to speak to him.

Eventually, he comes out with a backpack over his shoulder. He slows when he spots me, and for the third time today, I have to ask someone for help.

“Asher? What are you doing here?” he asks in surprise, his eyes flickering down to the wheelchair.

I sigh. “I figured you’d be in the ER.”

“I’m a Hepatologist, but I work in the ER sometimes. What’s going on?”

It’s like a plug is pulled from my mouth, and everything falls out. “I’ve been through hell, and I fucked my leg up. I need help.” My voice breaks at the end, and even more fucking tears start pouring from my eyes. I must be dehydrated as fuck by now.

Ramos frowns, nodding sadly at me. “Let’s go get an X-ray.”

Ramos takes over and brings me to radiology himself. To my relief, he doesn’t speak again until we’re alone in an empty room, and he helps me get ready for the X-ray.

“What happened?” he asks.

I only shake my head. If I open my mouth, I’m going to scream until I bust every window in this room.

“I’ve paged Dr. Lannick from Ortho, but it looks like you have a few rebreaks.”

“How do they rebreak when they’re bolted together?” I grumble.

“Not the big ones; some of the smaller breaks were still weak.”

“So what will this mean for me?”

“That’s what we’re going to ask Dr. Lannick. But I do know that whatever treatment you need will involve a walking aid and potentially even a wheelchair for a while to give your leg a rest.”

Before this mess, I would’ve told Ramos to go fuck himself. But now? The thought of using a walker or wheelchair is terrifying for reasons I’ve never allowed myself to admit. I’d be weak. Damaged. Pathetic.

But the reality is, I already am.

My fragile fucking ego got me here and nearly ended Lila. Now, I need to make it as right as I can. I’ll do anything to be what she needs.

“Whatever you think is best.”

Ramos gives me a surprised half-smile. “You’ll be alright.”

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Chapter 30

Lila

When I wake, I feel cold. Alone. I peel my eyes open, finding my lids heavy. I turn slightly, seeing Turner asleep in the chair beside me.

Asher's gone.

"Turner?"

He opens his eyes and immediately leans in, entirely focused on me.

"How are you feeling?" he asks.

"Everything hurts."

He grabs the call button attached to my pillow and clicks it.

"Where's Asher?"

"He left," Turner says, though his expression is all wrong. Something happened. I know Asher didn't just leave.

"You sent him away, didn't you?"

"He left," Turner repeats gently.

“Liar.”

“Lila, I’m here for you. I’m not going anywhere.”

I shake my head, feeling dizzy. Angry. Why would Asher let Turner bully him out?

“He wouldn’t have left. I know you made him leave.”

“Lila-”

“No! You had no right!” Snapping at Turner takes all my energy, but it’s energy well spent.

“What happened is his fault, Lila. You nearly died. I’m trying to help you.”

“Well, you’re not helping me; you’re hurting me.”

He winces, wounded.

“I want you out. Go.”

“I’m not leaving you here alone.”

“You did that when you sent Asher away.”

He’s frustrated, but he won’t fight me. I can see it.

“I’m not leaving. You need someone here for you.”

“Then send someone else.”

I don't expect him to fold, but something I said must've resonated because his eyes are filled with sadness and shame.

"Who?"

"Asher."

"I don't have his number and don't know where he is."

He's lying, I know he is, and I don't have my phone. So, who can I call? The answer is obvious: if she'll ever forgive me.

"Macy. "

Turner nods, happy with that answer. "I'll call her and wait until she gets here."

"You can wait in the hall."

"Lila..."

When the nurse finally walks in to answer my call button, I look at her with pleading eyes as she approaches. "I want this man out of my room. Please call security."

Turner stands up before the nurse can do anything, making his way for the door.

"Lila, I'm sorry. I'm just trying to protect you."

"Yeah, well, prove it. Leave."

Turner nods, his eyes filled with sadness as he exits the room.

With Turner gone, the nurse can tend to me. “Are you alright, Miss?”

“I need something more for pain, please. Did the other man who was here earlier leave anything for me? A phone number?”

“I’m afraid not. Let me get you something for that pain.”

I spend a few hours with my thoughts. Other than being interrupted occasionally by nurses, I’m alone.

I close my eyes, and I can hear Jared choking on acid. I can see the skulls lined on the wall. I can feel that serrated knife cutting through my skin and the torch that always followed. I can feel Rooney.

When I try to shove those thoughts down, too hurt to bear them, I come back to Asher. When I opened my eyes and found myself in his arms, I could feel his fear and grief. It was the most intense feeling I’ve ever felt, more than being cut up like a Thanksgiving turkey or drowned in a bathtub of scalding water.

I felt loved...

How could he leave me here?

I’m wallowing in sadness when a knock on the door startles me, and a familiar face peeks in. Her eyes are wide with fear.

“Lila?”

My name makes me break as I take in Macy, my sweet, small friend who has been through hell just like mine. When the dam of tears breaks, I open my arms, and it’s all she needs. She shuts the door behind her before rushing for me. When I find the

strength to sit up, she wraps her arms around me, sitting on the bed.

“What happened to you?” she cries. Though she tries to let go and take a look at me, I don’t let her. I need her arms.

“Mace, I am so sorry for what I said. I’ve been horrible.”

Finally, I let her free, and when she pulls back, she’s crying. “I don’t care about that right now. I’m worried about you. What the hell happened? Turner wouldn’t tell anyone anything.”

I shake my head. “I don’t think I’m ready to say it out loud. Even thinking about it makes it hard to breathe.”

Macy nods. If anyone would understand, it’s her.

“Why won’t you let Turner in?”

“Because he went too far. Asher was here with me, and while I was asleep, Turner made him leave.”

I can see the conflict in Macy’s eyes, but she’s gentle without him in the room and with me being so broken down.

“Help me understand,” she pleads.

I know what she means. Asher.

I don’t even know how to make sense of it myself. Who could? What started as hatred morphed into competition to survive him, and from there, I don’t know how it happened.

“He’s not perfect, no one is. And yes, from the outside looking in, he’s probably a nightmare. I get that,” I start, my heart swelling as I speak. “But he’s just like any one of us. He’s just as broken and lonely as I am.”

“Do you think you can fix him?”

“He doesn’t need to be fixed.” And I think I’ve known that all along. He needs to address his leg so he doesn’t kill himself but beyond that... “What’s to fix? He makes me feel alive. And after all we’ve been through, I see him more clearly than ever. When he found me like this, he was shattered.”

He never would’ve leaked my sex tape. And if I had just called myself his dirty little whore, I have no doubt, he wouldn’t have laid another finger on me, I know that now.

“Are you sure you can trust him?” Macy asks gently.

“I do trust him.”

Macy nods with relief. And when she speaks again, I’m at a loss for words.

“Where can I find him?”

My lips part in shock. “You’d do that for me?”

She nods. “You were right before, and I’m sorry for being so cruel to you about Asher. No one has any right to make decisions about your life. If you trust him, and you need him, then yes, I’ll find him. Or, maybe someone else can, so I can stay here, and you won’t be alone.”

“Neela. She can bring him back.”

“Do you have any idea where he might be?”

“God, I don’t know. His best friend was killed...”

Macy nods, deep in thought. “If he cares about you, he wouldn’t leave you now. So how did Turner scare him off?”

“Turner told him I’d be better off without him.”

“Then, if he loves you, he’ll look for a way to be better for you.”

That’s when it clicks. I think I know where he must be.

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Chapter 31

Asher

I needed another surgery for my leg. At first, I wanted to push it off, but I had a moment of clarity. If I don't take care of this now, how can I care for Lila?

Lannick and Ramos convinced me it was a simple surgery, and I'd be awake in a few hours. When I wake up numb and weak in a hospital bed, I feel calm. This feels like the right thing.

"Hello, welcome back," a distant voice says.

I open my eyes to find a nurse above me, checking the monitor beside me.

"How'd it go?"

"Everything went well. The doctor will be in to see you in a while, but she was happy with the results. How's your pain?"

"Manageable." Thank god .

"There's a young woman here named Neela asking for you. Should I let her in?"

Neela? "Yeah, sure."

After the nurse checks me over, she leaves, and Neela enters the room, her eyes filled

with worry and sadness.

“Asher?”

I nod a weak hello, my head spinning as she stares down at me, weak and feeble in a hospital bed. Another body stands in the doorway, a man with dark shaggy hair and a narrow face, who watches me. This must be her man. I guess I understand why he wouldn't let her come alone.

“I heard about Bane and Jared. I'm really sorry.”

“Why are you here?” I ask.

“Lila. Our friend Macy's with her now. She's worried about you and wanted to be sure you were okay.”

“How did you know I was here?”

She smiles. “After they talked, Lila realized you wouldn't have just left her. She figured maybe you were getting your leg taken care of, and she was right.”

Smart, smart girl. Realizing that she had faith in me makes everything feel a little lighter. “Can you get her on the phone?”

“Macy says she's asleep. She's been in and out, but she's doing okay.”

“Good. Let her sleep. Do you think I could send a text to Macy for her?”

Neela smiles, offering her phone, and I take it.

“I'm surprised her guard dog allowed this. ”

“If you mean Turner, he didn’t. When she found out he chased you off, she kicked him out.”

Smart girl.

“What happened to her? No one knows anything; Turner and Macy won’t talk.”

“You know I can’t tell you that. But it was bad. She’s going to need all the support she can get while she moves on from this.”

“And she’ll get it,” the man in the doorway says.

“That’s Ty, my partner.”

I nod hello and wave him in so he’s not standing in the doorway. I motion to some chairs, and they both sit down while I formulate my message to Lila.

Hey Sunshine,

I wish I never left, but I think I needed to. A man’s gotta hit rock bottom before he can better himself, and I dug myself a deep hole. I’ll never be able to make up for everything that’s happened, but I hope you’ll let me try. I’m not going anywhere.

-Ash

When I return the phone to Neela, she doesn’t read the message, but I’m sure she will later.

“What will you need when you get out of here?” she asks.

The question catches me off guard because I hadn’t thought about it. With Bane gone,

I'm on my own. I hope to win Lila back, but there's no guarantee she'll let me in. Even if she does, she's the one who needs to be taken care of right now. So, where do I go from here?

"I don't know, why?"

"We can help," she says as though it's obvious.

"You'd do that?"

"We take care of each other around here. And if Lila's chosen you, that makes you one of us."

Tears burn in my eyes, and Neela smiles slightly as I break, supporting me. Lila's lucky, she has a village. There's one thing I know I'll need, and I hate to ask for it.

"I can't do stairs right now. Can you move my bed into Lila's den?"

"Yeah, we can do that," Neela says.

"It's heavy. You're gonna need some muscle," I say. I don't want to piss Neela off by implying she won't be strong enough to carry it, but she won't.

"We have muscle," Neela says.

"Why don't we just move Lila's bed? It'll be easier," Ty suggests.

"No, I want her to have that personal space if she needs it." I still don't know if she'll ever forgive me, but if she allows me to be there for her, that's where I'll be. If she kicks me out, I'll go home and sleep in Bane's bed. Hopefully, someone will be around to help me move it downstairs if that's the case.

Neela smiles. “We’ll make it happen. No problem.”

I point to the table beside me where my keys sit. “Lila’s house key is on there, too. There’s an alarm on both houses. Edgar and Nash will know the code. You know them, right?”

Neela chuckles. “I should. Nash is my brother.”

Fuck man, I can’t keep up with these people.

Chapter 32

Lila

I never truly appreciated how tired a person can be. Even when I'm only lying in bed with my eyes closed, unable to function, I still feel like my body might implode from complete exhaustion.

When the nurse comes in to take my vitals, I have to wake up and move. Though I'm exhausted, I feel a lot better. My injuries still hurt, but I don't feel like I'm riding the edge of death anymore.

After my nurse leaves, Macy stirs from her chair. She rubs her eyes and yawns before checking her phone screen.

"What time is it?" I ask. My voice is still hoarse and horrid, but it doesn't hurt too much now.

"Almost seven AM," Macy says. "I talked to the nurse while you slept; she said you'll be discharged today, but you'll need to see a wound care specialist at home for a while." She stops when she reads something on her phone, confused.

"What is it?" I ask.

She smiles slightly. "It's a message from Asher."

She passes the phone, and I take it in my bandaged hands.

Hey Sunshine,

I wish I never left, but I think I needed to. A man's gotta hit rock bottom before he can better himself, and I dug myself a deep hole. I'll never be able to make up for everything that's happened, but I hope you'll let me try. I'm not going anywhere.

-Ash

"Oh my... god..."

"I think I like him more now," Macy says softly.

"Could you write a message for me?" I can't with my hands bandaged the way they are.

Macy takes the phone from me and waits for me to speak. There are a hundred things I could say to Asher right now, but it all boils down to one simple sentence I don't know if I believe in yet. But even false hope is hope.

Everything's going to be okay.

Chapter 33

Asher

Neela and Ty stayed with me at the hospital, not wanting me to be alone. Though we didn't talk much, their presence helped. It lessened the panic I felt that I desperately needed to get back to Lila. Her friend Macy is still with her, and we have a line of communication.

I got a message back from Lila, and it took away most of the pain.

Everything's going to be okay.

I was discharged from the hospital with some equipment in tow. I'll be mainly in a wheelchair for the next couple of months, at least. They taught me how to transfer in and out of it, and I have a walker. It has two wheels and locks, which I can use to help me stand and transfer. I also have a shower chair and an adjustable commode chair to go over a toilet, which is the same thing that Bane bought for me and I hated him for.

God, it feels like so long ago.

The healing from this injury feels daunting, but somehow, it doesn't feel shameful like I thought it would.

Neela and Ty drive me home while Nash carries my equipment in his truck. When we get to Lila's house, more vehicles are in the driveway. Nash brings over my

wheelchair, and I easily transfer into it from the car the way I was taught in the hospital. When Nash begins to push me, I don't object.

When we get to the steps, I'm surprised to find a ramp built over the two steps onto Sunshine's deck.

"Edgar put that in for you; he built one for his elderly neighbor, too."

The ramp is made of wood and bows slightly when I'm pushed up it, but it feels solidly safe. There's a smaller one built over the lip in the doorway. Neela opens the door for us, and we enter the house.

In the den, two men I haven't met are finishing setting up my bed. One is middle-aged, with dark hair, a large nose, and some scars on his face. The other is younger, maybe early thirties, with buzzed blonde hair and bright blue eyes that meet mine as I enter.

In the kitchen, two women are stocking Lila's freezer. A tall redhead passes some containers from a large bag to her friend in the freezer, a curvy woman in a dress with chocolate brown hair. The kitchen table is overflowing with flowers and cards, including a bundle of sunflowers in a vase. She'll love those .

"That's Allegra and Juliet. They did some meal prep for you guys," Neela explains. "And that's Gareth and Ian. Gareth is Macy's husband, and Ian is Allegra's fiancé."

Ian is Lila's ex-husband. One look at him, and I understand why. He looks soft and gentle. I'm sure he's a nice man, but he's not the man for Lila.

"You're gonna have to write me a guide."

Neela chuckles. "You'll get it."

“Is she okay?” Juliet asks, stealing the room.

“She’s on her way now with Macy,” Neela says.

Good, she’s almost home.

“We should clear out, guys; we don’t want to overwhelm her,” Gareth says.

“Does anyone know where Turner is?” Ty asks.

“He’s home,” Gareth says. “Give him some space.”

Ty scoffs. “Like he’s ever given any of us space.”

“Yeah, we all know he can be a prick sometimes,” Gareth says.

“Maybe, but Lila wouldn’t be alive right now if it weren’t for him,” I say.

The room goes silent as every set of eyes turns on me.

“Would someone just tell us what the fuck happened?” Juliet blurts.

“No. The guy’s an asshole, but I really think he’s an asshole because he cares.” I don’t know why I’m defending Turner, but I can’t fault him. We wouldn’t have gotten there in time if he hadn’t helped Bane and me. The way he took control of the situation while I was too scared to function is the only reason she’s still alive.

“That’s Turner in a nutshell. Tough love,” Ty says .

With nothing more to be said, I want them all out. “Thanks, guys.”

“We’re not here for you,” Juliet says. When the room stills, I feel every set of eyes on us. “We’re here for Lila. You just happen to be stuck to her. We don’t know what happened to her, but if it really is your fault, you will have all of us to answer to.”

“People make mistakes, Juliet,” Gareth says.

If the room was quiet before, now it’s dead silent.

“Gareth’s right,” Ty says firmly. “It’s what we do to make up for those mistakes that means everything.”

Neela wraps her arm through his as he speaks, and they share an emotional exchange.

“Let’s clear out, guys,” Neela says. “When Lila’s ready, we’ll be waiting.”

Chapter 34

Lila

Coming home doesn't feel real. As Macy pulls into the driveway of my house, I glance at the one next door, black as death, and my heart pangs for Bane.

"Everyone cleared out. They didn't want to crowd you when you came home. You know we're all here for you," Macy says.

I nod sadly. "Is Asher here?"

"Yes. Neela's in there too. We're going to stay with you guys in shifts since you're on the mend, and he had surgery. We just want to make sure you're both okay. We won't be in the way."

"Asher needed surgery?"

Macy smiles. "Go. You need to speak to him. Do you want me to come in for a bit?"

"No. I'll be fine... Thanks, Mace. "

She smiles softly. "Of course. You know I'd do anything for you. I know you may not be ready to talk about what happened, but if you think it'll help, I'm here to listen."

I know Macy will be at the top of that list when that time comes. She knows what

I've been through better than anyone. "I will."

Macy helps me out of her truck since it's a significant drop. I'm steady on my feet now, though a little slow. I'm still on medication for pain and anxiety, which have kept me drowsy, so I take my time, careful not to fall.

I find a wooden ramp over my steps and another into the house. I'm too tired to consider what they're for as I approach the door. It's locked, so I have to knock. I hear hurried footfalls on the other side before the alarm disables and the door swings open. Neela takes one look at me with her wide eyes, and tears begin to fill.

"I'm so glad you're okay!" she cries.

When I open my arms, she gently falls in, and I inhale the sweet smell of her hair.

"Thank you for everything, Neela."

"Of course. I was just with Asher; he's waiting for you in the den when you're ready to see him. We moved his bed there, so yours is still upstairs if you need space. Do you want something to eat?" Neela asks.

Space? Space is the last thing I need. "No thanks, I'm fine."

Neela shuts the door behind me while I enter the kitchen, and the first thing I see is the mountain of flowers on the table. There are cards as well, already unwrapped and perched on the table.

While some part of me is scared, I still head straight for my den. I stop in the doorway, and there he is.

He's in a wheelchair .

Other than the chair, he looks okay. He's facing me in the middle of the floor, wearing a T-shirt and sweatpants, and I don't see any marks on him. He looks okay.

When his eyes meet mine, I find myself frozen. There are a hundred things I want to say to him, but right now, I don't think it's words I want.

"What do you need right now?" Asher asks, his voice gentle. I glance at the bed behind him, the king bed taking up most of my den.

"Will you get in bed with me?"

"Gladly."

The quick way he agrees makes me pause, and pain washes over his face.

"Lila, I won't lay a finger on you until you ask me to. I promise."

There's no doubt in my bones. I trust him.

I turn around to strip off my T-shirt, toss it on the ground, and then drop my sweatpants, leaving me just in some underwear. I look hideous. My head is painted in pink, like a horrid sunburn. The rest of me is bandaged almost everywhere. There are cuts and burns on the inside of both my thighs, calves, stomach, and my chest. They're everywhere, and they still hurt, even with the pain medication. It's the first time all my wounds have been in his face since he found me, and I hear his sharp intake of air behind me. Without saying a word, I pull back the blankets on my bed and get in. After sitting in the car for three hours, the bed feels like heaven as I settle on my side. Asher gets in beside me, fully clothed, and keeps some space between us. For a while, he's silent as he waits for me to come to him. Though I hesitate a little, eventually, I scoot over to him and snuggle into his chest. He wraps his arms around me, pulling me in tight. It feels possessive but in a comforting way.

I haven't had much time to process everything that happened. While in the hospital, I spent most of my time asleep, recovering, or just blocking out the world. I think the King of Avoidance is my greatest asset right now.

"I'm so glad you're home," he whispers.

"Me too. How's your leg?"

"I had a couple of rebreaks while rescuing you, and I had surgery."

My heart swells for him. "I'm sorry."

He smiles. "It's the price I was happy to pay, Sunshine. Your friend Turner may have kicked me down to rock bottom, but at least he threw me a rope."

Anger boils in me as I remember. "What did he say to you?"

"He said you'd be better off without me. And he was right. So, I did something about it. For what it's worth, he did me a favor. He cares."

"He wasn't right. Even when you refused to accept your leg, I was never better off without you." I pull away to look at him as I speak. Sadness swells in my chest alongside something else as he takes me in. He's pained.

"You survived," he says. It's almost cryptic.

"What did you mean when you said you were with me the whole time?"

He hesitates, and when his eyes soften on mine, they're like ice.

"I saw the livestream..."

“I thought they were lying about that...” I didn’t think he’d actually watch.

“Except for when they burned off your tattoo, I saw everything. I called...” Tears flood his eyes, and I hold him tighter.

“I figured they were screwing with me with the phone calls... Once you knew that too, I figured you would’ve turned it off if you were watching.”

“I couldn’t. As long as I could see you, I knew...” his voice breaks, his eyes filled with visceral fear. “My phone died right when they took you out of the dungeon...”

That’s when Asher falls apart. He pulls me in closer, holding me tight to his chest, and I let out an exhale, molding against him. Here, in his arms, I’m safe.

“Lila, if you want to talk-”

“I don’t.”

A deafening silence fills the room.

“It might help.”

Something in his words strikes a nerve, and I turn my head to stare him down. “Don’t preach to me about dealing with my problems, Ash.”

I can’t tell what he’s thinking. Asher seems just as lost as I do. I feel like he’s looking through me. Everything’s so fucked up. I still haven’t told him how I feel; I can’t. I know that what happened to me wasn’t my fault and that I’m not tarnished. I’m fucking shattered.

And after everything that happened, I’m not sure I can be glued back together again.

Who could?

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Chapter 35

Asher

I 've heard PTSD is a bitch. But did I expect to be woken up six times with my terrified girl screaming in my ear?

Never.

Every time she screamed, Neela was right there in the doorway. Even without our help, she seemed to fall right back to sleep. But I sure as fuck didn't.

I give up around five AM, my sanity gone. After making sure Lila is comfortable and asleep, I get into my chair and head for the kitchen, seriously feeling the pain in my leg from the incisions. To my surprise, Neela's gone, replaced by the squirrely blonde who was in Lila's window that first night. This must be Macy. She startles me initially, since I'm still jumpy from everything that went down. She's a cute little thing, younger than Lila. She glares at me with two big owl eyes as I roll into the kitchen, heading for the coffee maker.

"Good morning to you, too," I say dryly.

I feel her observing me from the cluttered table as I move. She's nervous. Still, she stands up and approaches me hesitantly, reaching for the coffee maker on the counter above me.

"Let me get that for you," she says, reaching the top cupboard to pull down a mug.

Once it's down, she pours me a mug while I take a few breaths, trying to calm myself down, but it's useless.

"Cream and sugar?" she asks, and all I can bring myself to do is nod.

"I'm Macy. I'm sorry about your friend. Neela told me he died."

Bane... I can't. "What happened to you? Turner said you were taken, too."

She recoils, shaking her head. "I don't know you. And I may have helped Lila track you down, but I did that for her sake, not yours. I don't trust you."

"I didn't hurt Lila."

"That doesn't make what you did right."

"No, you're right. But regardless of how anyone else feels about it, she needs me right now. I'm not going anywhere."

Her eyes narrow on me further. "Don't you fucking hurt her. After everything that's happened, I don't know if she'll survive another blow."

"I meant it, Macy. I'm not going anywhere."

That seems to soften her a little around the edges. The hackles come down, and she relaxes into the chair.

"What happened to you? Tell me everything. "

Angry again. "I'm not telling you everything. My stepbrother Colin took me hostage."

“Alright, go on; what did he do to you?” I ask a little gruffly. I really need to work on my empathy if I’m going to help Lila.

She lets out a deep breath before speaking. “Everything he could. He tortured me. Beat me, broke my bones, and after four days of that, he shot me and left me to die.”

She doesn’t look like she’s finished speaking. She needs a nudge, but there’s no gentle way to ask. “Did he rape you?”

After a nervous pause, she nods. “So please, tell me... Is what happened to her anything like what happened to me?”

I’m not telling her shit, but I’ll admit that much. “Similar.”

She has to take a moment to steady herself.

“How do I get her through this? I don’t have a fucking clue what to do or say.”

“Nothing you can say or do will take it away. Just be there for her. My husband, Gareth, didn’t always know what to say, but he was always there for me. And that went both ways. I helped him lay some pretty heavy burdens to rest. That’s how our trust became so strong.”

I nod. “It’s so hard to talk. And when it’s quiet, all I can hear is her screams...”

Macy’s brows lift. “Did you see it?”

I find myself clenching my lips together to try to hold my shit together. Then I’m wiping the tears as they come. “It was livestreamed on the dark web.”

Macy breaks, hiding her face in her hands as she sobs, and once I hear her, I start.

The amount of fucking crying ...

When Macy finally comes up for air, her face is red, and her eyes are bloodshot.

“What kind of fucking monsters could do this to her?”

“Dead ones. They’re gone. Never coming back.”

She snuffles. “You’re sure they’re dead?”

“Oh yeah, deader than dead. Ask Lila how she killed Rooney; it’s pretty impressive.”

Her eyes widen. “She killed one?”

“Brutalized. It still doesn’t come close to what they did to her, but still.”

Macy nods, understanding. She stifles her snuffles and wipes her tears away, changing the subject. “Is your leg gonna be okay?”

I shrug. “Okay as it’s going to get. I’ll be in a wheelchair until it’s healed; then, I’ll need something to help me walk.”

She frowns. “That’s got to make you pretty angry.”

“All that anger got me into this mess in the first place. I’m handling it.”

Before she can respond, a pained voice calls out from the den. “Asher?”

“I’m here, Sunshine,” I call.

“Do you think you could bring my pain medication?” she asks.

“On it.”

When I reach across the table for the pill bottle, Macy grabs it.

“I’ve got it.”

“I got it,” I argue.

Her brows furrow. “Go out on the deck and drink your coffee. Take a breather; you look like you need one.”

When I open my mouth to argue, she raises a finger, silencing me.

“If she needs you, I know where to find you.”

Finally, I nod. But before she goes to Lila, I need help. “Macy?”

“Yeah?”

“Could you ask Turner to come by sometime? I want to talk to him. Apologize.”

She smiles slightly. “Yeah, I can ask. And Asher? You should find something to channel your anger into. It’ll help.”

“Thanks.” She’s probably right.

Macy was right. The fresh air does wonders as I sit on the deck drinking my coffee, watching the sky turn pink as the sun begins to rise. This town is so quiet and peaceful. Only the low sound of distant cars and the sound of birds chirping fill my ears.

For the first time since Lila was taken, I actually feel a little bit at peace. And that feeling is robbed when I remember that Bane's dead. Jared's dead. It brings me back to everything, watching Lila on my phone, how fucking scared I was when they dragged her out of the room to drown her.

I've never been a guy to feel my feelings. I'd bury them. But since Lila, I can't do it. I've cried more in the last week than in my entire life. And I won't fight it. I allow myself to feel it.

After I've calmed down some, I hear a vehicle pull into the driveway. A door opens and shuts, and a pair of heavy footsteps approach. Finally, Turner comes into view. His eyes are sunken, and he looks tired as shit.

"I hear you want to talk," he says in that trademark rough voice, his eyes drifting down to my wheelchair with surprise.

Jesus, Macy's fast. The sun isn't even up yet. "I didn't mean right this minute."

He shrugs, stepping casually up the ramp. "I was already awake." He sits down beside me in one of Sunshine's lawn chairs with a to-go mug in his lap, staring over the trees where the sky is pink.

A surprisingly comfortable silence falls between us as we sip our coffee. But I have a piece to say, and I'm not gonna pussy out now.

"You have some really good friends, you know. I've never had anything like this. It was always just Bane and me."

Turner nods. "And now he's gone."

I tear up again but just let them dribble down my cheeks.

“You got your leg fixed,” he says, sounding surprised.

“Yeah. I went to Dr. Ramos, and he helped me out. Same guy I pretty well spat on when I first got to town.”

Turner actually chuckles. “Ramos is a good guy. Great doctor; shitty bedside manner.”

Yeah, that’s him in a nutshell. “I wanted to thank you. You may have seriously kicked me when I was down, but it was the kick in the ass I needed.”

“Anytime. Happy to help.”

“There’s no bad blood over here. I know that everything you did, you did to protect Lila. And I know it was all my fault. This whole mess is the worst mistake I’ve ever made, and I will do whatever it takes to earn my place in her life.”

Turner nods, distant, as he considers. Finally, he speaks. “We all make mistakes.”

“How can I take care of her, mourn Bane and Jared, and deal with this fucked leg all at the same time?”

Turner’s lips turn up a little, his scowl disappearing, but he doesn’t quite smile at me. “With help. Lila has a lot of friends in her corner. We all take care of each other.”

“But I’m supposed to be her strength.”

“With that attitude, you never will be. She can’t be your strength right now; how do you expect to be hers? You’re both in hell, and you need to come up for air together. You don’t need to be strong for Lila. You just need to be there.”

I have to take a few deep breaths to absorb Turner's words. "Have you ever loved anyone?"

"I'm not the guy to ask about love," Turner says.

"No?"

"I have an ex-wife from a relationship riddled with the worst mistakes a man can make. But now, I just don't see the point. I'm old. Any partner would outlast me, and do I want to subject a woman I love to that? No."

"Dude, you're not that old. What're you, fifty-five?"

"Life's short, Asher. It goes by quicker than you think."

"Well, as cryptic as that is, you still didn't answer my question. Is there someone you love?"

The motherfucker is pushing me for my feelings but won't even admit his own. When he doesn't answer, I continue.

"I never actually hurt Lila, you know. There were rules. Technically, a safe word. Everything I did to her, she wanted." That might not be completely true, but for the most part, it is.

He turns to me, lifting a brow. "She told you that?"

"Yes, she did. I know you don't trust me, but I promise you. I would never really hurt her, especially not now. "

Turner smiles. "We need to work together to get her through this. Not just you and

me, all of us.”

“But she still doesn’t want to see anyone. She hasn’t eaten since she’s been home.”

“Give her time. It’s only been a few days.”

Time. So unreassuring.

Chapter 36

Lila

“How are we gonna do this?” Asher asks.

I need to wash up. Hours and hours of sleeping in bed with nightmares and sweats have left me feeling awful. My hair is practically glued to the back of my neck. But I can't exactly take a shower. Thankfully, my house has two bathrooms, one on each level, both equipped with a bathtub. There's a shower chair in the tub for Asher, along with a commode seat over the toilet. I still can't get over the change in him, how he went from exploding at anyone who would even mention his leg to voluntarily having surgery and putting himself in a wheelchair.

“My bandages can't get wet, so can you wash me with a cloth? Once that's done, we'll wash my hair over the tub. Is that okay?”

“You're the boss,” he says.

After running some soapy water, I sit on the toilet lid, and Asher sits in front of me in his wheelchair. He starts with my upper body, keeping the bandages dry but ensuring I'm clean. Despite our closeness, I'm still a little shaky around him. I think he senses it because he's completely professional as he washes me. In fact, his touch feels gentle, especially in the sensitive areas. Once I'm clean, he helps me towel off and change into clean underwear and sweatpants. I leave my shirt off for now so it won't get wet.

To wash my hair, I kneel on the bathroom floor and rest my neck on the tub's edge, letting my hair fall in. It's not very comfortable, but it'll have to do. Asher sits in his chair beside me, grabbing the hose that's already loose and hanging at the bottom.

When he starts the water, it first pours from the faucet, and the sound of water thundering against the bathtub immediately puts me on edge. The running water puts me right back in the bathroom at the cabin when the brothers topped up the bath with the hottest water from the tap since I splashed so much of it out.

It makes a lump form in my stomach.

Once the shower head starts spitting water, I relax a little until it begins to run over my hair. The second the warm water hits my scalp, my whole body seizes up in a panic, and I throw my head up out of the tub, scaring the fuck out of Asher. He quickly surrounds my dripping hair with a towel so I don't spill over my bandages.

"I'm sorry! I'm sorry," I cry.

Before I can fully implode, Asher grabs me by the arms, pulling me up towards his lap. I sit on his good leg, my legs resting between his. His arms warmly surround me, grounding me and bringing me back to earth.

"You're okay, Sunshine."

"I panicked," I cry.

"I know. It's gonna happen. We'll work through it."

"How am I supposed to wash my hair?" I weep.

Asher kisses my forehead, stroking my hair sweetly. "We'll figure out another way."

For now, breathe.”

It takes me ages to calm down enough to stand up. When I finally do, Asher squeezes my hand gently to keep us connected.

“What do you want to do?” he asks.

My hair needs to be washed. But with my head spinning and my pulse as high as it is, I can’t even think straight. All I know is I’m absolutely not doing that again.

“I don’t know. I just wanna lay down again.”

Asher nods. “Want me to come with you?”

“You were gonna shower too, weren’t you?”

“I can wait.”

“You shower. I’ll be fine.” I could use a breather, alone.

He nods in understanding. “Before you go, could you help me in?”

“Of course,” I say, my voice a little stronger. Asher asking for help? What a twist.

To my surprise, we get him in there fairly easily by working together. He uses the rail in the tub to hold his weight while I pull down his pants, and then he sits in the chair. Once he’s seated, I remove his pants the rest of the way, eyeing the two small bandages on his leg from his surgery.

I almost expect some backhanded insult from him about how he doesn’t need help. Instead, he turns to me, his eyes filled with nothing but relief and gratitude.

“Thank you,” he says softly.

“You’re welcome,” I say sweetly. Since he can’t reach the shower head, I pull it down for him and give him my bottles of soap, shampoo, and a cloth. I make a mental note to have Neela or Macy pick some men’s products up for him. In a pinch, mine will do.

“Do you want some help? You can’t get those wet,” I say, motioning to his bandages.

“I think I’ve got it from here, Sunshine,” he says gently, removing his shirt so he’s completely naked.

After getting an idea, I head into the kitchen, nodding a hello to Macy sitting at the table. I grab a garbage bag from the pantry and bring it back in to Asher. I place it over his bad thigh to protect the bandages.

“That should help, at least.”

He smiles slightly. “Thanks, Sunshine.”

I remove his walker and bring his wheelchair back in, parking it beside the shower. Then I grab his clean clothes and place them on the chair under a fluffy towel so everything he needs is within reach.

“Just holler when you’re ready to get out.”

“Will do.”

After Asher’s finished in the shower and back in his wheelchair, Macy helps me with my hair. She washes it for me in a big salad bowl in the kitchen, with no running water on my scalp. I opt for cold water to help with the cruel bite of the heat. Having

my scalp submerged in any water at all makes me feel physically ill, but for a few minutes, it's manageable. Once it's clean, she also washes the back of my neck, making me feel so much better. Asher stays with me the whole time, squeezing my hands.

Macy shows Asher how to blow dry my hair, and while he starts, Macy looks up some braid tutorial videos. Once it's dry, Macy puts in a crown braid so it's secure and off my neck. Asher watches her do it, and Macy teaches him how. They end up taking my hair down so Asher can do it himself. I can't see the result, but it feels less secure than Macy's. He redoes it twice before he's happy with it, and it feels perfectly secure on my head.

If someone had told me a week ago that Asher would be braiding my hair, I'd have told them to jump in a river.

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Chapter 37

Asher

It's been a week since Lila came home, and things have only worsened. Despite the attempts from Macy, Neela, and me, Lila is a shell. I can't blame her one bit. I watched nearly everything she went through, and even I'm having nightmares about it. Watching the woman I love in so much pain was the worst thing I've ever experienced.

But she had to live it.

The wound care nurse came yesterday and removed the bandages on her hands and feet. Her other wounds aren't infected but aren't healing like they should be. When the nurse asked Lila if she was eating well, she lied. Even with proper use of her hands with her finger bandages off, she doesn't seem to want to do anything .

We've tried to get her out of bed, even to the sofa. She wants nothing to do with it. We've tried to get her to eat, but she's barely managing one meal a day and doesn't eat all of it. She stays in bed, sleeping most of the time, and when she's not sleeping, she's mostly crying. I hold her through it, and she usually cries herself to sleep.

While she's asleep, I call Macy, Neela, and Turner over to help. We meet on the deck so she can't hear us. Gareth joins us this time, and Neela's going to be late.

"I can't get her out of bed, and she's still hardly eating."

“It’s only been a week, Asher. It takes time,” Macy says.

“How long did it take you?”

She glares at me. “Y’know, I wish you’d stop using me as your cheat sheet for suffering management. She’s not me, I’m not her, and we went through completely different experiences.”

“But how long did it take you?”

“Are you not listening?” Gareth growls. “It doesn’t matter how long it took Mace. We’re talking about Lila.”

Despite the desperation coursing through my blood, I know they’re right. I need to knock this shit off.

“I’m sorry. I’m just... I don’t know how to help her, and it’s making me crazy.”

“Asher, you need to take a step back,” Gareth says calmly. “I know just how you feel; I felt it, too. The best thing you can do is just be patient.”

Neela arrives before I can punch Gareth in the face, jogging from the driveway up the ramp with a bag in her hand. “Hey, sorry. I brought these. ”

She hands a bag to me, and I open it up, finding two sketchpads and a pack of high-quality pencils from an art store. There’s no art store in town, so she must’ve traveled to get these.

“You know she used to be an artist?” I say to everyone.

“She did?” Macy asks.

“Yeah, she told me, too,” Neela says.

Lila was pretty enthralled in the whole tattooing process. The designs she made that day Jared was in were beautiful, and when she wasn't drawing, she couldn't take her eyes off my machine to Jared's skin.

“It's a good idea. She needs to channel her anger into something,” Turner says.

Neela looks me dead in the eye. “Are you thinking what I'm thinking?”

I do. And I don't even need the confirmation. “Yeah, I am, but I can't even get her out of bed. How the fuck am I gonna do that ?”

Neela's lips press together as her eyes meet mine. “You find what she responds to, and you use it.”

I know what she's trying to say, and it's wrong, so fucking wrong. How can I do that to her? Hurt her to help her? She's been hurt enough.

But she's suffering, and I need to bring her back.

Chapter 38

Asher

It's been a few days since Neela brought us the sketchpads, and Lila hasn't touched hers, despite my attempts. I know what I need to do to help Lila, but I'm afraid she'll hate me. Still, I know it has to be done. She hasn't washed up in a couple of days, and she needs it, so I figure I'll start there. Lord knows it won't take much to piss her off. I just hope I can get her back after.

When she gets up to use the bathroom, I transfer into my chair and head for the kitchen, finding Neela at the table.

"It's time, leave," I say, my voice low.

She nods, quickly jumping up. "Text me if you need me to come back. I won't be far."

"Thanks. "

She quietly heads out the back door just as my heart starts to race. God, I do not want to fucking do this. But I have to.

When Lila exits the bathroom, I call her name, and she drags her feet to the kitchen doorway. She still looks pretty rough. Her clothes are from yesterday, and her hair is a mess.

“Where’s Neela?”

“She left. Macy will be here later.”

“Oh. I’m going back to bed,” she says tiredly, her brows downturned.

I ignore her statement, grabbing two containers of soup from the fridge that I had thawed overnight. “You wanna pop these in the microwave for us? I’d do it myself if I could reach the damn thing, and Neela just left.”

She takes only one of the containers from me and puts it in the microwave. She picks up the other and reaches for the fridge door, but I grab her by the hand, and she glares at me.

“I’m not hungry.”

“You need to eat something. Let’s have lunch, and then we’ll get you cleaned up and go to the shop.”

Her eyes narrow. “No, thanks.”

“I need to pick up some things, and I’ll need some help.”

She bristles, her extremely short fuse lit. “Someone can pick up what you need. I’m too tired.”

“You’re tired because you’re hardly eating,” I say, my temper growing.

Her eyes darken. “Asher, don’t start.”

“Lila, you need to-”

“What? I need to what?” she growls.

I give her a warning glare, but she doesn't fold.

“I need to get over it?”

I frown, shaking my head. “Lila, no.”

“No, I get it. Lila's broken, Lila's sad. Maybe she'll never get her ass out of bed again.”

“Do not turn this around on me,” I snap.

“Why? Why shouldn't I?”

“You're hardly eating, you smell like death, and you barely get out of bed. I'm allowed to be worried about you, just like you were worried about my leg.”

“NO!” Suddenly, her head practically explodes, releasing all the anger she had built up. “How fucking dare you? Why don't you let me drown you in a scalding hot bathtub, and we'll see how much you want to get on with your life, hmm? FUCK YOU!”

As much as I love her, I'd love to give her a good fucking shake right about now. “How are you supposed to heal if you won't eat? Hmm? You're a nurse, you're not an idiot! So stop acting like one !”

She slams the soup onto the counter before stalking away from me back to the den, and I follow closely behind her. When she tries to lie down, I grab her again by the arm. When she nearly punches me in the head, trying to shake me off, that's when I snap. I shove her onto the bed and carefully climb out of my chair, landing on her

chest-to-chest. She tries to hit me, but I grab her wrists, pinning them to the bed. She glares up at me with rage as I hold her.

“What are you gonna do, Ash? Fuck me? Make me your dirty little slut again?” she hisses, shaking me off.

“Not before I shove some food down your goddamn throat!”

She scoffs. “I’d like to see you try. ”

“Fine. Skip the soup, and get your ass in the car. We’re going to the shop.”

“I’m not going anywhere!”

I knew she’d dig her heels in, but the more stubborn she gets, the more I have to push, and the more I feel like shit for it. “Lila, Bane’s dead, and I need your help. We’re gonna get you cleaned up, then you’re gonna get your ass in the fucking car.” I hate to play the dead friend card on her, but in this case, it’s effective.

The burning fury in her eyes breaks my heart. “I’m not washing up right now.”

“Yes, you are; you smell like shit. Bathroom, now. ”

She knocks her shoulder against mine as she passes me, and it probably hurts her more than me, but she’s too stubborn to make a sound. Instead, she stops halfway towards the bathroom and turns to glare at me again.

“Fuck you. I’ll clean myself.”

Once she’s cleaned up and wearing fresh clothes, we head to the shop with a heavy, uncomfortable silence between us. Though she still helps me with my chair, she’s

aggressive about it. Despite all the bullshit I've put her through since the day I moved here, she's never been this angry at me. I can only hope she'll forgive me.

When we get to the shop, she quickly sits on the sofa. I pile what I need in my lap and return to Sunshine, setting the things on the desk.

"What are you doing?" Lila finally asks .

I motion for her to sit down and place a large piece of fake skin in front of her. Then, I set up Bane's tattoo machine with a fresh needle and black ink. I grab her sketchpad, the one I gave her the day she was here with Jared and me. I open it to the mountain.

"While I print some designs for my binders, I want you to tattoo that mountain the size of your palm on this fake skin."

Her brows pull together as if she can't see where I'm going with this. "Why? I don't even know how."

"Just humor me."

"I'll pass."

I huff. "Lila, just fucking do it."

I know she's too tired to bother fighting me, so once I show her how to start and stop the machine and how to hold it, she goes at it. While I do my thing, she works beside me. After some time passes, some of her hostility melts away, and she becomes a little more malleable.

"How do I shade?" she asks.

“Don’t worry about that yet. Just do the line work.”

Once I’m finished with my fake busy work, Sunshine is finishing up the design. Without the shading, it’s pretty simple, and she nails it. It looks exactly like the one on her sketchpad but smaller. I don’t know how she does that.

“Asher, what are we doing here?” she repeats.

“You’re gonna tattoo that on my ankle.”

Her response is pure terror. “What? NO!”

“Yes, you are.”

“Ash, I don’t know how. I could hurt you!”

“I’m right here to help. The worst you’ll do is give me a shitty tattoo, but I don’t think you will.”

She’s not convinced, and her anger skyrockets again. “Why are you being such a fucking asshole today!?”

“Bane was going to tattoo a mountain on me. Now, he can’t. Fucking do it.”

Playing on her heartstrings works, and after a little more hesitation, she gives me a hesitant nod.

Since she doesn’t know what she’s doing, I set everything up for her and show her how to keep everything clean, which she catches onto easily, being a nurse. I lay on my side in the chair, giving her the easiest angle to work with. When she picks up the machine, I stop her.

“Remember, hold it like you were before.”

She corrects herself. “Like this?”

“Perfect.”

Having the number of tattoos I already have, I can tell the moment she touches that needle to my skin that she’s not pushing hard enough.

“A little deeper, Sunshine.”

“Like this?”

It might be a little too heavy-handed now, but that’s alright. If it blows out, so what? It’s her first tattoo.

“Much better.”

She’s slow as a snail at first, not trusting herself. This tattoo boot camp may be a little extreme, but I think she needs extreme. When I check after a few minutes, I see she’s doing good. Her lines are steady, but she’s tense as a board.

“Lila, relax. ”

She removes the machine and shoots me a glare.

“Okay, bad choice of words. Just loosen up. Have fun. This is supposed to be fun.”

She scoffs. “Fun for who?”

“For you! You’re giving me a tattoo!”

Something I say seems to stick because she's a little more confident when she returns to my ankle.

The tattoo doesn't take her long, being it's just line work. Once she's done, she turns off the machine and sets it down, and I take a look. It's too deep in spots, with insufficient ink in others. Despite that, her lines are steady.

"You did great, Sunshine," I say.

"It looks like shit."

Her eyes clench shut as she spirals out of control.

Chapter 39

Lila

As I stare at Asher's ankle, something inside me breaks, shattering into a million pieces. And my reaction was not what Asher was expecting.

"Lila?" he stares at me.

That's when my sobs take over, rendering me speechless, and I curl over, letting myself fall to the ground, unable to catch myself.

"Lila, talk to me," Asher pleads, reaching down for me.

My eyes blur with tears as everything hits me at once like a fucking truck. Suddenly, I can feel every wound. I can feel the torch on my skin. I can feel Rooney ripping me apart. I can see Jared die, choking on acid. I can see the look on Asher's face when Turner told him his best friend in the world had bled out.

And as I stare at this imperfect tattoo, it pushes me over the edge .

With tears spilling from my eyes, I let out a sob. "Asher..."

"It's okay, Sunshine." He leads me to the sofa at the front of the shop and transfers into it from his wheelchair, and I follow right at his side. My tears melt into his T-shirt as he holds me.

“How am I supposed to go on? Everything’s so wrong!”

He squeezes me for dear life as though he’s hanging by a thread, just like me, because he is.

“You know, when Turner kicked me out, I ended up sitting in a hall, crying my eyes out, scared as fuck,” Asher says, his voice shaky, as though he’s holding back tears. “That was rock bottom for me, Sunshine. Bane and Jared were dead, you were nearly killed, and it was my fault. My stupid fucking leg. You know what got me through it? You.”

“How?” I cry.

“Because you’re the most important person in my life, and I wasn’t going to abandon you. I had to be better. I had you to hold on to. You need to find that thing worth holding on to and not let it go.”

If there’s one thing anchoring me to this earth right now, it’s Asher. What if he’d died? I think I would’ve died too.

“Let it out, Sunshine. Don’t bottle it up. I can take it.”

As I sob into his chest, I struggle to breathe, and he rubs my back tenderly as more flashbacks from that day come back.

“I couldn’t breathe!” I sob. “They must’ve dunked me a dozen times, drawing it out as long as possible. I didn’t know which time they weren’t going to pull me out, and I was going to die.”

It hurts so bad just to say it. But as I cry, I swear I feel the tears cleansing me. I’ve bottled up so much. And as I let it out, for the first time, I feel like I can go on.

“Let it out, Sunshine, and put it into your art. Make it sing. And then you let me wipe away all your tears.”

When I break into tears, Asher pulls me tight, cradling my head against his chest.

“I know, Sunshine. Let it out.”

My body freezes when his hand drifts from my back down to my hip. A strange mix of fear and pleasure instantly begins to fill me, and I nuzzle even closer to him. He’s so hesitant where he puts his hands.

I don’t like this Asher. He’s afraid of me.

“You can’t treat me like glass,” I whisper.

“Not forever,” he assures me.

“No, not ever.”

“You need to heal, Sunshine.”

The strangest urge washes over me, consuming me. “Ash...”

“Shh...” he whispers. “Sunshine, we’re not negotiating this. You need to heal.”

“I need him off me,” I cry. I’ll do anything to take away this awful feeling. And Asher won’t hurt me. I may be a mouse caught in a giant’s trap, but right now, while I’m so broken, he’s a gentle giant.

Asher sighs, his body tensing against mine. “Sunshine...”

“Please. Just a little...”

I swear I feel his resolve folding. “If I’m going to touch you, you need to promise me that you’ll tell me if I need to stop. Do not let me hurt you. Not now.”

When I shakily nod into his chest, he slowly sinks his hand into my underwear. And suddenly, I’m back in his den the first time he touched me, when he pinned me against a wall and aggressively fingered me until I came twice all over his hand. Back when he flipped my world upside down and made me rethink every sexual experience I’ve ever had.

His rough fingers brush against my clit, softly stroking it and waking up my sluggish body. When I tense, he pauses, his hand cupping me.

“Sunshine?”

He can’t do this, and I can’t exactly blame him. “Don’t stop. Please. I need you. Tell me I’m yours.”

Something in my words must click because, finally, his fingers drift to my entrance. I wonder if I feel any different after all the trauma, but if I do, he doesn’t comment on it. Instead, he says exactly what I need him to.

“You’re mine, Sunshine. You’ve always been mine.”

The words out of his mouth light me on fire, and my breathing picks up as I quake with need, my body fighting my mind.

“I know you’re hurt, and you need to heal. But I promise you, Sunshine... I’m here to be what you need.”

What I need is for things to go back to the way they were when he took what he wanted from me without question.

Finally, he begins to slip a finger inside me. When he finds me bone dry, he pulls his hand out and wets a single finger in his mouth, his eyes sensually resting in mine as he does. Then he returns his hand. He runs his fingertip around the outside, lighting me on fire as he waits for me to let him in. When I don't, he pushes in. My whole pelvis tenses as he sinks that single finger into me, and I let out a cry.

“You're okay, Sunshine. Let me take the pain away.”

When he starts to stroke my insides with a single finger, I tense, but eventually, I melt into him, my body relaxing. The gentle pleasure begins to take over, and evidence of my arousal makes everything feel a little better. When I whimper, I press my lips against his neck, sucking gently. When Asher lets out a deep moan, it goes straight to my core, and I begin to tighten, clamping down on that single finger. When my breathing picks up and I start to tremble, he slows his strokes to practically nothing, letting me ride out the orgasm.

And when the contractions stop, I don't feel that same ghostly presence I did before. Still, the tears fall freely.

“I love you, Lila,” he whispers, taking my breath away.

A sob slips from my lips as those four words echo over and over in my head.

“I love you too, Ash.”

When I kiss his neck again, he lets out a rumbling groan before squeezing me a little tighter, surrounding me in his warmth.

“We’re gonna get you through this,” he promises.

“You lied to me, didn’t you?”

The question catches Asher off guard, and it takes him a moment. Still, he smiles slightly, nodding.

I didn’t realize until the drive home when I was going over every minute that had passed since walking into the shop. But once I realized, I felt stupid for even missing it. Bane was never going to tattoo a mountain on him. Asher just wanted me to do it.

“I may have played on your heartstrings a little,” he admits. “I’m sorry for being such an asshole this morning. I didn’t mean any of it. I’d never push you that hard. I just needed to get through to you. ”

I should be mad that he lied to me out of principle. But I’m glad he did. “It worked like a charm.”

“Neela and I noticed how much you seemed drawn to tattooing, and we thought encouraging you might be a good idea.”

This is exactly the kind of thing I was pissed off about before. But after everything that’s happened, I’m seeing things differently. They only meddle because they care. Losing Ian took something from me. I lost sight of all of us, our big, weird family. It took Asher crashing into town and flipping everything upside down for me to see that. It nearly took my life.

Neela got it exactly right about Turner, that he meddles because he cares. He was just scared, trying to keep me safe. I can’t fault him for that. Turner is the backbone of Koa. Whenever we’re in trouble, he’s always there.

“Will you teach me more? How to tattoo?”

“Yes, Sunshine, I’ll teach you everything I know. I need a new artist, and you need something to channel all that pain. We’re a perfect match.”

I have Asher wait in the car when we get to Turner’s place. There are a few other cars parked, including a big utility van. Before I can question what it’s for as I pass it, the back door opens, and a man in workwear exits. He nods a hello as he heads past me. Turner is standing in the doorway, his eyes softening on me.

“Hey,” he says gently.

The way he melts as he looks at me shatters my heart. I’ve done him so wrong.

“Lila-”

“Don’t,” I cut him off. “Let me?”

At first he sighs, but finally, he allows me to speak.

“You never should’ve sent Asher away. But I know why you did. Because you care.”

He nods, his eyes filling with sadness. “You know I do.”

“You risked your life to save me. I never should’ve yelled at you. I don’t hate you; I could never. None of us could.”

“Lila, you don’t owe me an apology. You were right,” he says softly. “I went behind your back to protect you from Asher, and after speaking with him, I realize I never had to. You were spiraling, and I didn’t trust you to take care of yourself.”

I smile. “If Asher were a problem I couldn’t handle, I would’ve gone right to you. You take care of all of us; you always have. Even when we don’t exactly want you to.”

He smiles. “Someone’s got to. You lot are a wreck.” His eyes drift down to my chest, where a large bandage is poking out of my T-shirt. “You have no idea how scared he was to lose you.”

“No, I do. I felt it when he found me.”

He nods. “There are a lot of other people who were scared to lose you too. People chomping at the bit to see you, to know you’re okay.”

“I know. I’m just... I’m so tired.”

“You don’t have to say anything. Just let them see that you’re okay.”

When he puts it that way, I realize he’s right.

Chapter 40

Lila

Asher helps me get ready after Turner sends out the text. After we've tidied up a little bit with Turner's help, the last thing I need to do is wash my hair.

To my surprise, it's a little easier this time. We use cold water again, and Asher distracts me by humming a rock song that I recognize from him and Bane on the deck. Before I get too overwhelmed, the worst part is over. I have more strength now, but I don't offer to finish my hair for him. The tender way he brushes my hair and dries it is deeply comforting, a stark contrast to his rugged side. He's so gentle as he works on it, braiding it like last time.

Once I'm ready, I motion Turner to unlock the door, opening my house to chaos.

"Ready?" Asher asks .

I take a minute to force myself to breathe, and when I'm ready, I nod.

Gareth and Macy arrive first. As Gareth's eyes probe me, I feel myself shrink beneath his gaze and decide to march straight up to him to hug him. He wraps his arms around me gently, letting out a deep exhale.

"Thank god you're okay," he says.

"What're you thanking god for? It's us who saved her," Turner jokes, instantly

lightening the room.

Within half an hour, my house becomes a bustle of activity as everyone piles in. Edgar and Nash arrive next, sandwiching me in a hug of pure testosterone.

“You scared the sweet Jesus fuck out of everyone, you know,” Nash says.

“You know those security systems don’t work if you don’t shut the door, right?” Edgar asks, biting back a smile.

“That’s the worst joke I’ve ever heard,” I chuckle.

Like our gatherings at Turner’s, my house quickly fills with food as people arrive. While Asher, Turner, Gareth, Neela, and Nash encourage me to eat with them, I don’t, and they don’t push. Asher mingles a little, keeping himself out of the spotlight.

The next to arrive is Juliet, and her expression breaks when she lays eyes on me. She charges me and nearly knocks me into Edgar.

“Easy, I’m still sore.”

“You’re okay,” she weeps.

“Juliet, I’m so sorry,” I whisper. “I made you feel like a bad friend, and you’re not. I was just hurting, and I lashed out.”

She releases me finally, shrugging .

“I don’t care about that right now. I’m just glad you’re safe. What the fuck happened!?”

“Not now.”

She leaves it at that, not pushing. “I’m sorry.”

The last ones to arrive are Ian and Allegra. Allegra approaches me first, wrapping me in a gentle hug.

“Thank you for all the food.” Asher told me she meal-prepped and filled my freezer, not that I’ve touched much of it yet.

“It’s the least I could do. I’m just so glad you’re okay.” As she hugs me, she gently runs her hands over my back. “You’re so tense. If you want a massage, let me know.”

“I’ll definitely take you up on that once some of the pain dies down,” I say honestly. I’ve had a few massages by her, and they really are better than sex.

Well, some sex.

Once Allegra releases me, Ian steps in. His eyes are filled with misery. “Can we talk?”

“Yeah, come into the den.”

It’s quiet in there, with everyone socializing in the kitchen. I think they can all tell I’m overwhelmed, and I’m glad they’re giving me breathing space.

Ian sits beside me on the sofa, studying my face with concern.

“I know this is a stupid question, but are you okay?”

“I will be.”

He nods, understanding. “I was so worried about you. Everyone was.”

“I’m sorry I blocked you all out. It was just so much to handle.”

“I get that, and you don’t have to apologize.”

That’s Ian. I knew he wasn’t giving me a hard time, he just wanted to show me he cares.

“Asher seems interesting.”

I chuckle. “Smooth.”

He smiles, but concern is still present. “Promise me he treats you right.”

“He treats me how I want to be treated.”

Ian and I haven’t spoken much since the divorce, especially not about sex. But he seems to know just what I mean.

“You’ll be happy?”

“I will. Once I get past this, I’ll be happy.”

He sighs with relief and leans in, wrapping me in a hug. “That’s all I want for you. Happiness.”

“Asher’s not perfect. But he’s mine.”

“Forgive me if I grill him?” he asks with a smile.

“There’s nothing to be forgiven, Ian. And thanks for the sunflowers.”

“A little obvious?”

“Maybe. Y’know, I still like them, but I think I’m gonna cover them up.”

“Really?”

I nod. “Yeah. They don’t feel like me anymore. I’ve changed. But I’ll probably leave that quirky one in the bathroom.”

“You realize the entire outside of your house is yellow, right?”

Oh yeah, fuck. I think it’s time to tone that down just a smidge.

“Shall we go grab some grub?” Ian asks.

I nod eagerly. For the first time in days, I actually want to eat.

All the socializing wears me out. Once everyone starts to clear out, I return to bed in the den. When I wake up, and there’s no more daylight coming through the curtains, I know it must be nighttime. A phone screen is lit beside me, and I follow the light to see Neela lying on top of the blankets.

“Hey.”

She turns to me, locking her phone so she disappears. “Hey. Need some pain meds?”

“No thanks.” The pain feels manageable right now. “Turn the light on, will you?”

She turns on a lamp beside my sofa, and the room lights up. When I look over, I see a

sketchpad on the table beside the lamp.

“How about something to eat?” Neela asks.

I smile. “I ate lots earlier. Where’s Asher?”

“Bathroom.”

Looking over Neela’s shoulder, I see Asher’s sketchpad. “Could you pass me that?”

She reaches over to grab it and hands it to me with a soft smile. When I open to the first page of the one on top, I see some heavy scribbles, as though he let out all his anger on the first page, bleeding through and damaging several pages after. When I find the first actual drawing, I freeze. It’s a skull with two fucked up eyesockets. It’s Rooney. I can’t look at it, so I flip to the next page, finding a full-body portrait of Bane. He’s laughing, brushing his hair from his forehead. He looks so real. So alive. I nearly ruin it when a teardrop drips onto the paper in the white space on the side, and I wipe my tears .

“It’s so unfair.”

Neela nods sullenly. “I know.”

It’s hard to flip the page again.

The next page shocks me as I take it in, and it takes me a moment to realize that it must be me. I’m naked, on the ground, my eyes closed, and my cheek pressed into the floor.

“Is that you? When he found you?” Neela asks, her voice shaky.

“I didn’t know he does portraits,” I say with a nod, my heart rate rising.

“He doesn’t. He told me when I found him drawing. Flip the page.”

I do as she says. It’s me in this bed. The blankets cover me up to my chin as I take a deep, peaceful sleep. To my relief, he didn’t draw the huge gash on my face or highlight my burns. I look normal.

“I sat with him and watched him draw for a while. The way he looked at you was beautiful.”

I grab my own and pull the pencil from the wire binding, flipping to a clean page. There, I draw one of the purple flowers on Neela’s forearm. I start with one straight from her, and freehand the rest, filling the page with flowers that get more dead and wilted as they move further from Neela’s flower in the center. Despite how cryptic the design is, it actually makes me feel a little better. I finish the outlines first, and before I can start shading, the stark lines on the page give me an idea.

“I’ve been wanting to do something for Bane. Asher didn’t want a funeral, but Bane doesn’t deserve to be forgotten,” I say.

“I agree. I’ve been thinking about that too,” Neela says.

“I think I might have an idea, but I’ll need your help. ”

She nods eagerly. “Done.”

Asher wanted to come with me today, but I insisted on going by myself. I head inside alone, finding it hard to be by myself. The waiting room is empty, but another woman is sitting behind my desk.

“Good afternoon,” the woman greets me with a friendly smile.

“Hi, I’m here to see Dr. Parr.”

“Do you have an appointment?” she asks with confusion.

“No. I’m Lila.”

The woman’s eyes light up with surprise. “Dr. Parr asked to see you immediately if you ever stopped by. She doesn’t have a patient, so you can go on back now.”

“Thank you.” It feels weird to feel like a stranger in here.

I knock softly on the door, and after a moment, it swings open. Dr. Parr’s jaw drops.

“Lila!”

“Hey,” I say awkwardly.

She waves me inside, shuts the door behind me, and motions for me to sit in her patient chair before sitting herself.

“Are you okay? Your friend Neela said you were badly hurt but couldn’t tell me what happened.”

Neela told me she went to speak with Dr. Parr when she found out I was in the hospital. She tried to protect my job for me.

“I’m on the mend,” I say simply. “I really don’t want to get into it, though.”

“Okay, of course. The nurse out there, Pamela, she’s temporary. I hired her when

Neela said you'd likely be out for quite a while."

"She can be permanent."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm not coming back. And honestly, I should've quit a long time ago. I'm so sorry. I've been slacking, and it hasn't been fair to you."

She frowns. "You weren't happy working here, were you?"

"At first, I was. It's kind of a boring job, but I get to see mothers and babies all day. I think after my divorce, it just made it harder to come here, knowing that I'm nowhere near ready to have this."

She nods in understanding. "I wish you would've talked to me. I tried, you know."

"I know you did. You're not the only one. Thank you for trying."

"Of course. I really wish you the best, hun; I hope you know that."

I smile. "I know. Good luck to you too, Doctor."

Chapter 41

Asher

I 'm told that Edgar and Nash are the men to talk to when it comes to formal attire, and Allegra is the best cook of the lot. I've never worn a suit a day in my life, and I haven't got the first fucking clue. I borrowed one from Gareth, who's roughly the same size as me. While the guys struggle to make a man out of me, Allegra and Ian drop off our meal. It still baffles me how kind all these people are. Two weeks ago, I was on their shit list, and suddenly, it's like I'm the stray dog they adopted.

After thanking them all profusely, they clear out, and I'm left to wait for Sunshine to come home. I lit some candles that I found in her den and put either a curtain or a tablecloth on the table, I have no sweet clue which.

Sunshine left the house alone today for the first time since her attack. She wanted to speak to her boss and resign and said she needed to do it alone, which I was all for. When I hear her SUV pull in, I position myself in the center of the kitchen. Just as I suspected, the moment she passes the threshold, her jaw practically hits the floor as she lays eyes on me.

"Ash..." She turns her head to see her kitchen table.

"Welcome home, Sunshine."

She smiles. "What's all this?"

“Come sit down, and you’ll find out.”

When I roll over to the table and pull out a chair, she gives me a surprised smile as she lowers herself down and helps me push her chair in. Once she’s comfortable, I grab a single red rose from the counter behind me and offer it to her—Nash’s idea.

“Thank you.”

“Before you get too excited, I didn’t cook this. I asked Macy who’s the best cook of you lot, and she said Allegra. I would’ve cooked myself, but I’m a shit cook.”

“That’s really sweet of you, Ash. You didn’t have to go through all this trouble, but I’m glad you did.”

Oh, Sunshine.

She takes a bite of her cranberry pork, and by the look on her face, I’d say she enjoys the flavor. Once she’s taken a bite, I try my own. It really is good.

“Allegra’s an amazing cook.”

“And Nash and Edgar are great guys. They helped me into this monkey suit. Gareth loaned it to me.”

She grins. “I wouldn’t say the suit matches your bad boy persona, but you do look handsome.”

My brows furrow. “What bad boy persona? I’m a perfect gentleman.”

She scoffs. “Yeah, right,” she says, amused.

I know she's joking, but this is exactly why I wanted to have this dinner with her tonight.

"I have a million things to say to you, Lila, and I don't know where to start."

Her brows pinch together, and I see a wash of concern paint her face, which I remedy immediately with those three easy words.

"I love you."

It brings her smile back and the light to her eyes. "I love you too, Ash."

I take a deep breath, trying to find the words, but I don't think there are any. The feelings I have for Lila are beyond words.

"We really haven't had much time to get to know each other," I start.

"You're right," she says, her smile disappearing. I hate that she's nervous, like I'm about to drop a bomb on her.

"I've never loved anyone before, Sunshine."

She frowns. "That's sad. Why not?"

"I had no desire for it before. I was a playboy, I fucked anything with a pulse. Love wasn't something I felt like I needed."

"Everyone needs love, Ash. It's so lonely without it," she says, reaching across the table to take my hand.

"I can understand that now. Because now that I've met you, I can't imagine losing

you. There are no words for the freaking terror I was in when you were taken while I watched you go through hell, and I only had to watch. You had to live it.”

Bringing up her attack brings pain to her eyes, but I won’t dwell on it.

“Fear like that is crippling. I don’t ever want you to feel fear like that again. So that’s what this very long-winded speech is. I’m telling you that I’ve fallen in love with you, and I’m not letting you go. I’m here, you’ve got me, and I’m not going anywhere. You’re not my first love, Lila; you’re my one and only.”

My one and only Sunshine.

The look on her face takes my breath away as her eyes fill with tears and her lips curl up into a wounded smile.

“Our love story may not be perfect, but it’s ours. You may not have been my first love, Ash. But you’ll be my last.”

If I wasn’t already on the edge of tears, I am now. Once again, this woman brings the tears out of me. She brings out my heart. She’s right, our love story isn’t perfect. But it is ours. And in a way, that does make it perfect. What started as a neighborly spat turned into an all out war, and ended up a dark, twisted love story. She was hurt beyond belief, and I lost my best friend.

But we’re getting through it together.

When tears spill down my cheeks, Lila abandons her meal, approaching me. I pull my chair out so she can sit on my good leg on my lap, careful not to touch my bad leg, and she wraps her arms around my neck. Her eyes flicker from my eyes to my lips, and our lips meet. And every bad fucking wall around me comes crashing down, leaving only love.

She breaks our kiss just long enough to say my name. “Asher?”

I need one more moment with her lips before I can form words. The moment I let hers go, I want them back. “Yes, Sunshine?”

“Promise me we won’t lose the us from before.”

My smile takes over my face. “You think we’re suddenly gonna be not at each other’s throats? No. We’re gonna squabble just as much as we did before.”

She smiles. “Not just that. I mean... the sex. I want that again. I need that.”

I cup her head, stroking her cheeks with my thumbs. If she needs this, I’ll give her a glimpse of it. “If you think I’ll ever let another man touch you now that you’re mine, you’d be sorely fucking mistaken. I won’t be whoring you out ever again, that’s for fucking sure.”

“I think that itch is scratched.”

“I don’t want to lose that part of us either. We’ll take things at your pace, day by day, and eventually, we’ll get there again. For now, we both need to heal.”

Her entire face brightens. “I’m so proud of you, Ash. You’ve come so far.”

“I couldn’t have done it without you, Sunshine.”

The smile that lights up her face brings me a sigh of relief.

“Do you think we could go to the shop after we eat?” she asks.

“Sure.” I’m not sure what she wants, but I’ll never say no to her.

I drive us to the shop after she helps me into the driver's seat. Once we arrive, she jumps out first, bringing my chair around .

“Thanks, beautiful.”

After I unlock the door, she helps me over the doorway and follows me inside. The moment I flick the lights on, I freeze.

The grey walls are printed in white, all tattoo designs. It only takes me a moment to realize that most of them are Bane's.

The carnations he tattooed on Neela are behind the check-in desk. One wall is nearly all floral and greenery. Another wall is animals. The dragon tattoo he designed for Jared is up there, too, right beside the one I modified. And within some of the other designs on the wall, I see Sunshine's, the mountain currently on my ankle, a butterfly, and cherry blossoms.

The skull and apple belonging to Jared that I designed is etched across the front of the check-in desk. But the one I can't stop staring at is over the desk, front and center on the wall. It's my sketch of Bane, his smile lighting up the room.

“Who did this?” I ask, breathless, as my eyes blur with tears.

“Neela,” Sunshine says. “It was my idea, and I picked most of the designs, but she made it happen. If it's too emotional for you, we can take it down. We wanted to do some kind of memorial for Bane and Jared.”

I don't know where to begin. Finally, I turn my head, my eyes meeting hers, blurred with tears. I grab her arm, squeezing it meaningfully.

“It's perfect.”

She steps up to the wall where her designs are, running her hands over them. They're so well done that they blend right in with the others on the wall, mine and Bane's.

"She wasn't supposed to put these up," she says in confusion .

"I'm glad she did. You're a tattoo artist now."

She brightens as I approach and lowers herself right into my lap on my good leg, a position we've mastered now. There, she wraps her arms around my neck and leans in. My eyes close as our lips meet.

Before I met Lila, I didn't know what love was. Now I do. Love is terrifying, fragile, and the best thing I've ever felt. Love is what makes everything else feel insignificant.

I think, when it comes to life, love is the entire point.

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 3:15 am

When my leg was injured in that motorcycle accident, I was so panicked, afraid that nothing would be the same. I let that fear consume me, and it ended up being my downfall. My life was fueled with anger and fear.

Now, everything's changed.

Almost losing Lila eclipsed any other fear or anger I was holding on to. It changed everything. But the after? It's what glued us both back together.

We became a unit. She was my legs, and I was her backbone. Every bit of anger and malice we had for each other before was written over with support and understanding.

We got through it. Together.

I'm washing Lila's hair in the salad bowl. While her body is fully healed, including her chest, and she's come far enough to be able to take showers from the neck down, water on her head is still a huge trigger for her. So every time she needs her hair washed, I fill a big salad bowl with cool water, and we do it together. I talk to her the whole time to keep her grounded, and she says it helps.

I actually enjoy doing her hair. At first, when Macy taught me how to braid her hair, it was out of necessity. Her body was so spent that for her to try to hold her arms up long enough to do anything with her hair was just not feasible, not to mention her shattered mental state. It's turned into a routine of me washing, blow drying, and doing her hair, and now, minus the hair washing, she loves it. She says it makes her feel cared for.

And she is. She always is.

I've mastered several different hairstyles on her, but today, she wanted a crown braid, the one I'm best at. Once it's done, she heads upstairs to get dressed.

I follow her up shortly after, using my cane to get me to the stair lift we had installed a couple of months ago. It's a chair on a track along the wall that folds down. I can sit down on it, hit a button, and it carries me up the stairs, removing my biggest headache of getting around in this house.

With the right attitude, a bum leg isn't a life sentence; it's just a different way to live. Once I got past my stubborn ego, everything became easier.

I'm wearing the same suit I borrowed from Gareth. Walking into the bedroom, I find my beautiful girl adorned in a sweet yellow dress. It's floor length and has no straps other than the thin loop that holds it up around her neck, covering her entire chest. She's been wearing lots of clothing that make it hard to ogle her tiny tits, and while I completely understand she wants to hide her mangled chest, I can't wait to redo her tattoo so she won't feel like she has to hide anymore. It's not going to be perfect, and it may not even be possible, but she wants to try once her skin is fully healed, and I completely understand why. She loved that tiger, and she wants to take back whatever she can that the brothers stole from her.

"Yellow? Seriously?" It's taken some time, but much of our original banter has returned. A fly on the wall would think we hate each other, but it's the farthest thing from the truth. We just love pushing each other's buttons.

She grins. "Anything to piss you off."

It's easier to get dressed now. I have a chair I sit in, and I get my legs into my pants and boxers. From there, I'll get my shirt on, and when I use my cane to stand up, I

lean on my good side and put everything into place. I still don't know how to tie a tie, and I feel pretty fucking stupid about it. So, instead of spending twenty minutes fighting it, I put the rest of my suit on and drape it over my shoulders before walking over to Lila with a pleading expression.

"Don't look at me. I've never worn a tie," she laughs.

We arrive at Turner's and pull in just behind Edgar and Nash. I open the door before they can rush inside, hollering for help.

"Ed, Nash, help!"

They turn just as Lila and I step out of the car. Nash chuckles, approaching me with amusement. He has my tie done up before I have time to blink.

"Nash, show him how," Edgar says with an amused smirk.

"How many times did we show him when we helped him with his date? He's hopeless."

I know they're having a laugh. These guys don't have a mean bone between the two of them.

"Teach me; it'll save you all time," Lila laughs.

"That works," I say. "I'll do your hair, and you tie my ties. Though it doesn't seem like a fair trade."

The house is filled with activity. Coolers of food are stacked by the back door for the reception, which will be held in the courtyard. The moment Turner lays eyes on me, he smiles. This is my first time in his house since I inquired about his club. Now, so

much has changed.

“Lila, can I borrow for a moment? The women are getting ready in the guest rooms,” he says.

“As long as you return him in the same condition he’s in now,” she says.

It’s been a running joke that everyone here wants to beat the crap out of me like they used to. While the other men head out to the yard where everyone gathers, I’m left alone in the kitchen with Turner.

“I have something to show you,” Turner says.

While I don’t question him too much, when he heads for the door to the club, Koa, I stiffen in place.

“No stairs, man, I’m not taking any chances.”

“Just get your stubborn ass over here.”

This guy really knows how to piss people off. But once he opens the door with a little silver key and I get a glimpse of what’s behind it, all the anger washes away.

“Well?”

I’m at a loss for words. It’s a stair lift, just like the one we put in at home. And the thing wasn’t fucking cheap, either.

“You’re serious?” is all I can say .

He nods. When he pulls the key out of the lock and relocks it, he offers it to me.

“Welcome in.”

I take the key from him, lost for words.

“There’s a room down there with your name on it for you and Lila.”

“Thank you, Turner. For everything. Why do I feel like I’ve been adopted into this weird family?”

“Because you have. We’re a disaster, but we’re a family.”

He’s right. This is so much more of a family than the one I was born into. I have a mom and dad out there somewhere, but they feel irrelevant. They didn’t want me.

Here, at Koa, I’m not only wanted but almost feel needed. I feel like one of them.

“I saw your new sign at the shop,” Turner says.

“You like?”

“I think it’s perfect.”

It is. And Lila’s come a long way in the last few months. She’s almost ready to start on client skin, and she’s done a few more on me, as well as one on almost every single one of her friends. She may be filling his chair, but she’ll never replace him. She’ll bring new life into the shop.

The shop we decided to rename “Bane’s Tattoo.”

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I've been appointed the makeup artist for the wedding, and Juliet does the hair. I'm pretty good with makeup, though I don't wear much on a daily basis. It reminds me of when Macy first came to Alton, and I helped her find some makeup to cover the bruises on her face.

That feels like a lifetime ago.

When I arrive, Allegra's hair is already done, so I can work on her while Juliet does Macy and Neela's hair. Her hair is done up in an elegant sock bun.

"I could've done your hair, you know," Juliet fires off to me.

"I know, but I like it when Asher does it."

"She's in love," Macy says, flashing a smile.

"You do look really happy," Allegra says as I brush some blush over her cheeks.

"So do you, beautiful bride. How did last night go?"

She smiles. "You should've seen Ian meet my mom. Was he a nervous dork when he met your parents as well?"

"Oh, a complete fool," I laugh.

"Right!?" She giggles, and I have to back off her face for a moment so I don't mess it up. "My mom adores Ian."

“I think he’s a parent’s dream for their daughter. He’s soft-spoken and gentle; not many men come off that way.”

“, thank you for being so cool about all of this. I was worried you’d feel awkward at the wedding, and I didn’t want that.”

“There’s no awkward feelings,” I say honestly. “You found your prince charming, and I found mine. Honestly, I was a little panicked when I heard you two were getting married. I just felt like I was falling behind everyone else, alone. But I don’t feel that way anymore.”

“Do you think you and Asher will get married eventually?” Allegra asks.

“It’s a little soon. But we’re both in it for the long haul.”

“What about you and Ty?” Juliet asks Neela.

“Maybe someday. We’re happy as we are right now,” Neela says.

Macy stands up from Juliet’s chair, her hair in an elegant, thick updo with thick curls. The sunlight hitting her from the window turns her golden.

“Mace, you look so beautiful,” Allegra says.

“You really are glowing.” The moment the words are out of my mouth, I freeze, my eyes drifting down to her stomach in her dress. I hadn’t noticed it, but with her tight sage green dress, she’s either put on a few or...

She shoots me a warning glare. “. ”

“Macy! ”

She shakes her head as every set of eyes falls on her. “This is Allegra’s day, guys, let’s move on.”

“Are you PREGNANT!?” Allegra blurts.

Macy folds, her smile caving in her face. “Allegra!”

“I don’t care if it’s my wedding day, you tell us RIGHT NOW!” she blurts.

Finally, Macy caves. “I’m pregnant. We’re having a baby.”

Turner is officiating the ceremony like he did for Macy and Gareth. There’s no wedding party or ring bearer, but Neela walks Marina up the aisle with flower petals. The chairs are filled with our friends and family. I wave to Ian’s parents in the front row.

Ian was getting ready at home so he wouldn’t see Allegra, and he arrives near the beginning of the ceremony. He crosses the lawn to the back, and we watch as he approaches. He’s so dashing, in a full black suit with a sparkling white tie. I guarantee Allegra got it so that he could match her dress.

Turner stands at the makeshift altar, a simple podium Neela decorated with flowers. He shakes Ian’s hand as he joins him and greets the crowd with a friendly smile. When his eyes meet mine, he winks, and I smile back, squeezing Asher’s hand in my lap.

Allegra joins us a few minutes later, and everyone stands as she enters. She looks incredible. She’s in a floor-length mermaid dress that shows off her curves, and she sparkles like a gem in the sunlight. Her chocolate brown hair is in an elegant updo, and her makeup is light, emphasizing her gorgeous eyes and pretty pink lips .

I didn’t know how I’d feel watching Ian get married. As much as I’m over him, I

wondered if watching him marry another would hurt. But my heart is so full that I can't feel anything but happiness for them. Allegra and Ian bring out the best in each other.

And with Asher at my side, I'm not lonely anymore.

Trauma can bring people together in incredible ways. I've seen that firsthand. I just never thought I'd be in the middle of it. Asher and I went through hell, and we're still getting through it. He still tears up when Bane is mentioned, and I still can't wash my damn hair, but we're getting there together.

It's our love story. It's dark and fucked up, but it's ours.

"Allegra, do you take Ian Miller to be your lawfully wedded husband?" Turner announces.

Allegra smiles into Ian's eyes, glowing. "I do."

"And Ian, do you take Allegra Webber to be your lawfully wedded wife?"

Ian reaches out to cup her cheek, stroking it in a way that makes her melt. "I do."

"Then I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may now kiss the bride."

They crash into each other like they've been waiting all day, desperate for air, ready for a breath. And when they do, our gathering erupts into cheer. I've made it my mission to cheer the loudest, and when I do, they both separate, smiling down at me.

The next day:

Asher wanted to bring me to Turner's today but wouldn't tell me why. While I'm confused, I go with the flow, until he punches a code into the door to open it.

“You have a code?”

He flashes a smile at me. “I have more than that.”

We cross the kitchen, and he reaches into his pocket for a key to Koa.

What. The. Fuck?

“I thought you couldn’t do these stairs!” I blurt.

When he opens the door, I see what he wanted to show me. I’m guessing this is what the man in the van was installing that day.

A stair lift.

“Age before beauty,” he says, folding the chair and sitting down. I laugh as he places his cane in his lap and descends, and I follow.

“Turner hooked me up,” he says happily.

“That doesn’t surprise me one bit. That’s Turner for you.”

A room at the end of the hall hasn’t been claimed for a long time, and it’s adorned with Asher’s name.

Asher. My Dom. My love.

“Turner wanted me to show you this yesterday, but it was too busy to sneak down here with everyone in the kitchen.”

The door opens, and the inside comes to life as he forces me inside from behind. A passionate red lights the room. There’s a wooden X frame with cuffs against the wall.

Our standard bondage table sits in the center of the room, fitted with chains, at a lower level than the others. A foldable wheelchair is parked near the door .

“I asked him to put some stuff in here for me, but the equipment was his doing. Do I want to know why Turner assumed you like bondage?”

I turn to him, smiling deviously. “Probably not.”

While my heart races, Asher grabs my wrist, and he must feel my throbbing pulse. “You okay?”

I take a breath. This is what I’ve wanted for the longest time. We’ve been intimate but haven’t returned to the original us. But now that I’m standing in our room in Koa, staring at a table fitted with chains, it’s actually becoming real.

“Are you ready for this?” he asks when I don’t respond.

I nod shakily. “Yes.”

“Only if this is what you want. You need to tell me if I need to stop.”

“I will. I promise.”

“What’s our safeword?”

“Exactly what it was before. Dirty little slut,” I say with a smirk before settling. “Can we have a pause, too? In case I need a minute to breathe?”

“Whatever you need, Sunshine.”

I take a minute to go to the bathroom and collect myself. When I head back, I open the door, and Asher’s gone.

What the fuck ?

The door suddenly shuts behind me, nearly knocking me over, and I'm grabbed by the throat and slammed against the wall, where some padding protects my head. Whoever thought of that is a genius.

I struggle against his hold, but he's far stronger than I am. His body presses mine into the wall, and he holds my neck so I can still breathe but can't move. His eyes burn into mine, tearing back the layers to see underneath.

"What's the problem, little cunt? Scared of me?"

"No!" I growl.

A cryptic smile stretches across his face. "You should be. Take off your clothes and get on the table."

"Go fuck yourself!"

"I'd rather fuck you, Sunshine. Now you can take off your fucking clothes and get on the table, or I'll be forced to do it for you, and you won't like that. What'll it be?"

When I wad up some spit in my mouth and fire it past Asher's head, his eyes flare with anger. Real anger.

This. This is what I've been desperate to get back to.

"You're gonna regret that, Sunshine. Don't forget, I still have that video on my phone."

He grabs me by the arms and forces me back. Before I know it, I'm on my back on the bondage table, and he's lying on top of me, both of us fully clothed. He's so

strong that chaining my first wrist down to the table takes little effort. Once that's done, I'm fucked. He's able to secure my other three limbs easily, so I'm trapped on the table in unwavering chains, unable to move an inch. My legs are comfortably spread apart, so I'm open but not stretched.

I turn my head to watch him as he moves, settling in his wheelchair and rolling over to me, leaving his cane on his lap.

"I've been thinking about all the best ways to punish you."

I gawk. "Punish me for what!?"

He strokes my cheek, and I squirm away from his touch.

"I think you enjoyed that foursome we had way too much, Sunshine. I can't just let you get away with that."

"You motherfucker!"

He slaps my cheek hard enough to stun me, and I glare at him.

"Did you hear the noises you were making while you were stuffed with three cocks at once? I was a little worried you'd choke. That's the price I had to risk paying, I guess. The best-loved toys always have wear, after all."

"God, I hate you. LET ME THE FUCK GO!"

"No, Sunshine, you know that's not what I want to hear. You've got two options here. One: You can just admit that you're a dirty little slut, and I'll let you go. Or Two: You can keep glaring at me all you want while I fuck your pretty little cunt. Your choice."

He smiles cryptically when I don't fold, and I know I'm in for it. He crosses the room to the cabinet, searching for something. He finds some wipes and uses them to clean the bottom of his cane. It's a metal one, with a round rubber base.

Oh no.

"Asher!" I growl.

"What?"

"You fucking wouldn't."

He chuckles as he continues cleaning his cane, making a show of it. "You know the magic words. "

"Fuck you."

"Not the right words, little cunt."

He returns with a pair of giant scissors in his hands. When he grabs the bottom of my pants and snips the fabric, I see red.

"Asher!"

"I hope you didn't like these clothes. Should've just taken them off."

He cuts me out of my clothes with ease, leaving me exposed on the table, unable to cover myself up. That's when my chest tightens.

"Pause."

The room goes still while my head spins. Asher doesn't move or speak; he waits.

Once I feel like I can breathe again, I nod at him to continue. He explodes right back into character.

I crane my neck to watch as he places a hand on my hip, the other hand controlling his cane. He rubs the bottom of it around my entrance in small circles, gathering the heaps of moisture that have gathered there. His hand slides across my stomach as he gently inserts the cane. It's wide and unforgiving, though it glides easily through me.

“Asher! LET ME GO!”

A few shallow thrusts have me moaning and my core tightening furiously, going deeper each time until he's filling me up nearly to the top.

“Next time, when I tell you to do something, you do it . Unless you'd rather be fucked by my cane like the dirty little slut you are.”

I feel my core growing close, beginning to tighten. “Ash, I'm gonna come...”

“Of course you are, filthy little bitch. ”

When I come, he doesn't let up, fucking me mercilessly while I squirt everywhere.

Once we're finished, he immediately helps me off the table, and we move into bed. He pulls me right on top of him, and I rest my head on his chest as he props himself up on pillows. Then he surrounds me, wrapping me in a blanket and his warm arms that I feel so small in—so cared for.

“For the record, I deleted your sex tape. But I'll never stop threatening you with it,” he says.

“I wouldn't want you to.”

He grins. “You did so good, Sunshine.”

Sunshine... It started as an insulting nickname but turned into something sweet. Especially now that Asher’s showing more of his sweet side.

This man made me crazy when I first met him. I fucking hated him. Now, I can’t see myself without him. Life’s weird like that sometimes. Meeting Asher has been the craziest roller coaster of my life.

I love this man. He cares for me like a partner but fucks me like a slut. And I wouldn’t have it any other way.