



Stone Ascension (Gargoyle Marked #3)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: A terrible truth.

A grim new world.

A glimmer of hope?

Things have gone from bad to seriously worse. I've learned dark things about myself, these sour truths breaking my heart into a million pieces.

I'm beyond devastated.

I've lost everything.

Trapped inside a hellish new reality, I sink into sorrow, struggling to comprehend a hopeless future.

But there is a chance to make things right. A kernel of hope flickering in the distance, there for taking if I can just muster the strength to reach for it and free myself from this nightmare.

No what matter, I cant give up. The world is in danger, and I dont want to see it fall.

I have to be strong for my beautiful Asher.

I have to see my brother again.

I've got this...

Right?

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Chapter one

Noel

The sun's warmth pouring in through the bay window is my saving grace this afternoon. A beautiful day complete with a picturesque scattering of clouds on a light blue sky serve as a direct contradiction to the temperature in my office. The air conditioning stays on 67 degrees to combat the oppressive heat of southern Alabama. It's wonderfully inviting when first entering the building; however, my summer wardrobe wasn't chosen for the temperatures of springtime shade.

The frigid office, also known as JV Marketing Firm, is a second home to me. I've worked here since graduating from South Alabama. Before that, most of my intern hours in college were also spent in this office. My boss, Joe Vendelini, is a close friend of my parents. He practically promised me a future job when he found out I was the editor of my high school yearbook staff during a family bar-b-que. In fact, the only intern hours I acquired away from this office were in Joe's rival firm, per his request.

For the most part, I enjoy working here. It wasn't my top career choice, but it was a good compromise between my artistic ambitions and Nate's career. I do get to create art in some capacity. Even if it isn't what my younger self had originally envisioned.

Sitting back from my laptop, I look over at the picture of Nate that's framed on my desk. His blue-green eyes staring back at me with that playful smile on his handsome face transport me back to the beginning.

"Why do you need a picture of me, babe?" He asks while looking up at me through his heart-stopping, long lashes. He's still sitting on the bench we had just been sharing to eat our lunch.

I take him in for a moment before answering. He is truly a sight to see at 6'2" with dirty blonde hair and suntanned skin, the definition of homegrown. I still have to pinch myself to believe he's really mine.

"I want to remember everything about this trip, especially the way you keep looking at me," I answer him honestly.

"Mrs. Williams, I will look at you this way for the rest of my life," he says, melting my insides.

I hold my phone up to take the picture then sit back down on the bench beside him. He pulls me closer by wrapping his arm around my waist.

Leaning down to kiss me just below my ear, he whispers, "I've seen enough of Italy. I'd like to be buried inside my wife for the rest of the day. Let's go."

A knock on the door pulls me back to reality, far away from my honeymoon and even farther away from the beautiful man who was my husband .

"Yes?" I call out.

The door opens, and Joey steps inside. "Hey, Noel, I just got off the phone with a woman named Claire Morris representing a logistics company called Velocity. She won't be able to attend the meeting she scheduled with you, but the owner is on his way here."

"Okay, thanks," I say with a smile.

“Cool. Listen, everyone is really hoping to see you this Sunday,” he says expectantly.

My smile falters, and I look down at my wedding ring. “I’m going to come by. I’m looking forward to it,” I say, fixing my smile and looking back up at him.

“Great!” He leaves my office but doesn’t close the door.

The dread of going to family functions without Nate is something I need to get over because the last thing I want is to let everyone down. Now that I’ve been back to work for a couple of weeks, invitations for outings and gatherings have begun to flow my way. Going back to work was like sending a flare into the sky letting everyone know I was officially rejoining the world—even if unintentional.

Six months ago my husband died in a single-car accident coming home late on icy roads. His Porsche collided with a tree in such a way that it exploded on impact. His body had to be identified through dental records because he had been so badly burned.

It took months of therapy to work through not only the grief of losing him and the trauma around how he died but also the acceptance that it had truly been him. Not being able to see him for myself left my mind open to the possibility of conspiracy theories. As an investment broker, he used to joke that he would have to fake his own death one day to save himself from angry clients. People can be irrational when it comes to money. We actually received a few threats about a month before he died, so the theory wasn’t completely unrealistic.

Hope that his death had been a ploy clung to me like a coat in the coldest of winters. After those first few weeks of outright denial, I tore through his office files at home and his firm looking for anything that would prove he could still be alive. Proof that he had faked his accident and would come back for me with new names on passports granting us access to an endless tour of the world. My father even helped me look

through some of the files and documents I couldn't make sense of, but there was nothing to find.

According to my therapist, I was experiencing very strong denial and anger phases of grief. Time eventually helped me accept he was truly gone. Now, I'm learning the cold reality of death is that everything comes down to numbers in a bank account. Since finance was Nate's area of expertise, I didn't do much with any of it while he was alive. His dad, Grant, has been a saint for helping me handle some of the more complicated aspects of our portfolio the past few months.

"Here we are," Julie, our receptionist, says just before appearing in my open doorway.

Surprised by the lack of her usual phone call that a client is waiting, I jump up quickly to set the tone for a great first impression. She steps to the side allowing the owner of Velocity Logistics, Inc. to enter my office. As she does, golden brown eyes meet mine. The world shifts beneath my feet. The professional greeting that was poised and ready dies on my lips as my mouth goes dry.

"Declan?" I gasp .

His deliberate smirk gives me the heart-stopping reminder of how cute his dimples were. Only, I wouldn't use the word 'cute' to describe anything about the captivating man standing before me.

"Noel," his deep, husky voice states my name without the slightest hint of surprise.

Realizing he knew exactly what he was walking into, I swallow my shock and look away from him to salvage my composure.

"Thank you, Julie," I say dismissing her from camping out in the hallway as she

stares at our newest client's backside. She quickly closes the door when she realizes she's been caught.

I look away from the closed door to make eye contact with the man who shattered my world when I was sixteen. Boyish features from the past seem to have all been replaced by chiseled edges. His arms and shoulders are huge; there's no denying he still makes time for the gym. His sharp jawline is shaded by dark stubble whereas it used to be softened by dimples from the smile he always wore. The biggest change, though, is his eyes. They used to be carefree and innocent, but something darker stares back at me today.

He clears his throat and cocks an eyebrow at me for openly staring at him.

Quickly trying to recover, I extend my hand. "It's been a long time. How have you been?"

He takes a step toward me to shake my hand, enveloping me in his sweet, woody cologne. "It wasn't that long ago, sunshine."

Heat spreads across my face. I try to ignore the racing of my heart at his use of that nickname. I release my grip on his hand desperately needing to put some space between us, but he gives mine a harder squeeze before letting me go .

Clearing my throat and taking a deep breath, I try to get the meeting back on track. "Thank you for meeting with me today. Please, have a seat. Would you like something to drink?"

"No, thanks."

He settles into a chair looking around my office, stopping at the pictures on my desk. Most of them are Nate and me.

I take the chair opposite of his the way I always do with my clients. I try to picture anyone else in his place to get through this. Ironically, I used to imagine a moment like this where he would see exactly what he missed out on. In my imagination, I would be the one who'd play it cool. However, I feel exposed under his stare. I'm not at all as unaffected by him as I had hoped I'd be after all this time.

Buying time to get myself into business mode, I open my notebook to a clean sheet of paper and click my pen.

“So, Declan, tell me about your company,” I say as I follow his line of sight to a picture of Nate and me at a restaurant.

Instead of answering me, he looks at the picture for a few more seconds. When he directs his attention back to me, he simply studies me with an air of leisure. He's sitting in my chair as though this is his office—leaned back and at ease with his legs spread open. His dark grey t-shirt pulled tight across his broad chest that rises and falls slowly with unbothered breaths. Confident and comfortable as though seeing me is a regular occurrence, just another clue that he knew exactly who he would be meeting with today.

He must read the discomfort on my face as he allows the silent stare-down to go on. An amused smile shows off both of his dimples as he rubs the stubble on his face. My stomach's somersault leaves a deep ache behind.

He clears his throat but keeps a hint of that mischievous smile. He nods toward the pictures while his dark eyes search mine. “Congratulations.”

“Thank you,” I acknowledge but decide not to give him any details beyond what he can see for himself around my office. I smile politely and wait for him to answer the question I'm fairly certain I asked.

He looks out the large window that is now adding too much heat to my office then back at me.

“Velocity Logistics is servicing companies statewide and is close to capacity as is. I’m one or two large accounts away from needing to expand, so my marketing needs are just that. I need to level up,” He begins.

“So, it's a well-established logistics company that needs a facelift to attract national corporations.” I say as I take notes.

When I finish writing, I look up to let him know I’m ready for him to continue but find that he is studying me. Again. He doesn’t speak again, just holds my gaze until I look away.

Deciding we need a barrier to get out of this trance, I move to the chair behind my desk as the silence continues. I feel him watching me but keep my eyes trained on my notes.

He takes the hint and finally breaks the silence. “My letterhead is as old as the company itself. Creatively, you have freedom to do what needs to be done other than changing the name. I’m open to overhauling everything from the graphics and website to the sign in the parking lot.”

“A fresh start?” I clarify.

“That’s the idea.”

I can’t help but smile to myself as I look over my notes. I love a project like this. Trying to tweak someone else’s work feels like work. But this? This is a blank canvas. Clients that grant the freedom to start from scratch allow me to live out my artistic dreams.

“I’d like to see what you already have. Do you have a file your secretary could send me?”

“You’ll receive it today,” he says without hesitation.

“Also, I’d like to visit the main office. Do you prefer an appointment?”

“I’ll have Claire set something up when she sends the file.”

“Perfect.” Hopefully Claire will also be my main point of contact after today. “Well, do you have any questions?”

“No questions. Here’s my information.”

He stands and reaches into his jeans’ pocket while taking a step toward my desk. His eyes are locked on mine as he leans over slightly to put his business card on my desk, closer to my side. Now that he’s in my space, I can see the dare in them. He looks down at my mouth then back up.

His tongue caresses his lips before he says, “See you soon.”

Once he is out of sight, I exhale the breath I’d been holding since he leaned over my desk. Nerves carry me straight to the window to watch him leave. I close the blinds to prevent him from catching me as he gets into a blacked out F250.

Jesus Christ, what am I going to do?

A beep alerts me to a message on my laptop. It’s probably from Joe asking me how the meeting went. I’m sure he is curious about why it would be over so quickly. Initial meetings usually last at least an hour.

Joe Vendelini: How'd it go?

Noel Williams: Went great! Blank canvas project!

Joe Vendelini: Thatta girl!

My email dings. It's from Claire Morris at Velocity Logistics. That was fast.

TO: FROM: SUBJECT: Marketing Information
DATE: July 14, 2024

Mrs. Williams, Here are the files for all graphics the company currently uses. I've also created login credentials for you to access our website in order to make updates.

Username: JVMarketing Password: password

Mr. Adams would like to schedule a follow up meeting with you at our main office this Friday at 8:00AM. Please let me know if this is agreeable.

Claire Morris

I quickly open the files and can already see why he wants an overhaul. The designs are all very basic and created using outdated software. It's going to be easy to impress. Not that I want to impress Declan, but Joe will be thrilled to hear from a happy client. I respond to Claire letting her know I will be able to attend the meeting requested and set to work brainstorming ideas .

The afternoon is consumed by playing around with graphics, and it's time to shut down for the day in what feels like no time at all. I'm not sure I would've even noticed the time if not for everyone walking by my door to leave. Taking my time to gather my things, I end up being one of the last ones out.

Evenings are still the toughest part of my day. I used to rush home to cook elaborate meals or get dressed for nights out. Nate and I both loved trying new restaurants in town and going out with our friends. Now, I go home to a large, empty house with no one to cook for and no plans to pass the time. It's hard enough to miss Nate, but the loneliness of a quiet, empty house makes it harder to enjoy down time even now that I'm doing better.

Thankfully, my best friend, Kate, is coming over tonight. While I suffer through family visits to avoid hurting anyone's feelings, I actually look forward to hanging out with Kate.

As soon as she walks into my house, she notices that Nate's shoes are no longer in the shoe rack by the door. I watch her expression as she looks up from the shoe rack to me standing in the kitchen. She silently walks over and gives me a hug.

"That was a big step, Noel. I'm so proud of you."

My answering sigh is a mixture of relief and pain. "I had so much fun this afternoon on a new account at work that I still felt really energized when I got home. I started walking around the house moving things around. The next thing I knew, I was boxing up the shoes. It just happened. I'm not really sure how I feel about it now."

"Okay...Let's not think too much into it then. What's the new account?"

The grin stretches across my face. "A total overhaul! My day was over in the blink of an eye. I had so many ideas!" I tell her excitedly because I am. I'm already enjoying this project.

"See! Going back to work was exactly what you needed. What company?"

"Do you remember Declan Adams?" I ask, completely unsure what her reaction will

be to this part of the news.

She's looking at me with big eyes. "The guy who single-handedly turned the cheerleading team against itself senior year then became prom king and brought both cheer captains as his dates at the end of that same school year?"

"That's the one." Although I didn't remember the two prom dates, I do remember that he managed to smooth over all of the drama he caused within days of the cheerleaders finding out he was secretly hooking up with at least five of them. There were always juicy rumors floating around about him, and some were a little too far-fetched to be believable.

"Well your day was infinitely more interesting than mine. So, wait a minute. Declan Adams is your new client?" Her eyebrows pinch together now.

"That's right."

"Isn't that a conflict of interest or something?" She looks more concerned than I anticipated.

"I'm not a doctor or therapist. It's fine if I know my clients prior to creating their letterheads," I try to justify, knowing where she's going with this.

"If memory serves, weren't you kind of in love with him? I know you never wanted to talk about it, but I always got the impression that was because he broke your heart." She calls me out on the sad truth about the past I have with Declan, even though I didn't need any help remembering. Those memories are ones I've learned to live with. When he hovered over my desk with that same darkened look in his eyes that he had back then, all the parts of me that used to belong to him began to stir. Also reminding me that time does not change some things.

“No, it’s fine. I’m sure he still plays in the no-strings-attached arena, and we both know that isn’t my type,” I mix a lie with a truth. Kate has always been able to see right through bullshit, but I don’t really want to talk about him. I’ve stayed busy enough all day to avoid overanalyzing that meeting. It would be best if I didn’t relive the history of Declan Adams now.

Kate and I didn’t become close until senior year, and by then, the details around my almost relationship with Declan were old news. He was a star baseball player with new girlfriends every other week, and I started dating Nate just a couple of months into the school year. From what I can remember, the only reason Kate knew there was a past at all was that she found a box of notes from him in my room.

“Hmm. Or... that might be exactly what you need right now. You’re pushing six months of celibacy here!” She practically shrieks the last part.

“I don’t have the experience required to survive dating a man like Declan,” I argue. “Besides, I let him think I’m still married. And, I’m a professional.” I say, trying harder to get out of this conversation.

“I think you mean he doesn't have the experience to date a woman like you. It's time to let go of the past, Noel. People aren't always who they seem to be. When do you meet with him again?”

“Friday morning to tour his office. I like to get a feel for the company to make sure my designs are fitting. It usually gives me an edge compared to others. It will be strictly professional,” I over explain myself and hope she won’t notice.

“Well then, we need to go shopping,” she comments.

“Um, we just established that I’m not interested in dating him,” I protest, confused by her line of thinking.

“You still need to feel at the top of your game! This is your first big project since, well, you know... A new outfit will keep your mind in the present, so you can focus.”

I think about it for a second. “Okay. I like it. I can take off a little early tomorrow, actually.”

“Me too!” Kate shrieks, and we both laugh because she rarely goes to work at all.

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Chapter two

Noel

The GPS guides me to turn left into a large parking lot with several semi-trucks, a large warehouse, and a brick office building. I park close to the front door next to Declan's truck. Swarming butterflies in my stomach threaten to flutter their way out, and my attempts at evenly breathing barely keep them contained.

I'm almost ten minutes early, so I check my face in the rear view mirror. Then I look down to check my outfit. Kate was right about wearing something new. I feel professional, and it helps that I never wore this with Nate. He is always creeping into my thoughts. Something as simple as a shirt will remind me of a comment he made or a time we went somewhere while I was wearing it. This outfit doesn't have any connection to a time with Nate. This outfit is just for me.

Once I feel ready, I grab my bag from the passenger seat and get out of my Porsche Cayenne S. Walking into the office, I'm pleasantly surprised to see a well-designed space. Dark leather chairs offset light flooring. The walls are smattered with understated decor that is clean and modern. Adding to the aesthetic, the receptionist immediately stands and walks around her desk.

"Mrs. Williams, Mr. Adams is ready for you. Please follow me," she greets me politely .

"Thank you, and Noel is fine."

“Mr. Adams prefers to keep things formal in the main office,” she explains as she leads me down the only hallway off the main lobby.

“Oh.” I’m too surprised to say anything else. Declan Adams? Formal?

The receptionist, who I assume is Claire Morris, knocks on the first of three doors in the hallway.

“Come in,” Declan’s deep voice answers.

Claire turns to me and smiles before walking back toward the lobby.

I open the door and step inside to find Declan typing on his laptop. He stops when I’m a few steps in and walks around his dark mahogany desk to lean against the front of it. It’s a massive piece of furniture in an office three times larger than mine. His hands grip the edge on either side of his narrow hips while he silently watches me approach.

“Good morning, Mr. Adams,” I say with more confidence than I feel—sure to add the formality in reference to the greeting I received from his receptionist.

“Hm,” he scoffs.

“Your receptionist insisted that you like to keep things formal.” I stop a few steps away from him, tilting my head to the side.

“Do you always greet your clients with sass, Noel?”

Oh, shit. “My apologies. Good morning, Declan,” I correct.

A devious smile graces his otherwise serious face. “Good morning. Are you ready to

go?”

“Go?” I ask in surprise.

The details of the meeting specified this office. I don't ever go places with my clients. The entire point of an office visit is to observe and feel the climate .

He sucks in his bottom lip, gives me a once-over, then answers, “Yes ma'am. I tend to conduct meetings much better after I've eaten.”

Blood rushes to my cheeks, and I shift my weight from one foot to the other. “We can reschedule if today no longer works for you, or I could meet with Claire until you're free.”

“Breakfast pertains to the details of our business,” he says, meeting my eyes again.

When I don't respond, he reaches behind his back to grab a set of keys off his desk. He takes a step toward me. Even in heels, he towers over me.

“I'll drive,” he says, then motions toward the door with his hand.

Resolving to see this through, I turn around to the door. We walk back down the hall and through the lobby.

“Claire, handle all calls until I'm back in the office,” he addresses the receptionist as he opens the exterior door for me to exit before him.

“Yes, sir,” Claire calls out as we step into the heat of the morning.

Once we get on the highway, I steal a glance at Declan. He drives with his left hand and leans into the middle of the truck on his propped up right elbow. He's completely

unaffected as though tricking me into going somewhere with him is a usual occurrence. Meanwhile, I'm a bundle of nerves.

He's wearing a black shirt that fits him just as snug as the one he wore in my office a few days ago with dark jeans. His hair is messy but in that on-purpose way. The tip of his tongue rests between his teeth as though he's deep in thought. The sight sends intrusive thoughts to the forefront of my mind, and I have to quickly look out the window to push them away.

"Everything alright over there?" He asks.

I turn to look at him again. He's side-eyeing me with a dimpled grin. My chest tightens, and butterflies swarm in my stomach. How many hearts have you broken since mine, I wonder?

"All good," I reply. "How long have you been in business?"

"I started Velocity just after graduation," he answers.

"Oh? Where'd you end up going to school?" I ask, trying to learn what I can about him while he's in the mood to share.

"Not college. High school graduation," he clarifies.

What? "Declan, you were valedictorian," I practically yell at him in shock.

He chuckles at my reaction. "Funny. You wouldn't look at me through my entire speech, but you remember I gave one."

My jaw drops, and I close it shortly after he glances at me again. Words scramble in my head. The thought of him looking my way during his big moment confuses the

hell out of me. The comment makes it sound as though I mattered to some degree, which he made extremely clear was not the case.

Unspent anger gets the better of me. “Funny. You pretended I didn’t exist, but you noticed me during a moment that significant,” I bite back. He may have the upper hand here, but I’m not going down that easy.

“Touché,” he nods and chuckles again.

While I try to process what I just learned about him, he pulls the truck into the parking lot of a diner that opened a few years ago. I’ve driven past it but have never been inside. Nate preferred the downtown and upscale scenes, so we rarely visited places like this one. Personally, I love a hidden gem of any kind.

Declan gets out of the truck, and I open my door to do the same. When I look up from getting my bag off the floorboard, he’s standing in the opening of my door holding out his hand. The unexpected gesture sends an electric charge straight through me to places I’d rather not acknowledge right now. I look down at his hand then glance at his face. His expression is blank as though this is perfectly ordinary, and he waits for me to take his outstretched hand.

My fingers glide across his warm, rough skin. Gripping it slightly, I feel his strength as his arm holds firm beneath my weight. He lets my hand fall to close the door as soon as both of my feet are on the ground.

Walking slightly behind him to the diner entrance gives me an amazing view of his back muscles through his shirt. I clear my throat to make an effort at small talk. Obviously, I need a distraction because Kate was right—it’s been too long since I’ve had sex.

“I’ve heard a lot about this place but haven’t been here yet,” I throw out, unable to

come up with anything else to say.

“Always my pleasure to provide a new experience,” he says with a grin as he reaches for the door.

I shake my head and try to hide a smile when I walk past him through the door.

The hostess greets us happily, “Good morning, Declan. Right this way.”

She brings us to a booth near the diner’s office door. “Trish will be right with you,” she says brightly before walking back to her post.

“You come here often, I see.” I smile and pick up my menu. The brightness and commotion of the restaurant works wonders to break the spell of being alone with Declan.

“Trish is the owner and one of my clients. I ship her pecan pies statewide,” he says, “Everything on the menu is fresh and made from scratch, so I can’t say I’d recommend any one meal over another.”

“Do you keep in close contact with all of your clients like this?” I ask, genuinely interested.

“If I can support their businesses, I will,” he says matter-of-factly.

Interesting . I stare at the menu while I try to connect the Declan I used to know to the man sitting across from me.

“Good mornin’, darlin’,” a woman in her mid-forties says to Declan as she approaches our booth, “Hi, hun,” she addresses me.

“Mornin’, Trish,” Declan answers. “This is Noel. She’s my new marketing account manager and came along with me this morning to get a feel for what Velocity is all about.”

“Nice to meet you, Noel,” she smiles. “Ladies first. What can I get you?”

“Thanks, you too. Um, I’ll try your blueberry bagel with cream cheese,” I answer, smiling back at her.

“Good choice. What about you, Declan?” She says without writing anything down.

“The usual.” Declan tells her while handing her our menus.

I look around the diner to take in the nostalgic decor on the walls—and to avoid the gaze I feel burning into me from across the table. Declan rests his forearms on the edge of the table and leans forward. “I’m sorry about your husband, Noel,” he says in a low, raspy voice.

I let out a sigh and look down at my ring. “Me too,” I whisper without looking up. My tragedy is just a Google search away it seems.

Next comes the questions. People always have questions when they learn I’m a 27-year-old widow. I wait, wondering which one he will lead with. But, oddly enough, none follow.

I glance up to find him ready to meet my gaze. Another surprise. Most people don’t know how to look at me after the initial condolences are given. Then again, Declan is no stranger to death.

Instead of saying or asking more, he nods and changes the subject, “My website should reflect some version of my supportive business stance, but I do not want to

appear small town. ”

I smile my appreciation and say, “I can work with that. Are you partial to green? I noticed it is your primary color in all graphics but isn’t the color of your building or represented in the lobby.”

He lowers and tilts his head then looks back up at me from the side through his long, dark lashes with a crooked smile as though I’m missing something. After a beat, he finally says, “I am partial to the color, yes.”

Okay.... “Alright. I’ve already started designing a few options. I should be able to send you the first draft of the logo next week.”

“Good,” he says, readjusting in his seat to straighten his back. Even sitting down, I have to look up to him. He’s always been tall, but he looks even taller now that his chest and arms are so big.

Our food arrives, and we talk about a few more of Declan’s clients as we eat. He mentions a few companies that JV Marketing also works with, which leads me to ask one of the many questions I’ve had since he left my office.

“Who referred you to JV Marketing?”

His eyes narrow slightly before he answers. “You did,” he answers.

Taken aback by that, I stumble over my next question. “Wha-, um, how did I?”

“I stopped trying to figure that out years ago.”

His strange answers have my head spinning. When Trish brings the check, I’m thankful for the excuse not to respond because I don’t know what to say.

He thanks her and throws money on the table without looking at it. He stands and looks around the restaurant as he waits for me to slide out of my seat. Maybe it's the conversation or the dominating presence of him in general, but I find myself waiting for him to indicate whether or not I should walk in front or behind him when I'm out of the booth.

He looks down at me as I smooth out my pants and places his hand near the small of my back, letting me know to walk in front of him. Even though he doesn't make contact, I can feel his hand hovering just above my ass. He follows close enough behind to push the door open from above my head for me to exit the diner in front of him.

"I'll get it," he says as I reach for the door handle of the truck.

I step aside for him, looking up into his face. "Such a gentleman," I joke.

"Always," he says as he winks at me.

"Hmm" is my only response. I'm not so sure I believe that to be true.

When he cranks the truck, he turns the volume up as his phone connects to Bluetooth. "The Diary of Jane" by Breaking Benjamin plays in the background. My seat vibrates with the bass, tickling between my legs. I try to ignore it as we pull out of the parking lot, but I have to cross my legs as the song builds.

From my periphery, he seems to be oblivious as he drives. I adjust myself further by putting all my weight on one leg to stop the vibration from being directly on my pussy.

When we stop at a red light, he looks over at me with the hint of a smile on his face. His eyes dance with mischief. "Should I turn it down? Or up?"

I narrow my eyes at him and reach for the radio, turning it down completely. He lets out a deep chuckle as I look out the window, and the truck accelerates with traffic.

“Glad I’m so amusing to you, Declan,” I seethe without looking at him.

“You’re the first woman to sit in that seat. I only realized what was happening when you started to squirm,” he says.

“Mmhmm,” I say, still staring out of the passenger window. Now I can’t look at him because of the somersault my stomach did at the thought of being the only woman he’s taken somewhere in his truck. That should not matter to me.

His deep voice is stern when he says, “I’d never purposely do something like that without your permission, Noel.”

Turning slowly to read his expression, I see he is as serious as he sounds. I relax slightly and stop leaning into the door as we stop at another red light.

He turns to face me again, and I nod my understanding. His smile is genuine at first but turns wicked almost immediately. My eyebrows scrunch together at his shift in mood.

“With your permission, however,” he trails off and looks ahead as the light turns green.

“I’ll sit in the backseat next time, so you can listen to music. How’s that?”

He shakes his head with a smile. “It would be much worse back there, but you’re welcome to sit anywhere you’d like. Next time.”

Preferably on your lap, I’m sure. “Are you always this charming with your female

associates?” I tease.

He clears his throat. “You’ll always be sunshine to me,” he says, and my heart skips a beat.

He pulls into the parking lot of Velocity and shuts off the truck. Neither of us move. So much was said in the spaces between his words that I feel truly speechless after the last comment.

“Thank you for coming to breakfast with me,” he says, taking the pressure off of me to respond by changing the subject.

Smiling at him from the passenger seat, I place my bag in my lap. “Thank you for having me and for trusting me with your account.”

“Absolutely,” he replies with a nod and gets out of the truck.

I follow his lead and meet him at the curb. When I reach out to shake his hand, he glances down at it and smiles. Instead of reaching out with his right hand, he takes it with his left to walk me to my car. Once I’m seated inside, he tells me to drive safe and walks away with his hands stuffed into his front pockets.

My insides are all butterflies mixed with ghosts of the past. I turn the A/C on full blast and try to put the car in reverse. It doesn't budge, and something dings at me. The dash is blinking with a message reminding me it will not go into gear until the driver’s seatbelt is fastened. Shit, get it together.

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Chapter three

Noel

My phone rings just as I'm pulling onto the highway, and I press ANSWER on my dash without checking the Caller ID. I'm still lost in the replays of the time I just spent with Declan and moving on autopilot.

"Mrs. Williams, I'm glad to finally catch you. We really need you to come into the office to sign the rest of the paperwork regarding your shares and board membership," the woman on the other end of the line says politely.

"Oh! Yes, Nicole. I'm sorry. Um, do you have a day and time already in mind?" I sigh.

"Mr. Williams was hopeful that you could join him for lunch downstairs at noon today. Afterward, you could sign the rest of the paperwork."

"Sure. I can be there." I wait for her to say goodbye before I hang up.

Oh, Nate, why didn't you just let me sign the prenup?

Being the only child, Nate was meant to take over when Grant was ready to retire. The money he would've inherited at his father's passing is the reason I asked for a prenup, but Nate refused. As an only child to wealthy parents myself, it made more sense to me that we keep our complicated finances separate. I didn't need his money, and he didn't need mine. It was more trouble to combine things, which his father tried

to explain to him as well. Ultimately, Grant and my father sided with Nate. Now I'm stuck with all the paperwork.

My father-in-law would do anything his son wanted. They were very close. Nate's mom had left them when he was young. They had an unbreakable bond, and Grant did all he could to make up for her abandonment. The two of them had moved to Birmingham our senior year. Apparently, Grant had originally grown up here and decided to move his business closer to where he wanted Nate to attend college.

Nate and I met in Business Law class and hit it off immediately. By the end of senior year, we were planning a life together. A life that started with attending the same college.

I always wanted to get out of the state of Alabama, but Grant wouldn't hear of Nate moving away, not even for school. I'll never forget the relief I saw on his face when I agreed to stay in Alabama. The gravity of loving a man with abandonment issues hit me right in the chest that day. I would compromise much more over the years to stand by that promise to stay for him; I just didn't grasp the weight of it then.

By the time I get out of my own thoughts, I'm parking at JV Marketing. The lobby is fairly empty today, which isn't surprising; Fridays are typically a lighter day of the week. I get to my desk and open my laptop to find several emails waiting for me. One of them is from Declan.

TO: FROM: SUBJECT: Invitation DATE: July 18, 2024

Noel, Thank you for joining me for breakfast this morning. Velocity is hosting a charity event this weekend at the Grand Bohemian. Are you available on Saturday night?

Declan

I stare at my laptop screen rereading the email. It's a corporate event. I've been invited to plenty of events like this by clients. If only Declan felt like a client. Things were not strictly professional this morning. Toward the end it felt much more like a date than a business meeting. The comment that I'll always be 'sunshine' to him took me back to a lifetime ago. The girl he remembers had big dreams and no fear. It turns out that she didn't stand a chance against the expectations of the world after all. Seeing him again so soon feels risky. Since I can't trust myself to make the right decision, I pick up my cell and dial Kate.

Kate skips the greeting and gets right down to it. "How'd it go?"

"Confusing. He took me to breakfast, which started out fine. He knows about Nate. But he didn't ask any questions, so that was refreshing. It felt a little like a date. He opened doors for me. There was some flirting in the truck on the way back to his office," I ramble out my thoughts in a jumbled mess of words.

"Doesn't sound all that confusing, Elle. Sounds like he's interested in more than just working together," she suggests.

"We're supposed to be business associates," I argue.

"But you know each other from before this, and you're human. You can't just turn off reality for the sake of business, Noel. Your life may never stay in the lines again, but that wouldn't be a bad thing. You said it yourself that it's just letterheads, nothing preventing you from going out with him." She proceeds to throw everything I said to defend the situation days ago back at me.

Not wanting to admit that she's right, I bring up the more pressing matter of how to respond to this email.

“Anyway! I got back to my office to find an email from him. His company is hosting a charity event tomorrow night, and he’s asking if I’m available to attend. Kate, he still calls me ‘sunshine’. And now he’s inviting me to an event. We’ve already seen each other twice this week. Am I overthinking this?” I ask her, hoping she understands my confusion.

“You are a new contact for his company. He’s inviting you to a company event through email. It’s definitely not a date, and he will probably be too busy to talk to you much. But, I have to admit that emailing when you just left his office does make it pretty clear that he wants to see you again.” She trails off on the last part.

I groan into the phone. “Should I go?”

“Abso-fucking-lutely! I wanna go too!” She answers excitedly.

I quickly type my response to him before I can talk myself out of it. It’s not a date per se, and Joe would encourage me to go for the company. Kate can come with me to buffer any flirting, and it’ll be good for everyone.

TO: FROM: SUBJECT: RE: Invitation DATE: July 18, 2024

I am available. Please send me the details.

Noel

“So, did he mention where it is?” Kate brings me back to our conversation .

“The Grand Bohemian.”

“Oh, I know about this event, and I know exactly what we’re going to wear! Hey, I

need to run. I'll come over early tomorrow. See ya!" She hurries off the call.

My phone beeps as soon as I set it down on my desk. It's a text from a number I don't recognize.

Grand Bohemian Mountain Brook at 7pm. Black tie, dinner served at 8pm, open bar, silent auction. Claire will add you to the list with a plus one.

I'm stunned for a moment trying to figure out how he got my cell number before I remember that it's included in the signature of my emails. This is professional. I save his contact and respond.

Thank you.

For the first time in a while I'm actually looking forward to something, but I can't help looking over at Nate on my desk and feeling guilty for it.

Grant Holdings is a multi-story building downtown. The ground floor is parking, and the floor above it is a restaurant and shops. Several floors are dedicated to the investment firm's offices and meeting rooms. Then there are apartments. Grant lives in the penthouse on the top floor. He truly eats, sleeps, and breathes his company.

I go to the hostess stand at Haven's Half Shell and give my father-in-law's name. She walks me to a private room with floor-to-ceiling windows giving a view of the bustling city below. Grant intentionally purchased the property next door to insure his lower-level restaurant would be able to boast a view in its private rooms. It's truly beautiful at night.

A waiter quickly pours water into the glass already on the table and asks for my drink order as soon as I'm seated. Because it's already been one hell of a week and this lunch is bound to be draining, I decide to order an espresso martini and call the work

day done.

The hostess is bringing Grant to the table just as the waiter delivers my martini. He chuckles at my drink choice. I stand to hug him and do my best to ignore the way my chest tightens at seeing him. Nate's blue-green eyes look back at me from his father's face as he takes me in for a moment.

"You look beautiful, my dear. It's so good to see you." He squeezes my arms gently and hugs me again. Then, he stands behind my chair to push it back in for me once I'm seated again.

He looks to the corner of the room and nods, letting the waiter know to come over. "Would you please go over the specials for us?"

The waiter calls off the memorized list of specials while I sip my martini. The smells and sounds in this room have me fighting the memories just to stay in the present. Nate and I came here often to have lunch with Grant. We even snuck in here a few times to get away from him. Toward the end of our senior year of college, Nate was working for his dad almost full-time, so this private room became our personal dining room more often than not.

"Are you ready to order, ma'am?" The waiter interrupts my drifting thoughts.

"Yes, I'll have the grilled salmon special, please." I answer, hoping it isn't too obvious that I'm struggling to keep myself together.

Grant orders as though everything is as it should be, but once the waiter is gone he says, "I suppose I should've made reservations somewhere else. I wasn't thinking. Please forgive me."

"It's all good memories. Some days I even smile over them." I smile for him now,

and he smiles back.

We spend the rest of the meal talking about my return to work, how my parents are doing, and other meaningless small talk. His company proves to be a much needed distraction from my morning. After lunch, we take the elevator upstairs to his office to finalize the paperwork I've been dragging my feet over.

The corner office is equally lined in bookshelves and windows. After closing the door, he gestures toward the conference table to the left. He offers me a seat in front of the papers already on the table waiting for me.

Grant begins by giving me the shortened version of why I'm here. "As you know, Nate was part-owner of Grant Holdings. He had a will set up leaving everything of his to you, which means you now own 25% of my company. First, I need your signature to complete the transfer of his shares into your name. Once that's done, I'd like to explain how this works for you moving forward. Do you have any questions?"

"Grant, I don't want a portion of your company. He already left me his trust fund and a large life insurance payout. I don't even have to work as it is without this. Not to mention I receive payments from my own trust fund. If Nate and I had children, maybe this would make more sense," I finally tell him why I've been avoiding him and these papers.

"Noel, not having children didn't make you any less his wife. This is what he wanted. He was very adamant before you even got engaged that he wanted every part of 'two becomes one'. Please allow me to follow through with his wishes," he says with tears in his eyes.

"I'm sorry," I say, reaching across the table to squeeze his hand. "Alright," I whisper and begin signing on all of the marked lines.

Once I've finished signing all of the documents assuming 25% ownership of Grant Holdings, Grant explains to me how the Board of Trustees operates. We decide it would be best that my votes are cast however he sees fit, excusing me from ever having to attend the meetings. He tells me that I will receive dividends quarterly, and he will help me invest the earnings or whatever portion of them I choose.

By the time we are finished going over all of the paperwork and details, I'm exhausted. Grant walks me to the elevator and hugs me while we wait for the doors to open.

"Thank you, Noel. I'd like to schedule lunch again soon if you're up for it?"

"I'd like that too." I tell him while getting into the elevator.

Once I'm inside my car, I pull my phone out to send Kate a quick message asking if she will meet me at one of our favorite restaurants just outside of town. Then, I drive home to shower and change.

"So, you're officially still rich?" She says after I sum up my meeting with Nate's dad.

I shrug my shoulders and take another sip of my wine. "I almost asked if selling the shares back to him would be possible, but he was too emotional. I just signed what he gave me to sign."

"Why don't you think you should have Nate's shares? If he were still alive, you'd have access to all of it." She always asks the right questions, the ones whose answers I try to avoid.

I sigh and decide to tell her the truth. "Nate and I didn't have kids. I'm young. I may eventually remarry. Wives who inherit their husbands' companies have children to raise or have no other means outside of the business or have helped build the

business. I don't fit into any of those boxes."

"You were his wife. 'Other half' means part of a whole. Nate adored you. I'm sure he would want you to move on and have a full life, including having children with someone else if you choose. He knew what he was doing when he created his will, and he would want you to move on with the financial security he left you." She tries to help me accept it.

"Grant said something similar, but it feels strange to be tied to Grant Holdings without being married to Nate," I try to explain how complicated I feel.

"See how it goes with this first quarterly payout and investment. Maybe you can start a charity of some sort in his honor if you still don't feel right about using the money for yourself," she suggests.

"I like that idea," I say and sit up a little straighter.

She smiles. "Let's talk about us going out tomorrow night. You know my brothers will be there? This is the fourth year for it. I had no idea Declan Adams owned Velocity, or I would've tried to pull the 'we graduated together' card to get on the list sooner."

I picture Kate sashaying into the lobby at Velocity telling his prim and proper secretary that she needs to see Declan, her old high school BFF, in full drama queen mode. The contrast between my bubbly, wildflower best friend and perfectly-put-together Claire makes me giggle.

"You know? I can't believe I didn't ask before now. Is he still hot?" She asks.

I almost choke on my drink at that. "Uh...yeah. Unfortunately, that's an understatement," I admit, and heat pools in my stomach picturing him standing in

front of his desk this morning.

“Ooooh. I’m proud of you for admitting that out loud! A gorgeous bad boy is exactly what you need in your life right now,” she says with a giggle.

“If only I could be more like you,” I say with a smile and a sigh.

We both laugh, again. Thank God for Kate. I really needed this after such a heavy afternoon.

“So,” I change the subject, “are you going to let me have veto power over what you plan for me to wear tomorrow night? ”

“And let you hide your best assets from your hottie high school crush? Not a chance!”

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Chapter four

Declan

The venue is top-notch, just how Claire likes it. It's one of the many reasons I hired her. I don't have time to plan events, much less oversee how my secretary spends money. She knows how to set these things up to keep the top spenders happy without going over budget on me, so I let her do her thing. The only instruction I gave her explicitly this year was to seat Noel beside me.

Guests have started to arrive. I order a whiskey on the rocks and make my way around the room, speaking to my clients and meeting their wives or associates. Aside from needing the tax write-off, most people attend this event for networking. Business deals will be made tonight, including my own if all goes as planned.

A longtime client of mine walks toward me with a man I haven't met.

"Declan, I'd like you to meet Andrew Humphrey. Andrew, Declan Adams."

I reach out to shake both of their hands. "Thank you for coming."

"You're the man putting this on, then? Velocity Logistics, right?" Andrew asks.

"That's right," I answer and take a drink.

"I'd like to talk business after dinner if you've got time."

“I’ll find you. You both look a little empty handed. Should I give you directions to the bar? ”

They both laugh. “Just getting here, man. We’ll talk later,” Andrew says as they walk toward the open bar to order a drink.

I look around the large room watching it fill with people. This event has grown exactly as I hoped. Put on a black tie event with an open bar and make it invitation only; that’s how you draw in the fuckers at the top. I’ve bided my time, waiting for certain players to gain an interest. This year a couple of my bigger targets will be here. I plan to move on at least one of them this evening.

Three men to my left are locked into a pretty heated discussion when one of them notices something across the room. I follow his line of sight to see it isn’t something but someone. Deciding to watch how this plays out, I watch the man excuse himself from the group to approach Noel.

She’s wearing a tight, mermaid-style dress. The front cuts down in a low V showing off her round, perky tits. Her long brown hair is curled and down. My dick twitches at the way her tits bounce as she walks. She was gorgeous in high school, but now she’s a fucking siren.

Danny Price, a trust fund asshole, makes his way to her. I’m far enough away that I can’t overhear the conversation, so I satisfy myself with watching. She smiles at him politely and extends her hand out to shake his. He bends over to kiss the inside of her wrist instead, and now I want to fucking punch him. She pulls her hand away, and her smile falters. The persistent fucker doesn’t take the hint. Instead, he steps into her to whisper something in her ear.

Zander walks up beside me right as I’m about to walk over to them and asks, “What are we watching?”

I take a drink from my glass and nod my head toward Noel, who is standing her ground with Douche Bag.

He looks over and says, “Fuck, man. Is that your new flavor?”

“That’s Noel,” I counter.

Zander has never met her or even seen a picture of her, but he knows who she is.

He lets out a low whistle. “It’s time?”

“It’s time,” I say, taking another swig.

Zander was with me the night she got married. He jumped on a plane with me, no questions asked. It took three nights of drinking and fucking my way through Vegas before I wanted to talk about it. Even then, all I told him was her name and that I’d be there to take her when he fucked it up.

What he doesn’t know is that she should’ve been mine a long time ago. That she would’ve never been touched by anyone but me if her fucking dad wasn’t a greedy cunt. His plans are fucked now. I’ve had all the time I needed to make plans of my own. His pocket ace is actually mine now, and so is she.

A server walks in front of us holding a tray with champagne flutes. Grabbing one, I start walking. Before I make it to Noel, she has managed to say something that has Danny backstepping with his palms up. He turns around to continue walking away just as I’m passing by in her direction.

“Hey, man,” he nods in my direction. He’s clenching his jaw, obviously not pleased with being shot down.

Fucker .

When she sees me approaching, she smiles again, but her eyes give her away. They're bright green, letting me know she is still pissed about whatever he said to her. I hand her the champagne and watch her take a long sip.

When she takes a break from downing the champagne, she says, "You clean up nice, Dec."

"You are stunning," I tell her.

She looks up at me with open curiosity. Her nerves from yesterday are gone. We stand perfectly still for a moment, neither of us wanting to look away. When she tilts her head to break eye contact, her hair falls in front of her face.

She looks back at me to see I'm still watching her, but this time it's through the veil of her hair. I let out a growl at the sight that now has me picturing her on her knees looking up at me through messy hair. I reach out to touch the curl just below her jaw. She sucks in a breath but doesn't pull away. Instead she looks up at me surprised. I run my knuckles from her jaw down the side of her neck.

"So soft but so fierce," I say, admiring how she handled herself moments ago.

"Declan," she breathes out my name and closes her eyes.

She tilts her head just enough that I'm no longer touching her. I let my hand drop but stay in her space.

"May I show you to your seat?" I offer.

She swallows and says, "Please."

She matches my stride as we walk over to our table. When I hold out her chair, she notices my name on the placeholder card next to hers. I give no explanation, and she chooses not to ask.

“Can I get you something else to drink?” I lean down to ask her, noticing she has already finished off the champagne.

“I’d like a martini, please,” she says looking up at me.

“Hey stranger, make that two,” a woman behind me says.

I turn to see a tall blonde in an ice blue silk dress. I’m about to tell her she has mistaken me for someone else, but Noel speaks up from beside me.

“Declan, you remember Kate Hartford? ”

Once Noel says her name, I’m able to place her. She’s had some work done since the last time I saw her, but I remember her. She was buck wild in high school. I’m surprised to see that these two are friends. Opposites attract, I guess.

“Nice to see you, Kate,” I say.

“You too, and thanks for Noel’s plus one. I’ve actually been interested in attending this event. My brothers have been invited every year, but they always bring their wives.”

“Oh? Who are your brothers?” I ask. I don’t remember her having any brothers.

“Zach and Jeremiah Hartford. The Cozy Cup Coffee Franchise? That’s us,” she says proudly.

I nod. I don't know them personally, but I don't care to get into it.

"Have a seat, Kate. I'll go get the drinks," I excuse myself and walk toward the bar.

Zander, who is standing off to the side by a black door, nods to let me know he is ready for me. I text Claire about the martinis and slip into a dark hallway behind my best friend.

We walk in silence down the long hallway into a mostly empty storage room of sorts with only a few chairs pushed up against the walls. Two of my security guys stand on either side of the door with their legs open and arms crossed. The man sitting in the chair is unharmed but nervous, looking from one man to another.

"Mr. Sanchez, nice of you to join me," I begin.

"Mr. Adams, I swear I didn't know," he says, quickly pleading his case.

"My policy is explicit. The driver checks all cargo before leaving with it. I supply your pistol and training to insure your protection in the event that a final check goes sideways. So, Mr. Sanchez, you are telling me you chose not to do your job as I am paying you to do it. Is that correct?" My voice is steady. I could be discussing the weather with a stranger.

"I did check, sir!"

Zander punches him, and his head flops over to the side, spit flying.

"Fuck!" He yells.

"Funny thing, Mr. Sanchez. I received a tip to check the cargo of your truck. They said your cousin was the one who loaded the extra boxes."

“It must’ve happened after I checked everything! I swear I didn’t know!” He’s up from his chair to avoid Zander this time.

Both security guys grab him and hold him still.

“Then you failed to lock up after the final check?” I ask.

“Please, Mr. Adams, there’s been a misunderstanding. A mistake.”

I’m done listening to this bullshit. I’ve been in a shitty mood all afternoon after I got the phone call about this. I deliver a gut punch, and he doubles over to the floor. My guys let him fall, so I kick him hard in the side, feeling at least one rib break. Good.

“Mr. Sanchez, you’re fired, obviously. My friends here are going to help you out with delivering a message back to your family: Velocity isn’t interested in transporting your drugs,” I tell him.

He continues to beg for a chance to explain, which we all ignore.

I nod to Zander and leave them to finish without me. Walking back down the dark hall to the banquet room, I’m satisfied that his screams can’t be heard once I’m halfway back to the door.

Running shipments has its risks. I take all precautions to prevent hijackings and freeloaders, but it still happens occasionally. I usually stay with Zander until we’re done with the scum who try me, but I can’t have bloody knuckles tonight. If I play my cards right over the next few hours, I could check two items off my to do list.

Claire is waiting for me when I step out of the hall. I stand beside her for a moment to tuck the beast back down deep inside, taking some deep breaths as she checks my suit. Hosting an event requires me to be in a decent mood, which Sanchez was on the

verge of ruining. Thankfully, Zander found him early enough to salvage the evening. When I'm ready, I nod to Claire, giving her the OK to adjust my tie and jacket.

"She's exploring the silent auction area with her friend, sir," she reports and hands me a whiskey on ice.

"Thank you, Claire," I say and walk toward the silent auction to find the woman in the red dress.

On my way, I see Danny Price walking toward the restroom. Fucking perfect. No one else is around, so I follow in behind him and wait for him to pull his dick out before I slam his head into the wall.

"What the FUCK!" He hollers.

"Noel is mine," I say through gritted teeth.

He turns around to see who is behind him, but I punch him in the nose just as his eyes widen in recognition.

"Fuck, man! I didn't know! She turned me down anyway," he rambles while wiping the blood off his face.

"You know now. Get the fuck out of here," I warn.

He tucks himself back into his pants and leaves in a hurry.

Looking in the mirror, I smooth out my hair and suit again.

When I finally make it into the auction area, Noel and Kate are bidding on a set of skincare products. They seem to be enjoying themselves, so I keep my distance. I

speak to a few of my clients while the girls walk around placing bids.

Fifteen minutes or so pass before the DJ makes an announcement letting everyone know to make their way back to the tables for dinner to be served. Noel and Kate wander through the rest of the auction tables in the direction of our table while a client continues to discuss contract details with me.

I return to the table just as servers come into view holding trays of appetizers. Noel's back is to me, which is exposed in her dress. She's breathtaking from any angle.

Taking the seat beside her, I dip my head so that my lips hover over her ear. "Enjoying yourself?"

A secretive smile spreads across her face. "I am, actually. If you put in a good word with the auctioneer to help me win that Hermes bag, I'd really enjoy that too."

She turns to look at me, our lips only inches apart. The smile on her beautiful face fades, and her breath catches when she realizes I'm not going to back away. That's right, sunshine. You won't get away this time.

I give her a crooked smile before glancing down at her parted lips. She's close enough that I could take them, but taking from her is the last thing I want. She's going to give everything to me because she is going to need everything from me. She sucks her bottom lip into her mouth as though that could stop me if I didn't already have other plans for her.

"You can hide it...for now," I tell her, thumbing the sliver I can still see.

The flash in her eyes from my words, from my touch, is like a flare sent into the night sky beckoning me to do it anyway. To give us both what we wanted so many years ago.

Reminding myself where we are, I pull away from her. I have to adjust my hard cock under the tablecloth, so it isn't pressed into the zipper of my pants. From the corner of my eye, I see her wiggle in her seat at the same time. Before I can stop myself, I give the tiny hand she has resting on the table a squeeze. My silent promise to make it better, and soon.

Across the table, Roman Hyde raises his glass to me. So it begins. The woman next to him initiates the conversation between us all.

"Mr. Adams, my husband has told me a good bit about you; however, he failed to mention how handsome you are." She looks over at Noel to say, "Bravo, my dear, he is quite delectable."

Noel sits up straighter and clears her throat but doesn't deny the assumption.

Internally, I frown. Still playing whatever part someone else casts her in. I'll fix that soon, too.

Turning the table's attention back to me, I give Mrs. Hyde an innocent smile and say, "Thank you. If only I could be so lucky."

I look over to Noel to see her silently begging me to change the subject. Her face is composed, but she can't hide the embarrassment in the coloring of her cheeks, so I oblige.

"Mr. Hyde, however, is a lucky man, I see," I compliment Mrs. Hyde while giving her my most charming smile.

She beams at the compliment and leans into her husband, who also smiles.

"Please, call me Roman," he interjects.

I nod and tell him, “Declan.”

“Declan, I’m in the market for a logistics company, and I’m told you’re the man to see. Now that I’ve seen you can handle my wife, I believe what I’ve heard may be true.”

Fucking right! “Roman, I’ll leave handling your wife to you. But I am open to hearing about your company’s needs.”

The table laughs, including Roman and his wife.

The courses are continuously placed in front of us. Everyone enjoys each one while chatting. I’m not one for idle conversation, but I play the part when I have to. As soon as dessert is served, I’m pulled into a discussion about how the weather affects my business. I find a way to turn the conversation to be more about the weather and less about me so the others can do more of the talking. While nodding in polite participation, I eavesdrop as Noel and Kate discuss mass production with the man to Kate’s left. Neither conversation is very enlightening, so I check my phone as soon as it vibrates in my pocket.

It's done.

This is Zander’s way of letting me know he was able to handle our business with Mr. Sanchez without any issues. I send back a response quickly.

I’ll meet you at the warehouse at midnight.

When I slip my phone back into my pocket, I notice Noel is watching me.

“So, no date for the playboy?” She asks. Her face is flushed from the martinis, but she turns a slightly darker shade under my stare.

I raise an eyebrow at her boldness. “And what do you think you’re doing here?”

A tiny choking sound escapes as her lips part in surprise.

“And you brought a friend?” I decide to fuck with her a little.

“You said to bring a plus one,” she tries to back her way out.

So cute.

“I’m not at all disappointed either,” I praise. “A smoke show and an ice queen. Will that do for a ‘playboy’?”

My dick throbs at the flash of anger running across her face. Her bright green eyes bore into me, and she sets her jaw.

I tap my knuckles on the table, and change the subject. “Enough about me. Let’s talk about you, sunshine. What do you like to do for fun?” I lean back to see how she handles herself now that I’ve gotten under her skin.

Her head tilts a little, and she bites down on both lips before saying, “I still paint some.” She takes a long sip from her martini to finish it off. “Do you have any hobbies?”

Telling her my idea of fun would be seeing how hard I can make her come feels a little ill timed after giving her shit for the playboy comment, so I ask, “Would you like to join me?”

“Join you where?” She looks down to watch my hand as I unbutton my jacket.

“Where doesn’t matter much. The ‘what’ does require consent, though,” I watch her

eyes widen before I clarify, “Come to the race track with me?”

“Oh,” she says and blushes, taking a sip of her water and shifting in her seat again.

“Next weekend, then?” I press while I have her confused.

“What? Oh. Maybe,” she says as she bites her bottom lip. “Just to watch, though,” she adds.

“No. To ride.” I decide to see how far I can push her.

She reaches for her water again, using the time to find a way out of the corner she’s backed into. The only way out is through.

“I don’t know,” she says looking down.

I lift her chin with a finger, forcing her to look me in the eyes. “I’ll keep you safe.”

She searches my face before she breathes out, “Okay. ”

“There she is.” I smile down at her.

She swallows as I hold her chin and stare into that beautiful soul she keeps hidden from the world. The free-spirited side of her just needs a little push. She’s been kept in an ivory tower for far too long, and I’m just the monster to rescue her.

Behind Noel’s shoulder Kate freezes mid-sentence in her attempt to get Noel’s attention. She smiles at me and clears her throat, effectively pulling Noel out of her trance. I take the opportunity to shift my attention back to Roman Hyde as the servers clear the tables of dessert plates.

“Care to join me for a cigar?” I ask.

“Absolutely,” he says and leans over to his wife to say something in her ear.

I excuse myself from the table, deciding not to interrupt Noel’s conversation she has now rejoined with Kate. Walking toward the billiard room to land one of the biggest contracts in my company’s history, I find myself preoccupied by the vanilla scent of my sunshine still lingering in a cloud around me.

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Chapter five

Noel

The day after Velocity's charity event, I wake up on edge. Declan never came back to our table. When the auction closed, Claire, his secretary, sought me out to let me know that he was tied up with business and introduced me to a security guard who would walk me to my car. I tried to decline, but her words were literally, "That's not possible." Kate was practically drooling and kept gushing about how thoughtful it was of him, but I was skeptical about what business he would be handling at midnight.

I try to push my annoyance away by focusing on the full day ahead but fail miserably the entire morning. Declan is already under my skin, and I'd be fooling myself to think otherwise. When he walked up to me last night in that all black suit with his silky brown hair smoothed back off his face, it was all I could do to pretend I wasn't deeply affected by him coming back into my life. Then he touched me in little ways throughout the night, and now I know that time and space really don't change some feelings.

The connection I had with Declan never developed physically because of outside factors, but we were emotionally closer than I've ever been to anyone else, including Nate. Every thought and dream I had, he knew it. Opening up to him felt natural. He usually knew what I was thinking before I could say it anyway.

After last night, there's no doubt where this is going, but, fuck, I am not prepared. Kate thinks it's the perfect scenario to get me back into the dating world. She doesn't

know all the reasons I have not to trust him. If I could just be more like her. If I could just be casual, but I'm not. Some of my oldest scars belong to Declan. If he opens those next to the fresh ones Nate left behind, I don't think I could survive it.

Nate. I glance at his vanity when I finish with my hair. It used to be littered with things, but it's bare now. I used to complain to him about how messy his area of our bathroom stayed. I was always wiping globs of toothpaste and freshly shaved whiskers from the sink. Now it stays immaculately clean. Unused.

I wonder if other men are as messy as Nate. I wonder if Declan is.

Pulling myself together as best I can with the storm brewing inside, I leave home to meet Grant at Nate's grave to clean and replace his flowers. We've naturally fallen into a routine of meeting every other Sunday. I usually go alone between these visits but not this week. Admittedly, I've been avoiding my husband since Declan stepped into my office.

Since going back to work and rejoining the world, I've felt the connection I had with Nate slipping through my fingers. Staying home allowed me to pretend he was at work or away on business when I needed a break from the grief. Days began to go by in which I didn't fall apart, and I knew I was adjusting to his absence. In my refusal to let him go, I forced myself to think of him more. I was desperate to keep him, but reality wouldn't allow it.

One morning, I made it all the way through a cup of coffee before the realization dawned on me that I hadn't reached for him when I woke up. I called Joe later that day to let him know I was ready to go back to work. Nate was really gone. If I couldn't even keep him inside my pretend bubble, I didn't want to sit around in a silent house feeling his absence so completely.

The way I felt with Declan last night only confirms the reality that I will move on.

That death did, in fact, do us part. A part of me feels guilty for the thoughts and feelings Declan has stirred up inside of me. Another part of me is relieved. Loyalty to my husband has been warring with my own need to feel alive for some time now. And Declan's subtle touches last night certainly felt better than the cold, empty bed I crawled into at the end of the night.

When Grant arrives at Nate's gravesite, he must sense my mood because he hugs me a little longer than usual. Luckily, he doesn't ask questions. I wouldn't know what to say if he did. It's one thing to admit I'm ready to date again. It's something else entirely to have old feelings for a first love resurface. Nate would feel betrayed if I somehow still had feelings for Declan. Wouldn't he?

We quietly set to work removing the fallen leaves from the grave. Then Grant places a new flower arrangement beside the headstone .

"His mother will be in town this week. I know you like to come here on your own, so I didn't want you surprised to find her here," Grant says as we stand back to look over what's left of the vibrant man we loved.

"Thanks for the heads up. I'll stay out of her way." I never developed a relationship with Jaclyn Williams. Nate had forgiven her and developed a relationship of sorts with her, but I kept my distance.

While he claimed to have forgiven her, I still paid for her sins. He was always anxious about any space I needed. Not that I wanted space often, but girls-only outings or trips were always stressful for our marriage. Nate always needed affirmation that I wouldn't leave him. For the demons she left him with, I still choose to hold the grudge for him.

"Can't blame you there," Grant nods in agreement. "Noel, we have a board meeting this week. I'll need you to sign off on a few agenda items. I'll have someone stop by

your office with the paperwork.”

“Oh, alright. I didn’t realize I would need to do anything more,” I answer him surprised but am happy to help.

“Because the votes are your own, they must be accounted for by your signature in your absence. I don’t mean to put extra work on you. The paperwork will be complete when you receive it. You’re welcome to look over everything and change your vote should you disagree with my choices,” he explains as he kneels down to put his hand on Nate’s headstone.

“I trust you know your company much better than I do,” I tell him.

“This won’t happen often. However, we will need to meet next month in my office to discuss how much of your dividends you would like to invest,” he says, walking toward me.

We never stay long here, and he is a busy man—even on Sundays.

“Alright. I’ll be there,” I say as he leans in to give me a goodbye hug .

“Take care, sweetheart. See you in a couple of weeks.” He turns to the grave and says, “Bye, son.”

My heart clenches at his pain, and the guilt I feel doubles.

Growing up, I spent most Sundays in the pool at Joe’s house. My parents, Joe and his wife, along with a few other couples, were such close friends that all of their children were raised like cousins. Uncle Joe and Aunt Beth still host every Sunday even though most of us are grown and don’t go often.

Today I find myself needing the comfort of Aunt Beth's eggplant parmigiana and a glass of wine. I also need to rid myself of at least some guilt, so I drive to the gated community that is almost as familiar as the one I grew up in.

When I pull into the drive, my mother walks out to greet me. She and my father have given me space these last few months but have dropped hints more recently about family expectations. They want to see me more. They also want me to keep up social appearances within their circles. Feelings should be dealt with privately. On the outside, we should all be the picture of grace and charm.

"Oh, I'm so glad you're here!" She practically pulls me out of my car and into a hug. "Did you bring a bikini? We're out by the pool today. It's too hot for much else!"

"I did, actually," I tell her with a smile.

"Perfect! Joe tells us things are going well at work," she says.

"I'm glad to be getting into a familiar routine," I tell her honestly.

She smiles, and I can see the relief in her eyes. "That's great, Noel. Before you know it, you'll find a new love. Maybe even that mysterious Isaiah Canton. Dad tells me he is starting to get a little more serious about life these days now that his father has retired."

I stiffen at her words. Isaiah is nothing close to my mother's idea of husband material. She has known him his whole life. His father, Jeff Canton, is part of their inner circle of friends. She would never suggest Isaiah as an option unless my father put her up to it.

My head spins trying to decipher why she would bring him up. Unless she knows about Declan Adams being my new client and wants to intervene. Surely she doesn't

know. She wouldn't be as cheerful about this conversation if she did. Besides, I'm pretty sure Joe doesn't know anything about the account other than the company name and that Claire Morris is the point of contact on file.

"I'm sorry, honey. I didn't mean to push by any means. You know I get ahead of myself," she says.

You absolutely meant it, Mother.

"It's fine, Mom. Maybe you're right about dating, but let's hold off on wedding plans," I say to placate her.

Of course my stupid brain chooses right now to blast the image of Declan in his suit last night looking at me like he wanted to eat me alive. Damn it! I take a steadying breath and pretend it's because of the heat.

Mom agrees by adding her own dramatic sigh and waving her hand as though she's fanning herself.

We walk through the main living area out to the back porch. I can already see the pool is crowded with Uncle Joe's adult children and their families. Kids are laughing and splashing. It is truly the perfect day to be in a pool.

Aunt Beth walks around from the inside of the bar to give me a hug. She must be finished in the kitchen for the day because she is already wearing her swimsuit and holding a cocktail. Sunday dinners are serious business in an Italian household. She has probably been up since sunrise getting everything started. When I was much younger, she would cook all day with the help of the other moms while we played and our dads kept us out of their way. Now she has a small group of women come over to cook after she gets everything prepped. It took Uncle Joe years to convince her to hire help. He finally won her over when their first grandson was born. Now she

enjoys her time with their grandchildren on Sundays.

"It is so good of you to come, Noel." She rests her palm on my cheek. "Get changed and help yourself to anything, piccola."

"Thank you, Aunt Beth," I respond with a smile.

I walk over to give my father a hug before walking into the pool house to change into my bikini. When I make it back outside, I find a seltzer beer in the outdoor fridge and join my parents and their friends in the shade. They are discussing vacations and retirement plans. I enjoy listening to their happy chattering while I sip on my drink.

My gaze drifts over to the pool where Joey, Uncle Joe's oldest son, tosses his daughter into the water. She pops above the surface laughing, begging him to throw her again. I smile watching them play.

My mind drifts to the first time Nate and I talked about forever. It was right here in this pool. He was doing exactly what Joey is doing now, tossing a kid around in the pool to their delight.

"Oh, no! I'm going to drop you! I can't hold on much longer!" Nate feigned distress to Anastyn's delight.

"Throw me, Nate! Throw me!" She cried out between giggles just before he tossed her toward the deep end creating a big splash.

The water line rests at his waist, leaving his toned chest and abs on full display. He turns to me still laughing, enjoying the game just as much as the kids. "Your turn?" He reaches out to me.

"No way! I'd lose my top in front of everyone," I laugh and step back .

He chuckles. "Good point. Let's keep those between us."

I let him pull me to him now that I know he isn't going to throw me in.

"I want at least four, Noel," he says looking around the pool.

"Kids!?" I ask, surprised at the subject. We're in our junior year of college. While we have talked about our future together, we've always focused more on what trips we want to take, never the serious topics of marriage and kids.

He turns to look at me with a softer smile, his blue-green eyes searching my face. "As many as you would give me, baby. This is the life I want for us. I'll take you to see the world, just like I promised, but this is what I want in return."

I melt into him, wrapping my arms around his neck. "I want that, too."

A tear falling down my cheek brings me back to the present. I quickly wipe it away, thankful that no one notices. Afraid I may lose myself to the roller coaster of emotions I've felt this weekend, I force myself to get up and join the women who are laying out on the lounge chairs.

"Hey, Noel." Gabbie, Uncle Joe's daughter, speaks to me first, and her brothers' wives echo her greeting.

"Hey, everyone, mind if I join you?" I ask.

"We'd love for you to," one of them answers.

They continue a conversation about SUVs while I settle into a chair. Apparently, one of them is trying to narrow down which one to buy.

Joey's wife, Amanda, breaks away from the SUV conversation to talk to me instead. "I know you may not be up for this yet, but I want to feel you out, anyway."

I'm closest to her out of all the wives because Joey works at JV Marketing. We have lunch often, and she is always at office events. She's the type that says what's on her mind, which makes her perfect for Joey. However I'm never sure what to expect when she starts with a disclaimer.

"Alright, what's on your mind?" I ask, taking another sip of my seltzer.

"Joey has a newly divorced friend. He asked me recently if I had any friends who were interested in something casual. Seeing you here, I just had the thought that you may enjoy a little distraction without the expectations of something serious," she lays out her proposal in true Amanda fashion.

"Oh, um," I stumble, trying to decide how to respond. "Thank you for thinking of me, but I'm not ready yet." Just as the words leave my mouth, I think of the way my heart fluttered when Declan implied I was his date and the plans I have with him next weekend.

"I assumed as much, but I also thought it was worth asking," she says and changes the subject. "Joey said you're kicking ass at work again already. He said he's pretty sure his dad may leave the company to you if he steps a toe out of line," she jokes.

I giggle at that. "That's right. Tell Joey I'm coming for him." We both laugh.

The rest of the afternoon passes enjoyably. We have dinner outside because the kids want to stay in the pool longer. I managed to enjoy the time with my family and friends without thinking about Nate or Declan again.

I even listen to the radio on the way home and sing along with some of my favorite

songs. It isn't until I get out of the shower and into my pajamas that I check my phone.

I answer a text from Kate then move on to one from Declan.

Have lunch with me this week?

Laying my head back against my headboard, I close my eyes and think back to the bittersweet night that marked the beginning of the end with Declan Adams.

Standing outside of the dugout, I watch other players leaving before Declan finally comes out. He's all sweaty and dirty, but I don't care. My heart is pounding in my chest.

We've been talking for hours on the phone every night for weeks after he finally asked for my number at school. Now we only see each other in passing at school since schedules changed at the quarter, so I'm nervous to finally spend a little time with him in person.

My parents are going to pick me up, but I haven't called to tell them the game is over yet. I figure I can squeeze 20-30 minutes in with him before they get suspicious of the time.

"Hey, sunshine," he says, touching my face immediately.

I smile up at him, soaking in the moment. "Hey."

He looks around and says, "Come on. I know a place we can go."

He takes my hand and leads me to a bench behind the field house. It's dark but not completely. We can still see each other, but it would be difficult for anyone to see us.

He sets his bag down on the ground and takes a long drink of his water. When he's done, he offers me some. I take it, mostly just for something to do with my hands. Our hands touch again when I give it back to him, and time slows down.

"How long do we have?" He asks.

"I haven't called them yet," I tell him and swallow .

He takes my hand and rubs circles into the back of it. "Don't be nervous. You deserve a real first date before I'd feel right about trying to kiss you, anyway. Just hold my hand."

I smile and scoot closer to him. "I saw your big hit."

"Yeah? Coach said some scouts were here looking at me," he says.

We stare at each other for an awkward amount of time before he speaks again. "I think I'm better at talking to you on the phone. I'm too busy staring at you in person," he says. His voice sounds different, deeper somehow.

I giggle and look away. "I know what you mean."

He lifts my chin and says, "I'd rather have nothing to talk about than miss my chance to look at you. You're so beautiful, Noel. Your eyes are so bright that I can see how green they are even in the dark."

I feel myself leaning into him, hanging on every word. "Declan," I try to return a compliment but my brain feels foggy being this close to him.

"You smell like vanilla. Did I already tell you how much I love that smell?" He asks, not bothered by my lack of words.

I look at his mouth as he licks his lips. "Declan, kiss me," I whisper.

He searches my face and cups my cheek with his giant hand. "Are you sure?"

I lick my lips and nod my head.

Just as he begins to lean in, someone yells my name. We both look to see my father standing at the edge of the field house with his arms crossed.

Opening my eyes to my bedroom, I place my hands over my heart. I can still feel the nerves from that night fluttering in my stomach now. That same feeling of excitement and desire zinged through me last night when he told me I could keep my bottom lip "for now." This time, I won't have to sneak away from my father to see him. If I end up alone with him now, no one will be there to stop us.

Kate's words come back to me, and I realize she's right. People aren't always who they seem to be. I'm not who I was at sixteen, and I'm sure Declan isn't either. It's time to let go of the past.

I'd like that.

I'll pick you up on Wednesday at noon.

His response comes within a minute. I stare at it for a few seconds before setting my phone down on the nightstand to charge. Then I slowly take off my wedding ring knowing that I just took the first real step at moving on.

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Chapter six

Noel

B right and early, I'm one of the first cars in the parking lot at JV Marketing. I walk into the lobby and say hello to our receptionist. A man already waiting for an appointment stands up as soon as he sees me. I look at Julie to explain since I don't have any meetings scheduled for the day.

The man speaks up for Julie, "I'm here with the paperwork from your father-in-law, Mrs. Williams. He said you'd be expecting me."

I let out the breath I didn't realize I was holding. "Yes, that's right. Follow me," I tell him.

We walk down the short hallway to my office and step inside.

"Please have a seat," I gesture to one of the chairs across from my desk.

He sets a packet on my desk and takes his seat. "You will find that Mr. Williams has marked the necessary places for you to sign. I'm able to explain any of the documents to you. Please take your time," he explains.

I open the folder to find four pages tucked inside. Reading over the first, I find I'm to vote against a merger with a smaller finance company whose name I recognize from pieces of conversations with Nate. Based on those past conversations, I have no doubt he would have voted against this merger, so I sign it.

The next is in favor of staff salary increases, and the third is mostly gibberish to me about percentages of earnings. The fourth catches my attention. Grant has it marked that I am voting in favor of an NDA requirement for all staff and clients.

I look up to see the man is typing on his phone. He stops when he feels my gaze on him. "All done?" He asks.

I realize he didn't give his name. "Almost, Mister?"

"Please, call me James," he says.

"James," I say and nod. "I do have a question about what all of these percentages represent, and I'm curious as to why clients would need to sign NDAs to invest their money."

He smiles as though I'm a child asking an adult question. Asshole . I sit up straighter.

He clears his throat and explains, "The board often re-evaluates the amount to charge clients from their investment earnings. Those are the new percentages that have been proposed to take effect next quarter. As for the NDAs, we represent high-profile clients who prefer discretion. Some of them can be well-known to the public. All of the employees at Grant Holdings sign NDAs to keep our clients' personal information confidential; this is very common with all financial institutions. However, we have recently experienced some of our clients leaking information about who they've seen in our offices and when, which has not been received well. In essence, NDAs will keep our clients from using our offices as a place to pick up gossip."

Well, that makes sense. Satisfied, I sign the last two papers. After placing the documents back in the folder, I hand it over to James.

"Have a good day, Mrs. Williams," he says and leaves my office.

I power up my laptop and open my emails to find a few that need answers. Then I focus on preparing for the meetings I have scheduled later this week.

My phone beeps. I expect to see Kate's name on the screen since I haven't heard back from her since last night. She exchanged numbers with someone at the event on Saturday night, and I thought for sure she'd be full of juicy details about a new fling by now.

However, I'm surprised to see it's a text from Declan.

Good morning. Do you prefer pink or purple?

Pink or purple what?

The colors...

He avoids the question. I doubt this man is sitting in his office curious about my favorite color.

Purple

I'm almost finished with Velocity's new logo and will need his approval to move forward, so I pull up the file and add the final touches that I thought about over the weekend. Then I type out an email to send him the logo, letterhead, and slogan idea.

TO: declanadams@velocitylogistics.com FROM: SUBJECT: Logo First Draft DATE: July 21, 2024

Good morning Mr. Adams,

Please review the files attached. If you are satisfied with the design, I will order

business cards and begin working on your website. Please let me know if you'd like any changes made.

Noel Williams

I press send on the email and check my phone. He never responded to my text, so I'm in the dark as to why he asked about the colors.

I can't deny that I'm a little nervous to see him, especially since it's not work related at all this time. My pulse stutters in anticipation of how he will behave away from a professional setting, especially since he didn't let it stop him from flirting at the event.

My email dings on my laptop with the arrival of Declan's reply.

TO: FROM: SUBJECT: RE: Logo First Draft
DATE: July 21, 2024

Noel,

You are exceeding my expectations. Please move forward with the website and business cards.

Declan

I stare at the first sentence of his email entirely too long. Convincing myself not to read into it, I decide he means the design, and I'm glad he approves. Now my afternoon just got much busier. I let our receptionist know to expect my lunch delivery. Then I set to work on Velocity's website.

Towards the end of the day, a knock on my office door breaks me from my concentration.

“Come in,” I call out without looking up from my laptop.

“Burning the midnight oil?” Joey asks from my doorway.

I look at my screen to see it’s already 6:00pm. “Shit! I didn’t realize how late it was,” I say to myself as much as to him.

“Are you at a stopping point? I’ll walk you out. Everyone else is gone for the day,” he offers.

“Sure,” I say, “thanks.”

He walks in to have a seat while he waits for me to finish up. I hit save and shut down my laptop. Then I close the blinds and take my bag out of the bottom drawer of my desk.

“Ready,” I tell him.

He stands up and puts his phone back into his pocket as we walk out of my office and through the building.

“How’s everything going with Velocity?” He asks.

“Great! I got approval on the logo this morning, and I’ve been working on the website ever since,” I answer excitedly .

“That’s awesome, Noel. Let me know if you need anything. I’m really glad you’re back,” he says over his shoulder as he locks the front door.

The parking lot is empty except for our two vehicles, which aren’t near each other.

“Thanks, Joey. I’ll see you tomorrow,” I tell him and turn to walk toward my car.

“Hey, actually, Amanda wanted me to see if you’d be up for coming over for dinner Thursday night,” he calls after me.

I turn back around. “Sure, I’d like that.”

“Cool. I’ll tell her to reach out and arrange it, then. See ya,” he says and walks toward his truck.

I smile to myself because I genuinely feel good about accepting their invitation. Climbing back up from such a low place and actually wanting to participate in the world around me is a far cry from where I was mentally just a few weeks ago. Only now can I see just how low I really was.

When I get into my car, I call Kate to check on her. She’s been so quiet since Saturday night. She answers on the second ring and jumps right into a graphic, very detailed account of her new guy. By the time I manage to get her off the phone a couple hours later, I’m half asleep and barely make it through my shower before crawling into bed.

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Chapter seven

Declan

C laire calls me while I'm on my way into the office. It's never good when Claire calls me outside of regular business hours.

"Good morning, Claire," I answer through the truck speakers.

"Morning, Mr. Adams, there's an issue at the warehouse. Are you able to stop by before you come in?" She asks.

"Where's Zander?"

"He's already there," she answers.

"Well, I'll be in later then," I tell her and hang up.

Taking the next exit, I drive to the warehouse on the opposite side of town from the office. Zander runs things there while I take care of the smaller warehouse and the office side of the business. If he had Claire call me, it's a big issue. There's almost always a problem to handle in this business, but he rarely needs my help.

When I park in front of the entrance, I already know the issue. It isn't a company problem at all. It's my fucking dad. I jump out of the truck and sling the door open to find Dad stumbling around Zander's office, trying to convince Zander to give him some cash.

“Dad,” I say, stopping a few feet away from him .

“Hey, Dec! I was just telling Zander that I need to hang out here for a bit until I sober up. I need to go see your mom today,” he says and walks toward me.

“Come on. I’ll take you,” I say, trying to keep my cool about the drinking.

He gets drunk when he misses Mom. As unhealthy as it may be, I can't blame him. I've used so many things over the years to drown my thoughts of Noel. I can't imagine what I would've done if I didn't think I'd get her back some day.

“Now, son, I don’t need a babysitter. I can drive myself in a few hours,” he says.

Here we fucking go.

Keeping my voice calm as if we’re having a normal conversation, I say, “I know, Dad. I had some time today and thought we could go together. You in?”

He studies me for a minute while he leans on a chair. “Yeah, alright, but you’re driving,” he says.

Zander runs his hand over his face behind my dad, relieved it was easy to deal with him today.

Dad and I get into my truck, and I drive him straight to the diner for food and coffee. When we pull into the parking lot, he speaks for the first time since we left the warehouse. “You read my mind, son. Let’s get some breakfast.” He slaps my shoulder before hopping out of the truck.

The hostess brings us to my usual booth, and Dad looks over the menu. It takes him a while, but he finally decides and sets his menu down. Trish notices and comes right

over to take our order.

As soon as she walks away, he says what I already know is on his mind. “How did I make it this long, Dec?”

“Because you’re a survivor, Dad,” I tell him honestly.

“It should’ve been me,” he says, referring to my mom’s death.

“Well, men don’t get breast cancer too often, so I’ll have to disagree with you there,” I joke to lighten the mood even though I know it will likely piss him off.

“Don’t joke about it, son.”

“Listen, Dad. When you need something, just call me, alright?” I say, getting down to it since he isn’t angry drunk today.

“Yeah, I know. I just hate to bother you when I know you’re busy, and your office is no place for a drunk like me.”

“Dad, wherever I am is always a place for you,” I tell him just as Trish brings our food.

We eat in silence, and I pay the check. When we get back into the truck, I start the drive to the cemetery to go see Mom. He fills the time by telling me why he needed to borrow money from Zander. After talking me through everything he did yesterday, he finally remembers where he put his wallet.

When we pull into the parking lot, I’m surprised to see Noel’s car. The cemetery is big with lots of hills, so we probably won’t even see her. I’d try to find her if Dad wasn’t with me. At the very least I’d like to know what’s so important that she needs

to visit him when she's supposed to be at work. I've waited six months to give her time to get over the fucker before inserting myself into her life. I thought it would be more than enough time. She certainly seems ready to move on.

The cemetery has golf carts at the main entrance for people to drive if their family members are far from the parking lot. Mom is buried a decent walk in, so I pause and notice one is missing.

"Let's walk it, Dec," Dad says, interrupting my thoughts.

I nod in agreement, and we set off down the main path. When we get to Mom's gravesite, he sits on the bench I had put here just for him and pats the spot beside him. I sit down, facing her headstone as he talks to her about all the day-to-day shit he wants to tell her about since he's been here last.

"Love, you'd be so proud of our boy," he rambles. "Well, he's all grown up into a man now, but anyway. He's here with me today. Took his old man to breakfast this morning. I'll admit I needed sobering up, love, I'm sorry about that." He rambles on about me and how boring retirement has been.

At least fifteen minutes pass before a golf cart is driving toward us on the main path. When she closes the distance, I stand. She slows down when she sees me and comes to a stop behind the bench.

"Declan?" She asks in confusion.

"Hey sunshine," I say in greeting and walk over to offer her my hand.

Taking it, she steps out of the golf cart just as Dad stands to see her.

"Sunshine, huh?" He asks, walking over to meet her.

She smiles and says, “Noel, actually,” holding out her hand to him.

He stands straighter and shakes her hand. “Levi Adams, love. It’s nice to finally meet you.” He gestures to my mother’s headstone and adds, “This is my wife, Diana.”

Noel looks between my father and me then at the headstone. Her smile never wavers, and she doesn’t pull her hand away from his when he holds on longer than he should. Instead, she rests her free hand on top of their joined ones and says, “It is so nice to finally meet both of you as well.”

Dad invites her to sit on the bench, and she graciously agrees. I stand back and watch the interesting exchange between the two of them. He tells her a few things about Mom, his favorite subject, and she listens intently. Some of what he tells her she already knows, but she goes along with it as though it's all new information. Eventually, he asks what brings her to the cemetery, and she shares with him that her husband died six months ago.

When the conversation between them finally lulls, I say, “Dad, we should be going.”

Noel stands first, setting her left hand on the back of the bench to steady herself as she walks across the uneven ground. I notice her ring is gone. Good girl. I offer her my hand while Dad stays on the bench.

Just before she lets go of my hand to get back into the golf cart, I rub her bare finger to let her know I noticed the missing ring.

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” I say and wink.

She bites her bottom lip to hide a smile. “See you tomorrow,” she says and drives away.

I find myself watching her drive off just to watch the way the sun halos around her body and her hair blowing behind her. Dad stands and walks to the golf cart path where I'm still rooted in place.

"Why didn't you tell me?" He asks

"It's only just begun," I reply.

"How can I help?" He asks, knowing what I'm up against.

I raise an eyebrow at him.

"I won't drink another drop until it's done," he says.

I nod, and we walk back to the truck. His involvement will complicate things, but it does give me leverage with Isaiah Canton. And if it stops Dad's drinking for a while, I'll take it.

Instead of taking him home, I bring Dad back to the office. When we pull into Velocity's parking lot, he looks at me confused. I get out of the truck and walk toward the door knowing he will follow and would rather explain inside. Sure enough, he's on my heels by the time I cross the lobby.

"Claire Morris, meet Levi Adams, my father. Dad, this is Claire Morris. She will help you fill out your application. Claire, set him up in the office next to mine. He's going to be our new accountant," I explain the turn of events to both of them at once then walk into my office and shut the door.

Chance, my head of security, managed to get his hands on several of Nate Williams' files—mostly from Nate's wealthiest clients. After going through them the past week, I finally found proof to back up my hunch. Nate was involved with Isaiah Canton's

very exclusive business, the Cordeliers Gentleman's Club.

I need to figure out how deep his involvement ran sooner rather than later. It won't take long for Daddy Dearest to find out I'm back in Noel's life, and I need some answers before he does. Now that I know Isaiah is in need of someone to help with his finances again, I may need to reconsider his request for my services.

After Dad is settled in his new office, I step out to go to Cordeliers Gentlemen's Club to see an old friend. With Isaiah, it's easier to do things in person.

Isaiah Canton and I were on our high school baseball team together. We were friends, somewhat. There was a level of mutual respect, even though we weren't close. He was always throwing parties at his dad's house because Jeff was always working. In school, none of us knew what his dad actually did, and Isaiah always said he traveled a lot when someone asked. Now I know better.

Jeff Canton operated the family business—a secret club for men that only the rich and powerful were invited to join. It's run completely off the books through random accounts, businesses, and schemes to hide its existence. Men are the only members, and almost any vice is offered to them. The only rooms I've personally ever been in were the poker room, a banquet hall, and Isaiah's office. Based on what Isaiah told me when he asked me to join, I also know that they have an escort service and access to just about every sort of illicit drug.

The building is tucked behind a wood line, and the main parking area is around the back. The club never closes, but you wouldn't know that from the front of the building. There are only ever a few cars parked in the lot facing the road, and it looks run down to deter anyone from wandering in.

Using the inconspicuous backdoor, I enter the small lobby with dark wood paneling on the walls. Dark leather chairs are set off to one side, and heavy, cathedral-style

doors fill the opposite wall. In the middle directly ahead of the entrance, an intricately-carved double podium separates me from the bleach-blonde receptionist.

As soon as I make eye contact, the tip of her tongue peeks out of the corner of her mouth between her teeth. She lowers her black-framed glasses to look me up and down.

“Good morning Mr. Tall, Dark, and Handsome,” she says seductively.

“I need to see Isaiah,” I state, crossing my arms and keeping my distance.

Her lips press into a pout. “He’s not expecting you. Guess you’ll have to wait here with me.”

I scoff and stare her down, pulling out my cell to dial his number.

“Declan, my man!” He answers, happily. “Is that you I see in the lobby?”

“Yep,” I clip.

“Hand Leah the phone for me, will ya?” He requests.

I close the gap between me and the podium, handing her the phone. She’s sure to brush her fingers across my hand before taking it from me to hold against her ear.

After a moment, she says, “Alright,” and hands the phone back to me.

Stilettos click against the marble as she rounds the podium to unlock the double doors. She’s wearing little more than lingerie, but that’s the point. Isaiah’s exclusive men’s club is attractive to the elite because it offers a world that doesn’t exist outside of these walls. All they have to do is pay their dues to be a part of it .

I follow Leah down a dark hallway very similar to the lobby before reaching the elevator. When we step inside, she turns to face me. I cross my arms as she traces her finger from my bottom lip down my neck and around my shoulder as she circles around me. Then she runs her fingertips down my spine before snaking her hand back to my front to grab between my legs.

“Just my size,” she purrs, massaging my dick. “You know, there aren’t any cameras in here.”

I step to the side, causing her to lose her footing. I catch her arm before she falls. I need to play the part of a potential member, but she needs to keep her hands to herself.

“Maybe on the way out,” I tell her and wink to hide my annoyance.

She smiles as the elevator opens to the penthouse on the top floor. Exiting alone, I walk through the empty living area to find Isaiah snorting a powdery white line off a woman’s ass while she lays across the dining room table completely naked.

I clear my throat.

He spins around as though he’s surprised by the sound.

“Please tell me you’ve changed your mind about the club, Dec,” he begs, walking over to me with his hand out.

Isaiah is only slightly shorter than me, but he has more of a runner’s build. His innocent-looking baby face and rich boy attitude have always worked for him. No one would ever suspect him of running an underground organization like this.

I shake his hand and answer him honestly, “I’m still a solid fuck no, bro. I do have a

business proposition for you, but I want something else instead of the membership.”

“Oh?” He asks, tilting his head to the side.

“It seems we have a mutual friend, Nate Williams,” I state, waiting to see what he does with that.

“Well, I hate to tell you this, but he’s dead,” he replies flatly.

“I’ve heard.” I raise my eyebrow at him.

“What’s this business proposition you have for me?” He asks, ignoring the implicating look I give him.

"Is Jeff really retired?" Before I make my offer, I need to be sure things are as I believe them to be.

"What do you think?" He sneers.

Looking around the room, I mouth nonsense words to him. My way of asking him if we're being watched or listened to without being too obvious for potential cameras.

"No, you can speak freely here," he replies.

I proceed to make Isaiah an offer he can’t refuse—a way around his father, namely my dad helping him funnel money without his dad noticing, in exchange for a few favors. Isaiah plays his part well. But he isn't the black-hearted mother fucker his father wants him to be, not completely anyway. There's only one way for Isaiah to make the changes in the club he'd like to make. He has to buy out his father. The problem with that is he can't stash enough cash without Jeff noticing and shutting it down.

His face lights up like a kid at Christmas when I give him a basic overview of what Dad could do for him and how quickly it could be done.

"Whatever the fuck you want, bro. Name it," he says with a grin.

"I need information about Nate Williams, his father, and his father-in-law," I state.

He nods his head. "Nate was sleeping with a couple of the girls here. Sometimes, guys let shit slip if they drink too much. Leah would know if he told the girls anything that could be useful to you. His dad isn't a member, but Conner Anderson is a real piece of work. He's here often, and he's friends with my dad. I'm not sure what you're looking for, but Conner would be at the top of my list if I were you."

Isaiah walks over to a bar and pours us each a drink. I let the information he gave me sink in as I drink the whiskey he poured.

"I have a pretty good hunch that I'm going to need one more thing," I tell him.

After the details of our arrangement have been ironed out, I make my way back to the elevator. The door opens to Leah in the center. Her clothes are in a pile off to the side, and she's wearing nothing but stilettos and a smile.

I step into her as the doors close behind me handing her a slip of paper. She looks down at it, confused. After she reads it, I place my mouth just below her ear.

"The camera is in the corner behind me. Make it look real for Jeff, but do not fucking touch me," I threaten her in a whisper.

We put on a show for the cameras that are absolutely in here, audio and all. When we reach the lobby, she grabs her things and leaves with me.

As soon as we get into the truck, I text Zander to let him know I'm bringing him something.

"You sure know how to make a girl curious," she says, reaching over the center console to run her hands up my thighs.

I grab her wrist and glare at her. "There's nothing in there for you. Now, if you can keep your hands to yourself, I'll pay well. Deal?"

Her eyes narrow, and she pulls her wrist from my grip. "My bad, I thought maybe that was some sort of kink. Where are we going?"

Just then her cell phone rings, and I nod to let her know to answer it.

"Hello?" I can hear the confusion in her voice.

After a minute or so, she says, "I understand. "

She throws her phone out the window, and we drive off. Once we are out of the Cordeliers parking lot, I demand, "Start talking."

"Nate started out in the poker room when he first joined. A few girls tried to seduce him, but he refused. He didn't buy any drugs either, just gambled. Years went by like that. A couple of girls pushed hard, but he never caved. Men that look like him don't come in very often. Or men like you."

She stops talking to look at me. I can feel her stare but don't return the attention, so she keeps going.

"Anyway, one night he came in really angry. We had never seen him like that. A man named Conner Anderson came in with him that night. Mr. Conner has had a

membership for a very long time and is one of Mr. Jeff's longtime friends, but I had never seen Conner with Nate before.

They went into a private room with a new girl, Veronica. She served them whiskey, but both declined anything else. When Mr. Conner left, Nate stayed and had Veronica for the first time.

After that, he came in every Thursday night to play poker and see Veronica. At some point, he added Chelsea. Some nights it was both of them. Some nights just one or the other. He still saw Veronica more often than not."

By the time she finishes giving me a rundown of Nate's sexual encounters at Cordeliers, we're pulling into the warehouse parking lot. I shuffle her into the office where Zander is waiting alone and lock the door behind me.

"My answer is yes," she squeals as she stares at Zander.

"The fuck?" He asks, looking from her to me.

"Zander, Leah. Leah, Zander," I introduce them as I sit down.

"Now that we're all comfortable. Leah, I'd like to explain that I'm not really interested in the who-fucked-who drama. Let's back up to the night Nate brought in Conner Anderson. What were they arguing about?" I ask .

"Oh, I think about his wife," she answers, still fucking Zander with her eyes.

Zander takes a seat in the chair beside me and prompts her, "Go on."

"Let's play a little game, shall we?" She announces, walking over to us.

I narrow my eyes at her in response.

“It’ll be fun! Since I can’t touch you,” she says, looking at me then turning to Zander, “maybe you can play with me?”

I scoff and wait for Zander to respond.

“Color me curious. What do you have in mind?” He asks.

“For every answer I give that he likes,” she says, pointing to me. “I get a reward from you,” she declares and takes a step closer to him.

“Tempting, but your pleasure doesn’t interest me,” he responds.

She pouts and looks between us.

“The only game to play here is to tell us everything you fucking know about Nate Williams and Conner Anderson. Like I said before, I will pay well for the information. If you hold back, we’ll know.” I pull the knife out of my pocket and walk up to her. Touching the tip to her exposed chest, I whisper, “If we decide you’re not telling us everything, I have permission from Isaiah to cut it out of you.”

Her lips part at a sudden intake of breath. Finally, I have her attention. Zander asks the next question as I walk back to my seat.

“This time let’s hear every detail you remember, hm? Now, what were Nate and Conner arguing about?”

“Mr. Conner was pushing Nate to get his wife pregnant. They needed an heir. They never said for what. Nate said he was working on it. He argued with Mr. Conner that their agreement had been marriage right out of college, not kids. He said they had

plenty of time left. Mr. Conner insisted it had to be done soon then left. Nate told Veronica he had made a deal with the devil then told her to take his mind off things.”

“Any other conversations pertaining to his wife or Conner Anderson?” I ask.

She looks down and replies in a much lower voice, “Yes. He confided in Veronica months after that. Apparently, he had been replacing his wife’s birth control pills with placebos for a while. He really did want to get her pregnant, but he didn’t want her father to know how long he had been trying to do it.

Then one night he asked Veronica to help him by having her IUD removed to have his baby. By then, she was so in love with him that she would do almost anything he asked of her. He told Veronica that his wife couldn’t get pregnant, but they could all three share the baby. I tried to talk her out of it, tried to explain to her that she could end up pregnant by another member. She did it anyway.”

“Fuck,” Zander hisses.

I nod. “Thank you, Leah. Now, here’s what happens next. You’re going to continue to work at Cordeliers as usual. As far as Jeff knows, I’ve made a deal with Isaiah to use your services privately in exchange for something he needed. You will come here any time I call. I want to know everything you see or hear pertaining to Conner Anderson or his daughter, Noel.”

Standing, I stalk toward her and grab her by the chin. “Keep your mouth shut and your ears open.”

Her nod is subtle, which assures me she understands I will act on my promise to cut her if needed. Satisfied with the agreement, I walk to the door and look at Zander.

“Give her a burner and take her back in a few hours. Make sure she looks like she’s

been thoroughly fucked. She needs to keep up appearances.”

He nods, and I shove the door open to the southern July heat.

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Chapter eight

Noel

Seeing Declan at the cemetery yesterday caught me completely off guard. I knew his mother had died when he was young, but I've never seen him there in all the times I've been in the last six months. In some morbidly weird way, I felt obligated to tell Nate about Declan. Oddly enough, it felt like I had been caught cheating when I saw Declan on my way out from essentially breaking up with my dead husband.

He barely spoke, letting his dad do most of the talking. Then he made it clear he noticed I took off my ring. Since the exchange felt loaded, I'm feeling a little awkward about our lunch plans today. I keep checking the time on my phone, halfway expecting him to cancel based on the assumption that I may not be over Nate.

When 11:45 rolls around, there's a knock on my door. I look up from my computer to see Declan opening the door. He leans into the doorframe with his arms crossed and a heart-stopping smile on his face.

"Hey, sunshine," he says.

Taking a breath, I smile at him. "Hey."

After gathering my things, I walk over to him. He runs his knuckles across my jaw before taking my hand and leading me out to his truck. As we drive off, I notice the radio is on, but it isn't vibrating my seat this time. I look over at him, and he winks at

me.

“So, what’s for lunch?” I ask.

“Culinary Dropout. Sound good?”

“Sounds delicious!”

“I’m noticing a pattern here.”

“What’s that?”

“You’re always in a good mood when there’s food involved,” he observes.

A small giggle bubbles up my throat mostly from nerves. “Isn’t that every girl?”

“I’m not sure, but I’ll keep you fed if it means I get to hear that cute little sound again.”

I take a steadying breath, trying to remind myself that he says the right things because he’s had plenty of practice. We don’t talk again during the short drive as the silence is filled with Halsey’s “Bad at Love.” He takes my hand again when we meet at the front of the truck, running circles over my knuckles with his thumb as we walk inside.

The hostess blushes under his stare as he tells her we need a table for two. I can’t even blame her. He is gorgeous, and the smile he flashes her is the best kind of torture.

“This way,” she manages to mutter, and we follow behind her to a table.

He holds the chair out for me, and the poor girl almost melts into the ground before she can give us our menus. Once he's seated, she tells us that our server will be around soon and hurries off.

"I hope our server is a guy," I joke.

His expression turns murderous. "Why is that, Noel?"

Oh, shit!

Realizing he took my comment to mean I preferred a male server, I rush out, "Because women can't think around you. We may never get our food if our server is anything like the hostess."

His face relaxes only slightly. "I'm sure whoever it is will manage."

"How has your week been?" I change the subject.

He tilts his head to the side with a smirk. "Productive. Enlightening, actually. Are you ready for Friday night?"

Panic seizes me at the reminder that I've agreed to get inside of a race car with him. "Nope," I answer honestly.

He chuckles. "I think you're going to like it."

He wiggles his eyebrows at me and grins, setting my insides on fire. My appetite for everything on this menu turns to dust. His eyes flash and his expression grows serious when he notices my change in mood. We stare at each other from across the table, and everything around us seems to disappear.

He props his chin on top of folded hands, and his ankles cross with mine under the table. He slowly looks down to my lips then my chest. His gaze travels back up to my eyes again just as slowly as he began. His tongue appears to wet his lips before a subtle smile graces his beautiful face. A small whimper slips from between my parted lips with a quick exhale of breath, and I look up from his smile to his burning, golden brown eyes.

“Hey, yall!” Our server appears abruptly, pulling us out of the moment.

I blink a few times before I look up at the middle-aged woman standing next to our table. Declan, however, stays locked onto me as I try to stay in the present to answer her questions.

Looking away from him completely, I glance down at the menu and rattle off the first thing that catches my eye. When I look back up, his stare is waiting to capture me again as he orders something without looking at the server at all. The only thing I hear is the deep, husky tone of his voice.

She walks away, leaving us in our vacuum a little while longer.

A few moments pass before he loosens his hold on me by looking away. Casting my eyes down, I drink my water as though it can put out the flames within.

“Where’s the next country on your list?” He asks, effectively giving us something to talk about.

My straw swirls around the ice cubes of my water. “I’ve only been to Italy so far, so next would be France,” I say just above a whisper. I clear my throat to get rid of the rasp in my voice.

“We still have the whole list to tackle?” The surprise is obvious in his voice.

My head shoots up at the implication. “Um...” I try to decide how to respond. Something in his eyes tells me to go with it. “I guess so.”

“Even better.” His smile spreads, showing off those damn dimples I’m such a sucker for.

“I was surprised to see you at the cemetery yesterday.” Unable to hold it in any longer, I broach the subject with him.

“Is that where you left the ring?”

I’m not so sure he needs to know the rings are locked away in my safe at home. Avoiding his question, I tell him what I’ve wanted to tell him since I saw him there yesterday. “I told him about you.”

“You don’t owe anyone an explanation, Noel.”

“Maybe not, but I wanted you to know anyway.”

Leaning closer to me from across the table, he clarifies, “You don’t owe him an explanation about me.”

Oh.

“Declan, I-,” I stammer, unsure what to say to him. “This is new to me.”

“This is not new. It was paused. Interrupted. But you were mine before him, and you’re mine now.”

My breath catches, and I’m paralyzed by his declaration. The pounding of my heart is so loud I’m sure he can hear it too. The promise sounds so irresistible that I almost

forget the interruption he's referring to was of his own design. Almost.

"Hm. Interrupted. And whose-," I start.

Our server chooses now to deliver our meal and asks if we need anything. I don't even remember what I ordered, so I shake my head. Looking down at my plate, I'm relieved to see a cup of soup and a sandwich.

"Eat. There will be plenty of time for rehashing the past later," he says, guessing what I was going to ask.

We eat in silence, and I'm aware that Declan has yet to remove his feet from mine. Each time we're together he finds ways to touch me. The gentle displays of affection are such a contrast to his no-nonsense personality that it makes me feel special. The fact that he has probably had a lot of practice wooing women over the years isn't lost on me, and I have to remind myself that I decided to take a step forward to push the doubt away.

When we finish our meal, Declan leaves cash on the table and leads me out of the restaurant. His hand rests gently on my lower back, and my skin tingles beneath his touch.

"Declan," a man calls out to our left when we get to the parking lot.

He grabs my hand as he stops walking to see who is calling him. When I look over, I tense as I recognize the man to be Isaiah, one of Nate's friends. Isaiah has always given me a bad feeling that I couldn't describe. Most likely, it's because the only times Nate and I ever really fought was when he went out with Isaiah. He was just a bad influence. Now my stomach is in knots wondering if he and Declan are also friends.

Declan answers him with a polite, “Hey man, how’s it going?”

Isaiah stops to shake his hand then notices me. “Noel?” He looks at Declan then down at our hands. “Alright! Good for y’all. Guess the good guys do finish last, huh, Dec?” He pats Declan on the shoulder and laughs.

“Something like that,” Declan says in a strained voice. He pulls me closer to him with his arm in front of me, and I get the feeling that Declan thinks of Isaiah the same way I do.

“See ya!” Isaiah calls out as he walks off in a hurry.

Declan wraps his arm around my waist holding me close to him, and runs his knuckles across my cheek. “Has he ever tried anything with you?” His touch is gentle, but his glare is deadly.

“No,” I manage to squeak out. “His dad and mine are friends, and he was close with Nate. Why did he say that about good guys finishing last? What does that mean?”

“If he contacts you in any way, I want to know about it.” His voice is low and threatening.

“Okay. But why?”

“I’m not sure that I trust him.”

His mood has shifted, and he’s quiet as he drives me back to work. After a few minutes, I decide to break the silence.

“Do you remember when you challenged me to paint a feeling?”

“Did you ever do it?”

“I did, and it’s hanging in my house. But I never told anyone it was mine. I said that I bought it locally and didn’t know the artist,” I admit.

“I’d like to see it,” he says, glancing at me.

“I’d like that too.”

“What feeling inspired you?”

I smile to myself at his happier tone. “Let’s see if you can guess when I show you.”

He turns into JV Marketing’s parking lot. Leaving the truck on, he walks around to open my door for me. When both my feet are on the ground, he runs his thumb across my bottom lip and says, “Challenge accepted.”

I smile at him, and he winks.

“Thank you for lunch.”

“See you Friday,” he answers and gets back into his truck.

Like a true southern gentleman, he even waits until I’m inside before he drives away.

I haven’t heard from Declan since our lunch date, but I’ve thought about him almost nonstop. I’m so thankful I have plans tonight at Joey and Amanda’s to have a way to pass the time. Since my house is in the opposite direction from theirs, I decided to work until it was time to go to their house. Walking through the lobby, I notice through the front window that a piece of paper is flapping on my windshield. I’m surprised Julie didn’t notice solicitors walking through our parking lot. Uncle Joe or

Joey usually run them off for her.

When I get to my car, I take the paper out from underneath my windshield wiper to see it's not an advertisement flyer after all. It's a handwritten note.

Noel, I'd like to meet you for dinner this Saturday night. Grant wouldn't give me your cell number, so I'm resorting to leaving a note for you to find. If you could find it in your heart to see me, I've made reservations for us at Chez Fonfon at 7pm. With love, Jaclyn

I look around the parking lot wondering how long ago she was here but don't see anyone lurking around or leaving. Getting into my car, I throw the note onto the passenger seat and drive to Joey and Amanda's. I suppose I expected her to reach out at some point, but I have nothing to say to her. Taking a deep breath, I decide the right thing to do would be to give her whatever closure she's hoping to find.

I pull into the horseshoe driveway in front of the massive red brick house. I grab the bottle of wine from the passenger seat before getting out of the car because wine is the way to Amanda's heart. When I open the front door, I'm bombarded with all the commotion of their five children running around. I make my way into the kitchen, knowing that's where I'll find her.

"Noel!" Amanda exclaims and pulls me into a hug. "I'm so glad you came! Joey invited this friend of his, and I'm not a big fan of his wife," she whispers.

"Well, I needed a little distraction myself," I tell her with a smile.

"You know me so well!" She laughs and takes the wine.

While she sets to work opening the bottle and pouring us each a glass, I continue stirring her sauce on the stove. We catch up on life, mostly about her kids' busy

schedules, as we sip the wine. Choosing to keep Declan to myself a while longer, I keep up the pretense that work is the only thing going on in my life.

Not long after I arrive, Joey brings the couple he invited into the kitchen. I recognize the man right away as one of our clients. I've been involved in several meetings with him, so he introduces me to his wife. She stays in the kitchen while the guys venture into Joey's bar off of the dining room. While Amanda and I plate dinner and set the table, the other woman stares at her phone without offering to help. It's pretty obvious why Amanda doesn't like her before we even sit down to eat.

Dinner is delicious, and the conversation is enjoyable. After helping Amanda clean up, I get roped into putting their three-year-old, Gracie, to bed. By the time I'm able to sneak out of her room, I'm half asleep myself. I tell everyone goodbye and drive home.

Checking my phone one more time as I crawl into bed, I'm tempted to send Declan a text. I'm not very experienced when it comes to dating. Period. Add the fact that I have zero experience with it as an actual adult, and I'm more than unsure. But if there's anything I've learned from being married, it's that your true self comes out at some point anyway. Besides, I'm an adult who is capable of sending a text simply because I want to.

Hope you had a good day. See you tomorrow.

Holding my breath, I wait for his response. And within seconds, I have it.

Always worth the wait, sunshine. Sleep well.

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Chapter nine

Declan

Hyde fucking Pharmaceuticals. In black and white. Officially under contract. Fuck yeah!

Before we left the charity dinner Saturday night, I had Hyde in a verbal agreement. Now, here the contract sits on my desk before lunch on Friday. Done.

I pick up my cell and tap the contact I need.

“Hey, Dec,” she answers before the end of the second ring.

“I hope I didn’t catch you at a bad time,” I say in greeting, letting her know I need a few minutes of her time.

“A bad time is the best time for an interruption from you. I can be free after 5:00. How does that sound?” She draws out the last part seductively.

Ignoring her offer to fuck later, I tell her, “I’m in the market for commercial property in Tennessee and Georgia.”

She clicks her tongue at me. “Straight to business, huh? You sure know how to break a girl’s heart.”

I scoff at that. “Jess, we both know you don’t have one of those, and we agreed to

pursue other interests. Can you find some acreage for me or not?”

“Ugh! Yes, I’ll send you a list in the morning,” she groans.

“Thanks.”

“You can’t avoid me forever, Dec,” she tries again.

I hang up, not wanting to get into it with her.

Jessica has been a placeholder for a while now. As soon as my plans for Noel could be set in motion, I lost all interest in other women. I was gentleman enough to let Jessica end things, but it seems she has changed her mind. Sorry, sweetheart. I’ve already been fucking a petite brunette in my head on repeat since I walked into her office two weeks ago, which reminds me...

I type out a text to the siren who now lives in my head.

I’ll pick you up at 6:00. Send me your address.

After a minute, my phone vibrates on my desk with a response from Noel.

617 Rosewood Drive, see you soon!

Everything else can wait until Monday as far as I’m concerned. My payroll is heavy enough that I should be able to leave early every once in a while, and today is that day. I shut down my computer, lock my desk, and get out of my office.

“Ms. Morris, I’m leaving for the day, and my father will be with Isaiah Canton until later next week. Chance is going to finish out the day here.”

“Enjoy your weekend, Mr. Adams.”

“See you Monday,” I say over my shoulder as I walk out the door.

Deciding to surprise little miss sunshine, I park in the street in front of Noel’s house about a half hour early. It’s exactly the type of house I’d expect the owner of an investment firm to live in—bright colors, cookie-cutter neighbors, and perfectly symmetrical landscaping. Not the type of house Noel would’ve chosen, but we’ll work on that.

I didn't actually need her address. I’ve kept tabs on her over the years. The only reason she ever got so far out of my reach was the machinations of her father. Conner Anderson knew exactly what would keep me from making a move. If I put myself in her life in any way, he would have my father killed. Conner was sure to hire the one fucker who hated me enough not to be bribed, and he was on standby just waiting for the opportunity.

His efforts only bought him some time. His hired hit has been canceled even if he doesn't know it yet. And here I am on her doorstep. The sun shines on a new day after all.

She opens the door wearing a flowy, blue dress. Her hair is pulled into a messy bun, and she’s barefoot.

Damn, she is beautiful.

“Hey, you’re early. I actually just walked in from work. Can you give me a few minutes?” She asks and opens the door to let me in.

“Take your time. I’m sorry for showing up early on you.” I’m not.

She closes the door once I'm inside, and says, "No worries. I just need to change."
She leads me into the living room and offers me a drink.

"No thanks."

She walks into an alcove off the living room that I'm assuming leads to her bedroom. I take the opportunity to answer a few emails while I wait. Hearing her footsteps as she walks back into the room, I finish up and hit send on the last one. I look up to see she has stopped in the archway, just inside the living room.

She's wearing a plain black t-shirt that stretches across her tits and bunches at her hips. Her long, tanned legs are on full display in blue jean shorts. She kept the messy bun and added tennis shoes. I stand and tilt my head to the side, when I notice she's staring at me as though she forgot I was here.

"Sorry, it's just that..."

Then it dawns on me why she's frozen across the room. "I'm the first man here since Nate died."

She nods and gives me a shrug.

When I take a step toward her, she rubs her hands against her thighs. Then she nibbles on her lip nervously as I get closer. I stop when I'm no more than a foot in front of her. Her wide eyes watch me, unsure. She doesn't know the truth of her own story. To her, I'm the one who broke her heart, and the man who really loved her is dead. And that's alright.

For now.

I'll be patient.

I'll be exactly what she needs at every turn.

I slowly reach for her hand and hold it in mine as I make circles with my thumb over her smooth skin. We gaze into each other's eyes while she feels her way through this moment.

When she finally acknowledges my hand with a slight squeeze back, I take a step closer. Her breathing accelerates. I hold her gaze and her hand, keeping just enough distance that our bodies don't touch. Waiting for the next clue that she's ready for more.

It's all I can do to fight the urge to pull her into me, but I can be very patient when I need to be. She's been on someone else's clock long enough. So I'll wait for her to make a move in her own time.

Her eyes have turned every shade from dark to the blazing green staring back at me now. Her grip on my hand has slowly gotten stronger. Whatever it is she's working through, she's almost there.

Accept it, baby. This is happening.

Finally, she breaks the moment by looking down at our hands. I expect her to step back, but she shocks the hell out of me when she looks back up and touches my face. I drop her hand to grip her hip instead. Every inch she gives, I take.

She sucks in a breath but doesn't pull away. My fingertips press into her to prove I'm not going anywhere.

She wets her lips with the flash of her tongue, and her eyelids grow heavy. I've seen that look on so many women, but to see it on her is something else entirely.

I place my lips just below her ear to tell her to put us both out of our misery. To say the words out loud. Before I can speak, she leans into me and lets out the smallest of whimpers.

Fuck.

I have to take a steadying breath before I whisper, “When you’re ready, sunshine, you’ll have to say the words out loud.”

She places her hands on either side of my rib cage, so gently at first that I can barely feel her through my shirt. Then she closes the small space that’s left between us while running her hands down my sides, stopping when she touches my jeans. Her forehead presses into my chest as she makes a fist with my shirt in both hands, scratching my skin with her nails in the process.

I rest my hands on her shoulders. My fingers gently rest against her neck and collarbone. Her pulse beats against my thumbs wildly.

She pulls back enough to look up at me again, keeping our lower halves meshed together. My dick pulses against her at the movement, but she doesn’t put any more space between us. She stares up at me expectantly, waiting for me to make a move, to decide for her. I trail both thumbs up her neck to press into the bottom of her chin, lifting her face more. Her lips part for me as she closes her eyes.

It takes all my fucking willpower not to take what she’s silently offering, but she will say it. I growl and lower my face to close the distance, letting her feel my breath fan across her face to make her think I’m going to give in. My lips almost touch hers.

“Eyes open,” my voice comes out in a low rumble.

Her eyes fly open in surprise, searching my face like she doesn’t know what to

expect.

Not him.

“Watch what you do to me, Noel. Watch me do whatever you ask. Let me hear the words come out of that pretty mouth.”

Licking her lips, she braces herself with her fists still wrapped in my shirt. She opens her mouth to speak twice, but nothing comes.

Finally she exhales a whisper, “I can’t.”

Then she’s gone—pressing her back against the wall, staring past me into nothing, silently at war between what she wants and what she thinks she should do. Her chest rises and falls quickly as she tries to cool the flames, and I can practically smell the desire on her.

She’ll ask for what she wants, or she’ll take it. Either way, she will own it.

“Show me your painting,” I whisper gently.

Slowly, she looks at me again. The torture fades from her eyes. She pushes away from the wall and leads me to another part of the house.

We find ourselves in a room that looks like an art gallery, and I’m immediately drawn to hers. The first thing I notice is the way the darkness touches the center point of light without dulling it. The shading is subtle, and the effect gives shadows in even the brightest areas. The opposite is also true of the darkest areas in which she managed to brighten with a shiny, metallic color. The swirling of the colors feels circular, and I’m transported back to the moment that inspired this. It confirms that everyone who played a role in keeping us apart deserves to pay.

“Well? Care to guess? ”

Looking down at her, I can see the pride in her eyes. It bolsters my determination even more to get her out of marketing and into her own studio. Fuck them all for putting her dreams on hold.

“You did a much better job painting it than I did when I described it. It’s exactly what I meant when I told you that you brought light into the darkness.”

Relief washes over her face. A slight look of confusion passes over her before she looks at the painting again. I know she’s starting to see the holes in the stories she was made to believe.

Soon, sunshine. I’ll tell you everything soon enough, I silently promise her.

“Let’s go, beautiful,” I say, taking her hand.

After stopping to eat at a restaurant on our way to the track, we still arrive with plenty of time to unload the car before time trials begin. Before we get out of the truck, I look over at Noel.

“You ready for my version of fun?”

“Ready or not,” she says with a smile.

“Come on. After we unload the car, I have something for you,” I tell her and jump out.

Zander and his girl, Jade, get out of his truck beside us. He walks over to give me a bro-hug.

“Noel, this is Zander and Jade.”

“Nice to meet you,” she says.

Zander and I unload the car. Noel stares at it terrified.

“Ever seen a car like this before?” Zander asks, noticing the look on her face too.

“I guess in movies,” she says and looks at me like a deer caught in headlights.

My blacked out ‘70 Challenger is street legal, but barely. It’s loud as fuck and has too much horsepower to drive other than at the drag strip.

“Come with me.” I gesture toward the opening of the enclosed trailer.

We walk inside to where the cabinets are, and I open the tall one to the left where I keep my gear. I give her the black and purple fire suit I ordered earlier this week.

She smiles. “Pink or purple.”

I give her a half-smile in return. “Yep. You wear this over your clothes.”

She takes it from me, nodding her understanding.

I reach back into the cabinet to grab my own suit and put it on.

Her eyes widen, and her eyebrows shoot up. “We’re doing this right now?”

“We’re doing this all night,” I tell her and wink.

“Fuck,” she whispers more to herself than me.

My laugh bursts out before I can stop it. “That’s a very dirty word for such a pretty mouth.”

She narrows her eyes at me as she puts on her suit. After placing the helmet I ordered to match her suit onto the countertop, I take out my own and lock everything up.

“Let’s go sign your waiver, so we can get in line.” I grab her hand as we walk toward the announcer’s booth.

When we get back to the car, I put her helmet on. She's starting to look pale, so I make an effort to calm her down before I strap her in.

“Do you like roller coasters? ”

“Yes,” she says nervously.

“Well, this is a lot like that first big drop that takes your stomach, except we’re just going in a straight line,” I explain, hoping she settles down enough to enjoy it. If she wants an out, she’s going to have to say so. I’m not offering one.

We walk to the car, and I show her how the harness works, fastening and tightening it up for her this time. Then I tell Zander to meet me at the staging lanes and get into the driver seat. After I reattach the steering wheel, I look over at Noel who's watching my every move.

“It’s fun, and you’re safe. I promise,” I reassure her before I crank the car.

When we’re two cars away from the front of the line, I fasten my harness and put on my helmet. “Zander, which side looks good?” I ask through the headset built into my helmet. Zander is standing in the middle of the two lanes checking the track for me.

“Left lane,” he answers. “Noel, you ready?” He laughs into his radio.

“Nope” She reaches grips the upper straps of her harness until her knuckles turn white.

I can’t help but chuckle and give her thigh a squeeze. I turn on the Bluetooth for the noise-canceling headsets. “Even if it Kills Me” by Papa Roach blocks out everything, including the girl in the passenger seat. Now it’s just me and the machine.

Zander guides me, so that my tires fall perfectly in the grooves of the left lane. Backing up, I spin the tires in the water box then pull forward to warm them up. Halfway through the burnout, smoke clouds the sides of the car as the noise from the engine vibrates inside my chest.

The music fades in my headset as it picks up on Noel’s voice, “Oh, fuck! Declan!”

I smile to myself but don’t answer her as I pull up to stage. Inching forward, I watch for the pre-stage and stage lights. The trans brake keeps the car in place while I rev the engine, allowing me to hold still at the RPMs I need.

As the third and final yellow light on the tree blinks to life, I disengage the trans brake, launching us forward just as the green light flashes. I quickly grab second gear when I hear the motor dial up high enough, and we jerk forward again. The back tires make a chirping sound.

My right foot keeps the pedal down as the stands and people on either side of us blur past. Then it’s time to shift once more. Stepping down on the clutch with my left foot just enough to shove into third gear, I slam the shifter forward. Then, as fast as it began, the ride is over.

I slow the car down to a crawl and enjoy the high as we make our way back to the

trailer to let the car cool off between passes. My blood is pumping as the playlist shuffles to “Awaken” by Breaking Benjamin.

Noel hasn’t made a sound, surprisingly. Once the car is shut off, I put the steering wheel back on top of the dash, making room to climb out around the roll cage. Noel still doesn’t move as I remove my helmet and jacket.

I try not to smile as I run my hands through my hair and walk over to open her door. She sits perfectly still while I undo her harness and help her out of the car. She fidgets with the buckle under her chin as soon as she’s standing. Her hands are shaky and useless, so I move her them out of the way to undo the helmet myself.

The helmet slips off her head. Her face is flushed, and her green eyes sparkle.

Before I can say a word, her hands are on my neck pulling me down, crushing her mouth to mine. All hesitation gone.

I grip her thighs, lifting her, and she locks her legs around me as I take her inside the trailer. I slam my palm against the button against the wall. The ramp groans as it seals us inside.

Needing my hands free, I set her down on the counter. She uses her legs to pull me in closer while I wrap my hand around her neck, thumbing her chin higher.

My free arm wraps around her waist, and I pull away from the kiss. She licks her lips, looking up at me, waiting.

Now that I’m in control, I lower my lips to hers, brushing a soft kiss against the corner of her mouth.

"I've waited so long to taste these lips."

Another gentle kiss for the opposite side.

When I finally press my lips fully to hers, she opens up for me again, hungry for more. Instead of giving her what she wants, I drag the tip of my tongue along the center of her top lip.

She shivers and a soft moan slips past her lips.

That's when I claim her completely. I slide my tongue into her mouth, slow and deliberate. I'm going to memorize every inch of her from the inside out.

Her arms wrap around my waist above her already locked legs as she grinds against my hard cock. Keeping her where I want her with one hand throttling her neck, I reach down with the other to grab her ass, pulling her into me.

Giving her the friction she's after, I thrust into her, dry humping her like a fucking teenager.

She breaks our kiss to moan and takes in a shaky breath as I continue to rub against her. When she finally looks up, her eyes mirror everything I feel.

And fuck, it's perfect. She's perfect.

Her hands slip under my shirt, palms resting above my jeans, and I growl at the feel of her skin on mine.

I stop moving, letting her explore—letting her feel me. Her fingers trace slowly over my stomach, then up my back. Electricity spreads in her wake.

Our foreheads press together as she watches her own hands roam beneath my shirt. Like she's memorizing me the way I am with her.

“Kiss me, Declan,” she says, digging her nails into my back as she pulls me in.

This time I devour her. My hands lock around her face. I hold her jaw, tilting her face away to drag my mouth down her neck, tasting more of her.

Another whimper from her lips has me dragging my tongue back up her throat. I take her mouth again until she eventually pulls away to catch her breath.

Her hands glide across my skin to rest on my chest. She works to catch her breath as her legs shake against me.

I refuse to give her any more space, making sure she understands that she can't get away from me now.

When her breathing steadies, I straighten to my full height. She rubs her palms against her thighs as her eyes lift to meet mine. I brush my knuckles along her cheek.

“So you like my car?” I grin.

Chapter ten

Noel

We spent the rest of the night watching races and hanging out with Zander and Jade. I rode with Declan twice more, but Jade and I hung out when the competitive races began.

After our make out session in the trailer, we kept our hands to ourselves, giving me time to process all the dirty little details of Declan's kiss.

As I look out the front windshield at the dark road ahead, I try to convince myself the kiss wasn't as intense as it felt. My inexperience outside of Nate and now zero experience for the past six months amplified it. Add the fact that Declan and I have a very emotionally-charged past. The whole situation was a recipe for a kiss to feel like way more than it really was.

I just don't remember my first kiss with Nate feeling anything like that.

Regardless of the reason I got so caught up, I can't stop playing it on repeat in my head. I've tried to strike up a conversation multiple times on this drive home, but my mind circles right back to how good he felt literally everywhere. As soon as I get home, I'm showering and going straight to bed with my vibrator. I need a clear head to keep this thing, whatever this thing is, from moving too fast.

My phone chimes in my bag at my feet, and I jump to find it. It's past midnight. Anyone trying to reach me at this time of night must have a good reason.

When I see it's an alert from my home security system, my stomach sinks.

"Everything alright?"

I turn to face him. "I'm not sure. I had a notification from 8:30 that my security system was disabled. I didn't see it until now. The alert just now was the notification of it being turned back on."

I stare back down at my phone trying to process how that could be.

"Does anyone else have the code? Family members? Kate?" He asks, trying to find a simple explanation.

I shake my head. "I only just installed the system about a month after Nate passed away. My father-in-law insisted. He said that people in their line of work may find me to be an easy target knowing I would be home alone."

Suddenly, I feel panic rising through my body.

"Oh, God. I had to sign papers earlier this week for the Grant Holdings Board of Trustees. Do you think someone would come after me if they didn't agree with my votes?"

Declan must've dialed someone on his cell because his phone is ringing through the truck's bluetooth system.

"Boss?" A man answers.

"I need you and two others to go to this address. Check every inch," Declan orders. "You ready?"

“Go ahead.”

“617 Rosewood Drive. The security code is...,” he looks over at me to continue.

“052921,” I say to the stranger on the phone.

“Do you have cameras?” Declan asks.

“Yes, but they’re on a separate system. Grant said I needed to use older systems without the internet,” I’m becoming more freaked out by the second.

“Call you back.” The line goes dead.

“Walk me through the votes you mentioned.”

I can see his jaw clenching as he listens to the details of my owning a percentage of Grant Holdings and the four votes I signed based on Grant’s recommendations.

“I also took part ownership of a company that was not attached to Grant Holdings. The Cordeliers Gentlemen’s Club. Grant told me he would help me sell out as soon as it was possible but wouldn’t tell me anything about it. He said it wasn’t one of Nate’s best decisions, and it was best that I didn’t know much about it.”

“Cordeliers, huh?”

“I searched for it and couldn’t find anything. Have you heard of it?”

“Mmhm,” he says, pressing his lips together.

“And?”

“It’s an invitation-only club for men.”

“Okay?” I stare at him waiting for him to connect the dots for me. When he doesn’t give me anything else to work with, I realize he may not want me to know much about this place either. “Are you a member?”

“Fuck no,” he says, offended.

“But you’ve been there, at least?”

“Yes.”

I wait for him to tell me more, but he doesn’t.

My phone chimes, notifying me that my security system has been disabled again, and I tell Declan.

“That’s my guys.”

“Why do you have ‘guys’?”

“I keep security to watch my warehouse, office, and trucks,” he explains.

“Oh,” I say, realizing I just overstepped. “I’m sorry. It’s none of my business why you have security. I’m just on edge right now. ”

“I’ll handle it,” he promises, closing the subject.

We spend the next several minutes in silence. My thoughts are running in circles, and my questions have me jumping to conclusions. I’m hoping this is all just a coincidence, and my security system just happened to glitch out. Either way, I’m

calling Grant tomorrow.

Declan's phone rings, and he presses ANSWER on his dash screen.

"What did you find?" His voice is thick with restraint.

"Whoever it was turned the place upside down looking for something. Not a robbery. The jewelry box wasn't touched, and no electronics seem to be missing. The alarm system doesn't look like it's been tampered with, so they either knew the code or hacked it. We'll wait here to go through the video surveillance with you," the man says, and Declan ends the call without a word.

I shiver at the thought of someone knowing my security code and searching through my house.

"What the hell do they want?" I wrap my arms around myself.

"Noel, I'm going to take care of it," Declan says through clenched teeth.

He parks in front of my house on the street because his car hauler is still attached. In a hurry, I grab my bag and reach for the door handle. Declan grabs my arm before I can open the door, forcing me to look at him.

"I won't let anything happen to you," he says and pulls a gun out of the glove box before getting out of the truck.

I was not prepared for what was waiting for me on the other side of my front door. My house is destroyed. Pictures from the walls are scattered on the floor. Couches and chairs are turned over—the cushions ripped.

"Oh, my God," I breathe out.

Declan grabs my hands from my face and pulls me into him .

“Show me where the tapes are,” he says, forcing me to focus on him instead of the chaos around us.

I stare at him for a moment, shaking my head in disbelief and trying to get myself under control.

“Noel, the security cameras. Where are the tapes?” He asks forcefully, trying to get me past the shock.

Taking a deep breath, I bring Declan and one of his security guys into the master bedroom closet. Everything is a mess. My bedroom even has holes in the walls.

Suddenly, I’m very thankful that the older gentleman who installed my cameras recommended putting the recording hub in my safe. I press my thumb into the scanner until I hear the lock release and swing the door open.

Declan removes the USB drives from the hub and passes them to the man whose name I still don’t know. Then he looks over at me and says, “Pack a bag.”

Confused, I look between the man and Declan. The man nods at Declan and leaves us alone in my ransacked closet.

When his footsteps fade beyond earshot, Declan says, “You’re staying with me tonight.”

He looks around the closet and walks past me while I stand completely still and useless. When he stands in front of me again, he hands me an overnight bag.

“I’ll be right outside the door.”

He's right. I can't stay here, but I can't stay with him. I should call Kate or my parents, but it's the middle of the night. I certainly am not ready to tell my parents I've been spending time with Declan Adams, so calling them is out of the question. Kate is either asleep or extremely occupied with a man. Either way, she won't answer the phone.

It seems my only option is Declan.

I throw some things in the bag and walk into the bathroom to grab the rest of what I need. Declan is waiting for me in the doorway of my bedroom. He takes my bag and my hand and leads me out of the house.

The quiet drive to Declan's house has done nothing to calm my nerves. Instead I'm now worried about the break-in and being alone all night with him. The farther we drive the more I'm convinced I should've taken my chances at home.

His house is on the outskirts of Birmingham. It's too dark to see much of the property when we pull down the long driveway, but the house is softly illuminated by landscape lighting. It's a two-story, brick house with a large, covered front porch.

We drive past the house to park in front of the detached garage behind it. A motion light triggered by our arrival allows us to see our way across the open area between the garage and back door of the house.

He closes the door behind me. The clicking of the lock finalizing the choice I've made.

We're standing in an open living room with a high ceiling. An upstairs walkway halos the room. Everything is the perfect mixture of black and tan with masculine, brown leather furniture. It's not overly decorated. Instead the room itself seems to be the decor. Large light fixtures and furniture fill the space, and the contrasting shades

of black and brown keep the room from feeling bare.

“You have a beautiful home,” I say, taking it all in.

“Thanks,” he says, glancing around. “Come with me.”

He walks across the living room toward a dark opening I assume is a hallway, and I follow.

I reach the dark hall just as he steps into a room that provides the only light. Continuing to follow, I find myself in a dimly lit room. The soft glow spilling out from the crown molding is only enough to cast shadows. A lamp beside the bed clicks on. He tucks his hands into his pockets—watching me.

We lock eyes without speaking before he approaches me. Slowly, he lifts my chin with his thumb and forefinger. I lick my lips expecting him to kiss me again, but he searches my face for a moment instead.

“Make yourself comfortable.”

He walks away, and I watch the door close behind him.

I let out a sigh, looking around. His bedroom is much darker than the living room with black walls, curtains, and bedding. There are only a few touches of brown and tan here and there. The room is dark and sexy, just like the man who sleeps in this massive bed.

Knowing I need a shower, I help myself to his bathroom. Steam encloses me as I step under the rain shower head in the middle of the oversized shower. The hot water soothes my nerves while I try to sort through the chaos in my head.

I don't have any idea who would try to break into my home—or what they would be looking for. What's more concerning is how they were able to get past my security system. Whatever the cameras picked up will be disturbing. Either strangers who know my security code or someone I trust breaking into my house. Both scenarios are equally frightening.

And then there's Declan. God, that kiss. I've never been so aggressive or wanted someone more. Declan used to make me feel things I didn't fully understand, and it seems he still has that effect on me. It's like he unlocks something wild inside of me, something I can't control.

He recognized my painting immediately. When he spoke, he repeated the same things he said to me that night. The night that left its mark so deep that I had to paint it—then lie about it being mine.

Now I'm in his house. Nate and I didn't stay the night together until we had been dating close to a year. Even though I've known Declan for a long time, shouldn't I behave as though he's someone new? I don't know much about the man he's become, but it feels like no time has passed. We're picking up where we left off.

A knock on the bathroom door pulls me out of my head. Before I can answer, he walks in.

Shit!

I turn the shower off, quickly grabbing the towel to cover up before the steam clears.

"I hope you don't mind," I call out from behind the fogged glass.

Declan's voice is smooth but laced with danger. "I'm only disappointed you didn't ask me to join you."

He leans against the vanity, arms and ankles crossed, watching me—completely at ease. As though watching me shower is an ordinary part of his day.

I step out with the towel wrapped around my body and freeze. His head tilts with a half-smile as he looks slowly down my body and up again.

“I wanted to bring you this,” he says, referring to the water and pill on the counter next to him.

“I don’t take pills,” I politely refuse.

“Good. This is melatonin.”

“Oh,” I say, surprised by the gesture. “Thank you.”

Still frozen in place, I watch as he pushes off the vanity and stalks toward me.

“Need anything else?”

The question hangs in the air as I decide between the polite answer or the truth.

My fingers itch to touch his deliciously messy hair. Stubble shadows his face—the perfect length to tickle just right in certain places. His soft lips are the perfect contrast to his sharp jawline. But his eyes. His golden brown eyes are full of delicious, dark promises, and my insides are on fire every time he looks at me.

He’s threatening to release the deepest desires. The ones I keep locked inside. And I’m so tempted to let him. What has being the good girl gotten me anyway? I’m already here. Kate throws caution to the wind with men all the time. And Declan’s no stranger. He’s the first boy I ever loved transformed into a walking, talking fantasy.

His tongue slips out to wet his lips, pulling my focus to his mouth. He smiles. I have to suck on my bottom lip to give my mouth something to do, and his smile fades.

“Say it,” he orders. His voice is raw and rough now.

The air is sucked out of the room, and everything feels as though it's hinged on this moment.

Fuck it.

“Kiss me.”

He clicks his tongue, looking down at me.

“Where?”

My eyes widen, and my insides squirm. He crosses his arms, challenging me.

Maybe it's the collision of the past and present or maybe it's the adrenaline, but something deep inside of me claws its way free to answer him.

“Everywhere.”

His fingers slide between the towel and my heaving chest as he says, “Eyes on me.”

He pulls the towel free and watches it fall. I watch him lick his lips as his eyes roam my body. Then he rubs his face as if he's trying to decide where to begin.

He circles a thumb around one of my nipples, watching it harden. Then he does the same to the other.

“So beautiful,” he says, still not making eye contact with me.

Instinctively, my head tilts back, and my eyes close.

Smack!

My eyes pop open at the sound and sting of him slapping my breast.

“Eyes open,” he orders and waits for a response.

I nod, and he glares at me a moment longer. When he's satisfied that I'll comply, he leans down to kiss me where the sting from his slap still lingers. A whimper escapes as I breathe out. His soft lips soothe my skin while the sight of him kissing just beside my nipple sets the rest of me on fire.

Straightening to his full height, he brings my wrist to his mouth.

“After that fucker kissed you here last weekend, I sent him home with a bloody face.”

I gasp. “What?”

His lips linger on the skin just below my palm, slow and deliberate. His other hand sprawls across my back, pulling me into him. Continuing down the inside of my arm, he stops to kiss the bend of my elbow. His eyes shut and brows furrow like a god showing the slightest hint of weakness. His hand on my back keeps me steady as he makes his way to my neck.

My heavy breathing fills the air.

Finally, when his lips brush my ear, he answers me. “No one will touch what's mine, Noel.”

I stare up at the ceiling as he kisses under my chin before his lips drift lower. I try to make sense of his words, but it's difficult to think. When he gently kisses the center of my chest, I pull my shoulders back, silently begging for more.

He picks me up, wrapping my legs around his waist. My lips find his as he carries me into the bedroom. He deepens the kiss. His mouth taking all it can before he lays me down on the bed.

Breaking away too soon, he stands to look at me. I pull my legs closed, suddenly embarrassed that I'm naked while he's fully clothed. His dark eyes trail from what I've hidden from him to find mine. He bites his bottom lip with a smirk, and my thighs shake.

I'm so fucked.

"No hiding, sunshine. I've waited long enough to lay you across my bed, and I'm going to see every inch of your perfect little body."

Tapping my knees, he makes it clear he expects me to spread my legs open. The raw need in his face and words has me opening up for him.

"Good girl." His voice is all gravel as he stares at my center, and I actually moan.

With a crooked grin, he lowers his lips to my stomach. I watch mesmerized as he nibbles, licks, and kisses his way down to my leg. When he sucks on my inner thigh next to my pussy, my legs squeeze against the sides of his face.

"Declan," I breathe out, my voice just as shaky as my body.

I fist the comforter as he grips the backside of each of my thighs. His fingers dig into my skin. He places a kiss just above my slit. His lips are parted just enough so that his

kiss is both soft and warm.

“Fuck,” I hiss out.

Stopping to look up, he says, “Is that a request?”

“Dec, I-,” I stumble over my words. I want him, but I can’t bring myself to say it out loud.

“We’ll see if you can find your words when I’m done kissing you. Eyes on me while I taste this pussy.”

Without hesitation, he covers my slit with his open mouth. His tongue explores my pussy, massaging every part. When my legs relax around him, he slides his tongue inside of me.

“Declan,” I cry out his name—the pleasure mounting.

He growls into me and lifts my ass off the bed, giving himself better access to fuck me with his tongue.

Wanting more of him, I grab his face to feel him move in my hands. My hips take over, grinding into his face as he eats me like a starving man.

Minutes of relentless licking and sucking have me on the edge. His large hand presses against my stomach. His thumb circles my clit while his palm anchors me to the bed.

My insides tighten as the pleasure builds. He doesn’t let up. Just when I need more, his thumb slips inside of me while his tongue continues its delicious torture.

Losing all control, I shamelessly rock against his face and thumb. Electricity from all

over my body moves toward my center—the heat consuming me. My orgasm explodes from deep inside, and I cry out his name, gripping his hair. My body convulses as the waves crash through me. He matches each ripple perfectly, forcing the bliss to linger.

When it finally slows, he hovers over me. His face is soaked. My face flushes as we stare at each other.

“You are fucking delicious,” he says, licking his lips.

I giggle, and he gives me a crooked smile.

When he stands, I can see his erection through his jeans. Holy fuck! His dick runs halfway down his thigh under his jeans. His grin widens when he sees what I’m looking at.

“You’ve had enough fun for one night, sunshine. Time to get some sleep,” he says, pulling the comforter down to help me into bed.

“You aren’t going to sleep?” I ask, confused. I’m more surprised that he’s putting me to bed without wanting his own release.

“I have some things to do. I’ll be in my office down the hall if you need me.”

Too tired to ask questions, I decide not to press. Declan isn’t quiet, but he is calculated. If he wanted me to know, he would tell me.

“Goodnight.”

“I agree,” he says smiling, reaching for the lamp to turn out the light.

Declan

While I wait for a phone call, I review Nate's files on Cordeliers again. The contract is fairly simple. My main concern is that Grant knew she shouldn't be involved and didn't get her out. I need to figure out how Grant kept her in the dark about Isaiah being the owner and why he'd hide it.

I'd prefer not to ask her. My plans for her don't include asking her questions about other men, dead husband or otherwise. Actually, my plan was to be patient with her, play the long game, but she gave that idea a big fuck you when she jumped on me at the track. Long game be damned. As long as she's calling the shots, we can go as quick as she'd like.

My only boundary for her is that everything will be on her terms. She's spent her entire life doing what everyone else expects of her. I'm going to teach her how to make her own damn decisions.

Hearing her tell me what she wanted from me was worth every minute I've had to wait. She looked fucking perfect in my bed, and I can still taste her sweet cunt. Once I find out who broke into her house, I'll have to thank them before I kill them.

My phone vibrates with a text from Chance containing three images. Before I can open it, he calls.

I put the call on speakerphone to pull up the text. "I'm looking at them."

"It was just those two. They were there for hours and left empty-handed from what I can tell. They knew how long she'd be gone. You think it's someone she knows?"

"I'm sure as fuck going to find out." My blood boils as I study the image of two men in her bedroom. I flip to the next picture. "Is this their fucking license plate?" I ask as

excitement bubbles in my chest.

“Yep. I’ll have a name and address for you first thing in the morning.”

“Looking forward to it.”

I might actually be able to sleep tonight after all.

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Chapter eleven

Noel

Without opening my eyes, I enjoy the way the sheets feel as I stretch. The concept of time begins to creep in. I try to push thoughts away, holding on to the last bit of sleep, knowing I didn't hear my alarm. I haven't slept this good in so long.

My eyes pop open and my heart picks up the pace as the memory of where I am slams into me. The black wall and dark furniture confirms it was not a dream. I sit up to see that Declan's side of the bed is empty but slept in, and I realize I'm still completely naked.

Jesus, Noel, way to go!

I get up to find my clothes and brush my teeth, silently berating myself for fucking Declan's face on our first date. How does it take me years to be that comfortable with the man I married and only a single date with the next? Obviously, I don't have as much self control as I always thought I had.

Looking at myself in the mirror, I can't deny the fire in my eyes that I haven't seen in a long time. Closing them, I think back to how Declan kissed each part of me.

Something changed in me last night. I like that he made me tell him what I wanted. This morning, I freaking love that he only kissed me. Of course, he took complete creative freedom with the request, but he didn't step outside of the one directive I gave.

As much as I should feel guilty for letting it go that far, my only thoughts now surround how to return the favor. Once I'm dressed and get my hair somewhat under control, I set out like the powerful bitch I am to find him. Last night, he mentioned his office was just down the hall, so I make my way out of his bedroom to find it.

There's one open door at the end of the hallway, but I find the office empty when I step inside. The smell of his cologne causes my pulse to race. He must've just been in here.

I turn around and slam into him, not realizing he had walked in behind me.

"Good morning." His morning voice is huskier than usual.

"Good morning."

He's wearing dark grey sweatpants but no shirt. I felt his toned stomach last night, but this is my first look at him. Men should not look like this. His body is tan and muscles are everywhere. His skin is flawless except for the tattoos, which have been hidden from me under his clothes until now.

He isn't covered in them. The large one on his side wraps around his left rib cage. It looks like his flesh is ripped, exposing ribs. He has another that covers his right shoulder and tapers down across his chest. I'm wondering if he has any on his back when I notice the perfectly defined V of his lower abs and the bulge in his pants.

"See something you like?" He asks, amused.

My eyes snap back to his. I bite my lips together and giggle, knowing I deserve to be called out for gawking at him.

"Come on. Time to eat," he says, reaching for my hand.

My eyes bulge. Now it's his turn to laugh.

"Coffee?" He asks, pulling me down the hall .

"God, yes!"

He pours me a steaming cup and offers me a seat at the bar. While I sip the coffee, he sets to work making breakfast. I'm halfway through my coffee when he sets a plate of eggs and bacon in front of me.

"Thank you."

"Mmhm," he says as he turns around to get napkins, giving me a full view of his back.

The majority of his back is covered in ink. A demon wing on one side and an angel wing on the other are both wrapped in a chain that is attached to an exposed spine under ripped flesh.

He turns to hand me a napkin, noticing that I was staring but doesn't say anything. He sits on the barstool next to mine and begins to eat. He finishes quickly and puts his dishes in the sink.

I set my fork down on my plate just as Declan rounds the bar, stopping when he gets to me. He grabs the legs of my barstool just below the seat, sliding it out so I'm now facing him. Then he opens my knees to place himself between my legs. He slides a hand up my leg, but his fingertips stop once he has them just inside my shorts.

Licking his lips, he tilts my chin up with one finger and gently kisses me.

"I have something to show you," he says, releasing my leg before turning and

walking away.

He leads me back into his office and walks over to his desk. Pulling an image up on the monitor, he gestures with his hand for me to take a look. It's an image of two men in my bedroom. This must be from my surveillance drive.

“I don't recognize them.”

“Not surprising. Whoever is behind it most likely hired help. What do you know about Isaiah Canton's business?”

I stare at him, confused.

“Anything?”

“Isaiah doesn't work. He's a spoiled boy in a grown man's body living off his daddy's money.”

“He's the heir to Cordeliers. He's been running the club for the past five years since his dad retired.”

“No,” I breathe out. “You're mistaken. Isaiah hasn't worked a day in his life.” Even as I say the words, they feel wrong. Something terrible dawns on me. Something Isaiah's date had said the last time we went out with him—something about a club.

“Isaiah approached me a few years ago wanting help with his books in exchange for a membership.”

“Nate never mentioned any of this. He couldn't have known,” I say in disbelief. “Wait. When I asked you if you were a member, you said no.”

“Actually, I said ‘fuck no’,” he corrects.

“Why didn’t you join?” I ask even though I’m afraid to know the answer.

“What’s important right now is figuring out how you managed to inherit part ownership of Cordeliers and not find out that it’s Isaiah’s,” he says, avoiding my question.

Declan looks unfazed by this entire conversation, leaned back in his office chair, while I’m on the verge of losing my shit.

“I don’t have the slightest clue. I didn’t even know this club existed until last week, and Isaiah’s name wasn’t on that paperwork.”

My brain is struggling to process everything that has happened in the past twenty-four hours, and I’m desperately fighting against the idea that Nate had such a secret.

Declan grabs my hips, pulling me down to straddle him. Our faces are inches apart as he digs his fingers into my sides.

“Loyalty to a dead man can get you killed, Noel,” he warns.

Nate was an open book. He never gave me a reason to think he would hide anything from me. And Isaiah? It’s hard to imagine him being responsible for anything, much less operating a secret business. But I also know Declan isn’t lying just as sure as I know myself. If I’m going to figure out what this club has to do with me, I’m going to need his help.

I decide to share a detail about my husband before I lose my nerve. “He had a standing poker night with a group of guys every Thursday night. Isaiah was one of them.”

He loosens his grip on my hips. “Where?”

“They rotated houses.”

“Good. Do you remember who all came when they were at your house?”

I watch him kiss the palm of my hand but feeling it between my legs.

“They only used the single guys’ houses, so it would be guys only.”

It never bothered me. I actually enjoyed girls nights with friends on the same schedule. But now that I know about Isaiah and his club, I feel so stupid.

I look out the window at the trees lining the property in the distance. I try to picture Nate’s face to find any trace of deceit in his eyes, but my mind is too cloudy to find him.

How could I have been so naive?

“Look at me,” Declan orders.

I meet his narrowed eyes.

“Whatever you’re thinking, don’t. People can hide things very well,” he says as though he’s thinking of something and someone else. “You didn’t do this. ”

I look back to the window trying to stop the tears from falling.

No, I’m just the fool who had no idea what her husband was doing every Thursday night.

Given everything I've just learned, it seems more likely that Nate was at this club for his poker nights. Maybe he played poker or maybe he slept around. I'll never really know.

Declan wipes away the single tear that escapes. Looking down at him again, I watch him suck the tear off his thumb. He shifts underneath me, and I can't help but let my gaze wander down to his bare chest and stomach. My breath catches at the sight of his erection pushing up against his sweatpants.

How can I feel like this with Declan and be mad at Nate for the past all at the same time? Whatever Nate did really doesn't matter now, and I know that. But it still hurts. And somehow I feel safe letting Declan see me raw.

Declan touches my jaw then runs his hand through my hair. The expression on his face scatters all my thoughts. My heart stammering in my chest is the only sound I hear now—drowning out the conflicting voices in my head. My skin tingles everywhere his gaze touches. He runs his thumb across my bottom lip before he presses down on my teeth, forcing me to open my mouth.

"You're so fucking pretty when you cry, sunshine," his husky voice breathes out.

He watches my mouth as his thumb touches the tip of my tongue. Without thinking, I close my lips around it and suck. His eyes heat up, daring me to continue.

Releasing his thumb, I say, "My turn to kiss all of you."

He places two fingers on either side of my tongue, sliding them to the back of my throat. When I gag, he pulls back some. I grab his hand, nudging his fingers back in. I can see it in his eyes that he's being gentle with me, holding back. I'm done being fragile.

He gives me his best 'you're so fucked' smile and shoves his fingers to the back of my throat again. This time he watches me struggle to control my reflex. When I stop gagging and manage to swallow around his fingers, he pulls back again.

"That's it."

He pushes his fingers in and pulls them over and over again, continuing the pattern until I stop gagging so easily. I suck when he pulls them out of my mouth, trying not to drool on myself. Eventually, he runs a wet finger down my cheek, smearing saliva with the tears I shed from gagging on his fingers.

"These are the only tears you cry now. Tears for me."

He grabs my hips, pushing me off his lap. I stumble back as he stands in front of me. I place my hands on his hips for balance, and he grabs my arms to steady me.

After a moment, I begin to kneel in front of him.

"Not yet." He grabs my hair yanking me back up, his tongue claiming my mouth.

When he pulls away from the dirty kiss, he snaps the neckline of my shirt. Keeping my eyes locked to his, I take it off for him and drop it on the ground. He breaks away from my gaze to watch me undo my bra. As soon as my chest is exposed to him, he lightly circles my nipple. His fingertips glide across my skin to wrap around my throat.

"All of it."

His hand stays in place as I lean forward to push my shorts and thong down my legs. The pressure makes it harder to breathe, so I let them slide to my ankles and toss them away with my feet. He stares into my soul as he tightens his grip on my throat. I

know he's pushing me to find my limits, and I'm just as curious to find them.

I slip my thumbs into the waistband of his pants. "My turn, Dec."

His eyes grow heavy and he lets go of my throat. He holds his arms out slightly to either side, allowing me access to him. I slide his sweatpants down his hips, freeing his hard cock. Even though I try to control my reaction, I can feel my eyebrows raise. I kneel down quickly, so he won't be able to see my face.

Placing my hands on his thighs, I lean forward to lick the tip before sucking it into my mouth. His legs flex, and he sucks in a breath. His reaction along with how good he feels in my mouth urges me forward.

Grabbing him at the base, I slowly lick and suck my way down the side of his cock, fully understanding now that the gagging exercises were for actual practice and not just a dirty visual for him. Once he's completely slick, I take him to the back of my throat, gagging around him but pushing through it.

He grabs the base of my head. He twists his fingers into my hair and forces me to look up slightly. The angle allows me to take more of him, and the pleasure written clearly on his face has my pussy dripping.

"Breathe through your nose and stick out your tongue," he says, his voice raspy with need.

I do as I'm told and a moan escapes from the back of my throat. I watch as his brows furrow, and he begins to move.

"This pretty mouth was made for me."

He watches me choke and gag around him. Using his free hand, he smears my tears

down my face.

“Fucking gorgeous,” he says and pumps faster into me.

I’m mesmerized by this god of a man losing control above me. His thrusts into my throat become rough as the tears fall out of my eyes.

“Touch yourself, Noel,” he says breathlessly, keeping his pace.

I reach between my legs to feel myself soaked. I can hear my fingers moving through my wet pussy, and his face tells me he hears it too.

“Fuck that pretty little cunt with two fingers while I fuck your mouth.” As he says the words, he pumps hard into the back of my throat, causing me to gag again.

He pulls out of my mouth and strokes his dripping wet cock with his hand. “Let me watch you finger yourself.”

Leaning forward, I try to take him back into my mouth.

“You can have it back once there’s two fingers inside of you,” he says while he continues to stroke himself in my face.

I slip two fingers in, desperate to own his pleasure.

“Good girl. Now curl them and push up until you feel it,” he says through heavy breathing.

“Feel what?” I ask, but I whimper before he can answer when I touch the spot he wanted me to find.

“Do what I do.”

He slides the tip of his dick over my lips before pushing into my mouth again. I gag when he shoves back into my throat, but I recover quicker this time. He thrusts slowly in and out of my throat, waiting for me to follow his lead. As he slides in, I push my fingers in. As he pulls back, I do the same.

He nudges my knees with his feet to open wider, giving him a better view.

Then he picks up the pace, and I follow his lead.

The ache deep in the pit of my stomach tightens into a ball of tension. Drool is running down my chin, and I’m moaning around him as he pounds into the back of my throat.

“So fucking perfect. Goddamn, baby girl.”

My hips begin to roll as my orgasm threatens to explode. I feel his cock harden to stone, and I know he’s close too. A scream echoes in my throat around him as I pump into my clenched pussy. The fingers of my other hand dig into his hip to keep myself stable while I come.

“Fuck, sunshine,” he grinds out as he fills the back of my throat.

I swallow around him and watch his face dissolve into ecstasy.

He loosens his grip on my hair as he begins to come down from his high, but his eyes keep their hold on mine. When his face relaxes, I swallow around him once more to make sure I’ve gotten all of it. His lips part to suck in a breath at the sensation. He slides out of my mouth and pulls me up by the back of my neck.

Wiping away the remaining tears, he studies my face. His expression is so intense, but I'm not sure what he's hoping to find. When his eyes wander to my swollen lips, he smiles a full-dimpled, heart-stopping grin. My chest feels raw at the sight of him.

He's just so real and so alive. I smile back, feeling warmth spread all over me.

"There you are," he says and runs a thumb across my bottom lip.

He leads me to his shower, leaving our clothes on the floor behind us. The steam and hot water do nothing to cool the fire we've lit. Unable to keep our hands or lips to ourselves, we barely manage to shower at all.

After we dress, Declan brings me back to my house, so I can begin sorting through the mess. On the way to my house, I remember the note from Nate's mom and decide to tell Declan about the dinner considering everything else going on.

"I'll take you. You aren't going anywhere alone until I get to the bottom of all this."

"I don't want to be alone with her anyway, but is that a little insensitive?"

"Her feelings aren't your problem," he clips.

"Good point," I agree. "Thank you for helping with all this, Dec."

"Anything for you," he says, pulling my hand to his lips.

Kate is already at my house when we arrive. Declan really meant it when he said he wasn't going to leave me alone. Kate is chatting it up with one of the security guys from last night.

Declan walks me into the house before giving me a slow, delicious kiss goodbye. I'm

aware Kate is watching us, but I don't care. As soon as he's out the door, she starts in on me.

"What the fuck was that, Noel?" She squeals excitedly.

"I don't even have an answer for you because there are no words for what he is," I tell her honestly, a stupid grin on my face.

"You fucked him!" She accuses me.

"Well, not exactly," I answer, deciding to keep the details to myself.

She narrows her eyes at me when she realizes I'm not going to give her a play-by-play of my night with Declan.

"Alright, Noel, keep your dirty little secrets to yourself. Just knowing you have some is good enough for me." She grins, and I laugh.

"On another note, though, what do you know about this break in?" She asks, looking around my disastrous living room.

I only told her there had been a break-in on the phone, not wanting to get into all the details until we were together in person.

"It might have something to do with Nate."

"Excuse me, what?" She stops picking up the broken lamp on the floor to stare at me.

I sigh. "Have you ever heard of Cordeliers Gentlemen's Club?" I ask, hoping she says no, so I won't feel like even more of an idiot.

“Like a strip club?”

“I’m not sure what kind of club it is.” I confess, realizing I hadn’t thought of a strip club as a possibility.

“I’ve never heard of it,” she says. “What does a gentlemen’s club have to do with Nate? Did he go there?”

“Apparently so. Isaiah owns it, and Nate was part owner,” I tell her and shrug my shoulders in defeat.

“What the fuck?” Her reaction mimics my own.

We talk ourselves in circles with reasons why Nate would’ve kept secrets. Kate texts her most questionable friends to ask about the club. All of which are dead ends. She suggests asking Isaiah straight up, but I’m not going to him for answers. If he hid his entire identity, he isn’t going to like that I know now.

She agrees to save the unanswered questions for later, so we turn on some music and start putting my house back together.

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Chapter twelve

Declan

The men who broke into Noel's house last night sit tied to chairs in front of me. Zander and I are waiting for them to wake up, and I'm growing more impatient by the second.

Chance had been able to catch a plate from one of the outside camera recordings. He traced it back to one of these assholes. A little more digging got us the other one. After collecting them for me, he brought them to the warehouse.

The one on the right begins to move, so I grab the bucket of ice and toss the contents at him. He yells out and tries to jump up but almost knocks his chair over instead. Looking around the room, his eyes settle on me, and he tries to pull himself out of the ropes like a desperate animal.

"What the fuck is this?" He yells, panicking.

"This is what the fuck happens when you mess with the wrong girl," I answer him.

Zander positions himself behind the man. The fucker slams his mouth shut, breathing heavy through his nose. Even better. I pull the knife out of my pocket and walk over to him.

"I was hoping you didn't want to talk. I'm not in the mood for conversation, either. In fact, I want to try something out. "

My knife clicks open when I get close enough to touch him. His chair clangs as he tries to move away from me. Zander presses down on his shoulders to keep him still.

Pulling his shirt away from him, I slice through it with the sharp blade. My pulse quickens as the tip of the blade breaks skin. The way it glides across without resistance quickly followed by blood calms my frayed nerves. The X on the right side of his chest looks as angry as I felt when I saw her fear.

He screams like a bitch, and I frown at him in disappointment. I was hoping he'd be harder to break.

His friend starts to wake beside us, so I retreat to toss ice at his friend's face. Everyone deserves a proper greeting after all.

"You're just in time, Mark. Colby and I were just about to play a game."

"What the fuck is going on?" Mark yells, still fighting the ropes tied around his arms and legs.

"I just told you. I'm about to play darts with Colby."

Colby fights harder against Zander and the ropes when my words sink in. Zander elbows him in the side of the head, and Colby hollers out but stops fighting. Mark starts yelling about letting them go, and it's a whole fucking drama fest.

Instead of listening to this dumb shit, I pull my gun and point it at Mark. Everyone gets real quiet then.

"Rule #1: Stop fucking yelling," I grind out through clenched teeth. "Now, I was trying to explain the situation to Colby. Since none of us are in the mood to talk about the break-in last night, we're going to play a game instead," I tell Mark.

“What do you want to know?” He starts out shouting but lowers his voice when I raise my eyebrow.

I stare at Mark for a minute before I nod my head.

“Alright.” I slip the gun back into my jeans and close my knife.

“What were you looking for last night?” I ask, my composure restored.

“Journals,” he answers plainly.

I look between Colby and Mark to decide if I believe him, and they both appear to be on the same page with that answer.

“Who wants them?”

Colby chimes in this time. “He will fucking kill us, Mark. Keep your mouth shut!”

I smile at that. “See, I knew we should’ve tried out that game first,” I say, pointing my knife at him.

“Fuck you!”

I flip the knife open and send it flying across the room to land dead center of the X on his chest. The warehouse instantly fills with Colby’s screams and Mark’s protests. Ignoring them, I walk over to retrieve my knife, wiping it off on his clothes.

Colby’s screams get quiet as he starts to sputter. His lung is either collapsing or filling with blood.

“You should probably save your breath,” I suggest.

Looking at Zander, I ask, “An eye next?”

“If you throw it too hard, it’ll kill him,” Zander cautions.

I click my tongue and look down at Colby. His head is hanging to one side, and his breathing is shallow. Zander picks his head up by his hair, but Colby only lets out a weak moan.

“Mark, we may need to hurry this up. Colby needs a doctor, I think,” I say to the man who hasn’t stopped cussing me out the past few minutes.

“Some guy named Rocky gave us each a grand to destroy the house and find some journals. We got a call that the girl was on her way home and to leave,” Mark says then spits in my direction.

Zander asks, “What about the alarm system?”

Mark glares at him. “He gave us the code.”

Fuck.

“Let us go. He needs a hospital,” Mark interrupts my thoughts.

“Eh, I’m not sure about that,” I answer him.

The cussing and yelling starts up again. If that’s all the information I’m going to get then the game is over. I throw my knife at Mark, landing it in his eye. His head falls forward, and the warehouse gets quiet.

“Hm, you were right Zander,” I say, amused.

Colby is turning blue from lack of oxygen, so I nod for Zander to finish him. If he can't speak, he's no use to us anymore. Zander twists his head from behind to snap his neck.

"Journals?" Zander asks.

"I don't have a fucking clue. Let's get this cleaned up."

When I walk into Noel's house, I hear singing in her bedroom. The music is playing throughout the house, so I know she doesn't hear me. I take the opportunity to find her cell. I transfer the information to a new one before smashing it and slipping it into my pocket. Then I walk to her bedroom to let her know I'm here .

Standing in the doorway, I watch them organize books on shelves. Kate is rambling on about who she's fucking, so I decide to wait it out. I'm mostly curious if Noel adds her own stories.

"Elle, he's the perfect situation for me. No commitment when he's out of town, which is often, but he wants me with him constantly when he's here. I think I'm in love," she says as she pretends to faint.

Noel laughs. "Just be careful. As in protection. If he has relationships all over the place like yours, you might catch something other than feelings."

Kate puts her hands on her hips. "I'm not new here. But you are. You were with Nate a long time, Noel. You know people still use condoms even if they're exclusive, right?"

Noel just stares at Kate, probably realizing she had my cock in her mouth this morning without bothering to ask if I was clean. Like I'd do a fucking thing to hurt her. I clear my throat.

Both of them jump at the sound and turn to look at me. Noel looks embarrassed, but Kate is unbothered by my listening in.

“Well, hey there, Declan! I hear the two of you had an eventful night.” Kate grins, obviously proud of her clever remark.

I stare at her for a beat, giving nothing away before shoving off the door frame and walking over to Noel.

“Go get ready. I’ll keep working on this,” I say before leaning down to kiss her parted lips.

“Oh shit! I lost track of time. I don’t even remember where I put my phone,” she says, looking around the room. “Um, okay, thank you, Dec.”

She walks into the en suite bathroom, and I pick up where she left off. Kate continues with her stack of books when she realizes I’m not going to entertain her.

“Be careful with her,” she says without looking at me. “I know she’s hiding something about the history between you two, and she’s certainly not giving any details about what’s happening now.”

“You want details about me, Kate?” I ask, raising an eyebrow.

She stops and glares at me. “That’s not what I meant.”

I step toward her, deciding to test a theory. “You aren’t curious about all the details of our eventful night?”

She stands her ground, anger flashing in her eyes. “I don’t want to fuck you, Declan. She’s protective of the people she cares about, and she’s always been guarded around

the topic of you. I just want you to understand what you're getting yourself into with her. Now, kindly back the fuck off."

I nod and step back, thankful she has at least one ally.

"I know exactly what I'm signing up for, Kate." I keep my eyes on hers. "She's been the center of my universe since I first laid eyes on her."

"Hm. Sunshine, huh?" She asks, obviously understanding the meaning of my nickname for Noel.

I nod, "Sunshine."

"Alright," she says with a nod, obviously satisfied with my intentions.

Noel is still getting ready when we finish with the books, so we walk into the living room. Kate turns the music off, and I sit in a chair that isn't ruined, pulling my cell from my pocket to check on some things.

"Let her know I'm a phone call away, will you?" Kate says, picking up her keys from a table.

"Mmhm," I answer, reading through an email.

When I finish answering emails, I decide to go check on Noel and find her putting on makeup. She looks to be ready otherwise .

"I found your phone," I say, handing her the replacement phone I picked up earlier today. I don't know who was tracking her, but they won't be anymore.

"Thanks," she says and smiles at me through the mirror as she stands to check the rest

of her outfit. Turning to face me she says, “I’m ready.” With a deep breath, she takes my hand.

“I’ve got you,” I reassure her and rub my thumb across her hand as we walk through the house out to her driveway.

When she catches sight of my bike, she stops and stares at me. “Declan, no.”

I slip my jacket and gloves on while she stares at me in disbelief. Then, I hold hers out, waiting for her to put her arms in the sleeves.

“Dec, I can’t...,” she breathes out.

“We can do whatever we want, sunshine,” I say and wink at her.

She relaxes and smiles but doesn’t move to put the jacket on, so I lift it slightly to prompt her. Sighing, she turns to let me put it on her. I pull her into me with her back against my front and kiss her ear.

“Good girl.”

She hisses in a breath and leans further into me.

“Let’s go,” I tell her.

When we get to the restaurant, the host brings us to a private room. Noel squeezes my hand tighter, and I squeeze back to reassure her.

The woman waiting for her stands but doesn’t smile. She looks at me with sadness before speaking to Noel.

“I didn’t realize you’d bring someone. I’m not sure what I need to say should be discussed in front of company,” Nate’s mother says disapprovingly .

“Not leaving,” I clip, pulling out a chair for Noel.

Instead of joining them, I stand against the wall and study the room.

“I apologize for making you think you needed a bodyguard to meet me,” she says to Noel.

I scoff but say nothing.

Ignoring me, she continues, “How have you been, Noel?”

“Why am I here, Jaclyn?”

That’s my girl.

Jaclyn smiles and nods her head, looking down at her fingers on the table.

“I get it, but I’m not your enemy. Nate and I resolved our past and built a relationship. Why do you still hold it against me?”

“He may have forgiven you, but he took it all out on me,” Noel says, her voice dripping with anger.

I push off the wall, my whole body tensing up at her words. “What did you say?” I ask through clenched teeth.

“He didn’t hit me, but there are other ways for spouses to inflict pain. I didn’t notice so much in college. For a while, I even thought it was sweet the way he’d get jealous

of my spending time with friends.

Eventually, he was asking for reassurance so often that it got annoying. No matter what I did or didn't do, he took everything to mean I would leave him. I didn't even realize how much effort I was spending convincing him of my loyalty and love until he was gone." She says every word without breaking eye contact with Jaclyn, holding her responsible for the broken man she married.

"I'd be careful where you place blame, Noel. Especially since you don't know the entire story," Jaclyn counters.

I grunt at her. "Then fucking enlighten us."

"Did you know Grant and I had a daughter?" She ignores me, only looking at Noel.

"What?" Noel asks in shock.

"She died when she was two. Losing a child can destroy a marriage. Grant wanted more children, and I couldn't bear the thought of having another little girl. Grant loves you like the daughter we lost, and he doesn't want you to know the truth." Jaclyn unloads all the heavy shit in one go.

"The truth about what?" I can hear Noel's sympathy in her voice. I'm not letting this woman manipulate her, so she better say something that means a fuck next.

"Keep in mind that Nate truly loved you, okay?"

She waits for Noel to agree, and I'm sure I know exactly what's coming next. But I'm not sure how Noel will react. I uncross my arms and fist my hands, bracing myself for the moment this woman goes too far.

“Your marriage was arranged when you were both fifteen. Nate insisted on moving here to let things happen naturally, so you wouldn’t feel forced to be with him,” Jaclyn explains.

“What the fuck?!” Noel raises her voice, and I take a step forward. She holds her hand up to me.

“Your father’s estate has certain stipulations,” she adds.

“What stipulations?!” Noel screams, lifting herself up with her hands on the table.

“Marriage to a specific type of family. A child,” Jaclyn whispers.

“I’ve heard enough,” I threaten. “What the fuck do you want?”

Noel tries to take back control and cuts in, “Wait, Declan, I need to understand!”

Fuck . I can hear the desperation in her voice. I glare at Jaclyn .

She holds up a USB drive. “This has everything. I think it may be best that you see for yourself. Nate wasn’t perfect, but he was under a great deal of pressure to do what was necessary. Your father is really to blame.”

“What do you want?” I demand again.

“I want justice for my son,” she says through tears.

Just then, someone slams the door to the private dining room open, and I point my gun at the intruder. Noel screams in surprise as I glare down the barrel of my gun at her father, Conner Anderson.

“Declan, that will not be necessary,” he says calmly.

I manage to move Noel behind me and keep my weapon aimed at his head.

“Noel and Jaclyn, you’re both coming with me. It seems we need to have a family meeting, and this is hardly the place,” he smoothly commands.

I kick the server’s door behind Noel and me. Walking backward, I shove Noel into the hall until the door closes in front of me. I drag Noel away by her hand expecting Conner to follow us.

“Wait!” She protests.

“Noel, later.”

Surprisingly, she doesn’t argue. I slip my gun into the holster inside my jacket before we walk through the restaurant. I practically drag Noel across the parking lot to my bike. Sliding our jackets and helmets on as fast as I can, I get us on the road.

“Noel, hold on to me tight. That’s right, sunshine, lock your fingers together. Lean when I lean,” I instruct through the headset.

I’m going much faster than she’s ready for in case Conner sends someone to follow us. She leans with me as I take an exit without slowing down.

“Perfect. You’re doing so good,” I say, trying to soothe her.

We pull into my driveway in no time, and I’m confident no one followed us through the winding roads and extra turns I took.

When I take her helmet off to find tears rolling down her face, I growl. I rip my

helmet off, throwing it to the ground. Her bright green eyes stare at me, tears spilling over. I wipe away her tears as best I can, but they're steadily replaced by more. She gently rests her hands on my wrists, so I stop to hold her face.

"I was wrong, Declan. I thought I was ready for this, for you, but look at me. I'm crying over another man when you asked me not to," she sobs.

I sigh, pulling her into me, letting her cry into my chest. Her hands fist into my shirt, and her body shakes violently. All I can do now is hold her and wait for the storm to pass.

When she begins to still, I lead her into the house. She maintains her grip around my body as we walk.

I guide her into the bathroom, silently raging on the inside. While the hot water fills the bathtub, I help her undress and get in. When I turn to leave, she stops me.

"Will you stay?" Her shaky voice pleads.

I pull my shirt over my head, and she watches as I shove my jeans off. She leans forward to indicate she wants me to sit behind her, so I sink into the warm water and pull her into me.

We sit in silence for a while as I rub her shoulders and trace my fingers down her arms. Her head lays back on my chest, and my chin rests on it.

My mind is busy planning my next move. I'm not sure if Noel understood everything, but one thing I am sure of is that I will be seeing Conner again very soon.

"How could I not have known it was arranged?" She whispers.

“You’ll never be forced to do anything you don’t choose for yourself again, I promise.”

“What justice could she want? Does she think his death wasn’t an accident?”

I don’t give her an answer to that. It’s too soon. Leaning forward slightly, I reach between her legs to let the water out. I help her out and dry her off. She doesn’t say anything else as I put her to bed and turn off the lamp.

With too much to do, I leave the room and head straight to my office.

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Chapter thirteen

Noel

Jolting awake, I sit up in a panic. Desperately, I reach out to find a lamp. Fingers wrap around my arm in the darkness. A scream rips from my lips. As I scramble to unwrap myself from the sheets, the hand tightens its grip, keeping me in place.

Declan's voice crawls out of the darkness. "Noel, shhh, come here."

He wraps his arms around me, holding me against his chest. My hands press against him, trying to fight for my freedom.

"Shhh, you're safe," he whispers above my head, holding my arms down.

I try to wiggle free of him, but he's stronger. Realizing I can no longer move my shoulders, I push with my feet, my head slamming into his jaw.

"Fuck! Noel, stop," he growls.

He wraps his legs around my waist, pinning me down completely. Screaming in frustration, I stop fighting in hopes he will loosen his grip. Instead, he kisses the top of my head and holds firm.

My breathing begins to match his deep, steady breaths, and the panic fades. The nightmare releases its hold, and his embrace feels less threatening.

“I won’t let anything happen to you. You’re safe,” he soothes.

“It was Nate. And my dad. They locked me in a dark room. I found a way out, but it was so dark. Footsteps were catching up to me, but I couldn’t see who it was or how to get away,” I whisper to him in the dark, explaining what woke me.

“It was just a dream. The only monster here is me, but I would never hurt you.”

His comment makes my head spin, reminding me of the fear I felt when he pointed a gun at my father.

“Would you have shot my dad?” I ask.

“Yes,” he says, without hesitation.

“What the fuck?” I whisper more to myself than him.

“He’s done using you,” he says with a chilling certainty that sends goosebumps all over my body.

“You knew?” I whisper.

“I’ve learned some of it more recently. At sixteen, all I knew was that he had the resources to keep me from you,” he clarifies.

“Those rumors about you with other girls in high school?” I ask.

“If I didn’t make you believe it, he was going to send you to an all girls school out of state. I couldn’t put you through that,” he admits.

His words break me. All this time has passed. Too much time. He let me think the

worst of him, so things would be easier for me. He was everything to me, and I ached for him for so long. I'm filled with regret for not knowing. If only I had known, things could've been different.

He spins me around to straddle him, and I place my hands on his chest. His hands cover both sides of my head as he gently pulls my forehead to his lips. My pulse quickens at the roughness of his fingers digging into me, and my chest tightens at the softness in his kiss.

Desperate to take back what was stolen from us, I whisper to him, "Make me forget. "

"Forgetting isn't enough. I won't stop until all that's left is me." His threat sends a shiver down my spine.

My nails dig into the skin of his shoulders. His hands squeeze my ass as he rubs his hard cock against my soaking pussy.

"Feel me, Noel? This is for you," he growls as his hands grip my hips hard, grinding me against him.

"Declan," I breathe out.

"It's always been you," he whispers before his tongue takes mine by storm. His hunger for me is just as strong as mine for him. We claim each other with teeth and lips and tongues. Our breathing and moaning mixes together in my ears, filling every empty part of me.

He lifts us both up then lays me down. The bed moves as his weight is removed, and my heart begins to race. I hear a drawer open and close, and my legs begin to shake in anticipation.

“Declan?” I ask in the dark.

The mattress dips between my legs, letting me know where he is, but he doesn’t speak. Packaging rips as he opens a condom.

His hands touch my raised knees, and I jump at his touch. Open palms slide down my outer thighs, and he kisses the tops of each knee. When his hands slide up my legs, his fingers wrap around my calves, pulling them apart to open me up for him.

“Declan?” I ask again more desperately.

“What is it, sunshine?” His voice is smooth as he places himself between my legs and rubs his hands down my calves to my feet.

“I can’t see anything,” I whisper.

“I want you to feel everything,” he says, his voice deepening .

He massages my feet then continues back up my calves, and I understand his meaning. Everything he does, I can feel in my core. My body is relaxing under his skilled touch—my emotions being replaced with desire.

A whimper escapes my parted lips as he reaches my inner thighs.

“It’s just us now,” his voice rasps through the darkness.

His lips take over as he closes in on my pussy. My whole body is shaking before he finally covers me with his hot mouth.

“Ohh,” I cry out as he explores with his tongue.

He sucks and licks until my hips begin to move on their own. Then, he pulls away and adjusts himself between my legs.

He pushes the tip of his cock in. I grip the sheets—the stretching pain a reminder of his size. He pulls out just to push in a little farther. With each slow thrust, he makes his way deeper.

“Noel,” he moans. “Does it hurt?” His voice is thick with desire.

“I’m okay,” I whimper between breaths.

He stills, letting me get used to him.

“You’re doing so good. It’s halfway in now.”

“Half?” I ask in disbelief. “Declan,” I breathe out, unable to finish my thought as he pushes in farther still.

I hear something click. Cold liquid drips onto my pussy. Then he gently rubs it around my clit. Pulling out almost completely to rub the liquid all over me, the loss of him not at all what I want. I lift my hips, silently begging him to continue.

A dark chuckle fills the room before he blows his cool air over my pussy. It tingles from the chill. When he stops blowing on me, the sensation only intensifies .

I can feel myself relaxing around him, allowing him in easier when he pushes in once more. When he pulls out again, I can feel my own slick arousal increasing around him.

“Mm, that’s it, baby. Let me in,” he praises.

I tighten my legs around him to stop him from pulling out so far.

“Don’t hold back. Please. Give me all of you,” I beg, wanting to show him that I was made for him.

He growls in response.

His arms cage me in as he begins to move his hips. His lips place small kisses all over my face and shoulders.

The pain is replaced quickly with pleasure. My mouth needs him as much as the rest of me. I kiss him everywhere I can reach as he thrusts into me—every nerve drawing tighter to my core.

“You were worth every second I’ve had to wait to make you mine,” he praises.

I whimper at his words. He pulls me into his chest and stands, walking us across the room. I grind against him as I kiss and lick his neck and shoulders.

He moans as he opens the door to his bedroom, slamming my back against the wall. Holding me from under my thighs, he thrusts into me as he sucks a nipple into his mouth. My insides clench around him, and I lose myself in the waves of an orgasm as he bites down on my nipple.

“Yes, Declan,” I cry out as my body shakes.

“Fuck, you feel so good when you come,” he says, pumping into me until my pussy stops pulsing around him.

Then he continues walking while he licks and nibbles my neck and shoulders. A light switch clicks, but I’m too lost in him to care where he’s taking me. After a few more

steps, I'm lowered onto a cold surface .

My eyes pop open to a dimly lit room. The ceiling fan picks up speed, the cool air spreading goosebumps all over my body. The leather table I'm on is just the right height to allow Declan to stay inside me.

He circles my clit with his thumb as he slides in and out of me gently until my hips move with him again. I lean back on my hands to watch him. His dark eyes are shaded by furrowed brows as he watches his cock push in and out of me.

"You're fucking perfect, Noel," he says, looking up at me.

The heat begins to coil in my core—another orgasm building at the sight of him fucking me. He presses his palm into my lower stomach, keeping me in place as continues to rub circles into my clit. In no time, I come undone for him again.

My legs shake uncontrollably as I come down from the high. Declan pulls out of me while I'm still riding the last of it.

"No," I protest his absence, but he's kneeling down in front of me.

"Just a taste, baby girl," he purrs before his mouth devours me.

I cry out at the warmth of his mouth soothing my already sore opening. He slides his tongue inside then sucks on my clit, causing my body to jerk.

"You need a taste, don't you?" He taunts.

Laying me down on the table, he helps me hang my head over the edge. He slides his dick into my mouth while he cradles the back of my head.

“Taste your come on me,” he says, as he fucks my throat hard.

“Good girl,” he breathes out, brushing the tears away as I gag around him.

When he pulls out, I grab his hips to keep him. I lick down his shaft and suck his balls into my mouth, burying my face between his legs.

“Fuck,” he hisses and lets go of my head to pinch both of my nipples hard .

I moan into him and continue licking and sucking, not willing to release my grip on his hips.

He slaps my pussy, and I release his balls with a scream. Stepping back, he grabs one of my wrists. I hear a click and feel something pinch my wrist.

“What?” I ask, looking at the handcuff around my wrist.

Declan is already locking my other wrist in when he asks, “How many orgasms can you handle?”

Pulling my wrists apart, I look up at him.

“I don’t understand,” I tell him.

“How many have you had back to back?” He rephrases the question.

I’m slow to answer because I honestly can’t think of sex before this.

“Only one,” I tell him, pretty sure that’s right. Oh, wait. “Twice, just now.”

He grins and climbs over me on the table. Grabbing my hips, he flips me to my

stomach. Then, he lifts my ass in the air, forcing me up on all fours. He slaps my ass hard, and I cry out in surprise.

I feel something slip around my waist and click behind my back. I hear a chain clank above me then feel him click it into whatever is around my waist.

“Declan?” I ask, unsure what is happening.

“You look beautiful in chains,” he says from behind me. “I think I’ll buy us some for the bedroom.”

My heart speeds up as fear trickles down my spine. I’m attached to the fucking ceiling. My breathing becomes erratic, and I’m about to ask him to take it off when his tongue makes contact with my pussy from behind.

The protest dies on my lips, and I moan instead. His tongue travels up my slit all the way to my ass. I try to pull away, but the chain hooked to my waist keeps me in place.

“This ass will be mine too,” he promises .

“No,” I tell him, still trying to pull away.

He licks it again, and I moan out his name.

“You’ll love it. I’ll make it feel so good.”

I whimper at his promise.

“Tonight I want this tight pussy dripping with my come,” he growls. “Do you trust me?”

“What?” I ask, confused.

“Can I take off the condom? I’m clean,” he clarifies.

“Oh. Yes, I’m on the pill. And I’m clean too.”

He leans over to kiss and nibble my back and ass. His fingers tickle my sides on their way to my nipples. The sensation of a sharp sting quickly gives way to relief as he pinches them. Desire is already pulling me under yet again.

“Fuck me, Dec,” I plead, my voice full of desperation.

Placing a hand on my lower back, he touches my wet pussy with the head of his cock.

“You want this?” He teases.

“Yes,” I moan.

He slams into me with a growl. Slowly, he pulls out before pounding into me again. He repeats the slow, hard rhythm.

My arms begin to shake because of how close I’m having to keep my hands, so I lower to my elbows. The angle allows him to go even deeper, and it occurs to me that’s why he cuffed me in the first place.

“Fucking perfect,” he growls, and I tilt my hips to give him more as he picks up the pace.

“That’s it,” he praises again.

He lifts my legs out to the side, adding to the pressure that’s building again at my

core. He pounds into me, pushing me closer to the edge .

“Oh, god, yes,” I cry out. “Come with me this time, baby,” I beg him.

He slams into me once more pushing me over the edge—my voice hoarse as I scream. He drops my legs to squeeze my hips hard as he empties inside of me.

“Mine, Noel. You’re fucking mine,” he growls.

His thumb gently pushes into my other hole as he pumps into me a few more times. The sensation of him being inside of both holes only extends the orgasm as it tries to slow.

We both still as the waves slow. He detaches the chain from my waist band, wrapping his arm around me to keep me from falling. He lowers me to the table.

I roll to my back between his legs, holding out my cuffed hands to him. He removes them with the key he kept at the corner of the table we’re on. I try to rub the sting away as he gets off the table.

He scoops me up and carries me to the bathroom. My legs are barely able to hold me under the warmth of the water. Noticing my struggle, he pulls me into him, wrapping his arm around my lower back to give me the support I need.

His other hand brushes the hair from my face before he kisses the tip of my nose. I drop my face into his chest and groan. He chuckles at how weak I am.

“What did you do to me?” I ask, more tired than I’ve ever been.

“I fucked you. And I’m going to do it again tomorrow. And the next day. We have a lot of time to make up for,” he says as he washes my body.

“I thought I wasn’t good enough for you,” I tell him the truth, too tired to hold it in any longer.

“I know, sunshine. I’ll make him pay for all of it,” he promises.

“You can’t kill my father,” I weakly protest.

“I can and will kill anyone to protect you,” he says, holding his ground .

“It’s my problem to fix. I think I have a plan,” I’m so delirious now that I feel like I’m not making any sense.

“What plan?” He asks, soothing me with his voice as the warm water falls over us.

My eyes are closed as I lean against his chest. I’m dozing off.

“If I tell you, you’d try to stop me,” I mumble.

“Hm, guess I’ll have to keep an eye on you,” he says, sounding amused.

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Chapter fourteen

Declan

I sit in my office cooling down from my workout when my phone vibrates. Zander's name appears on the Caller ID.

"What's up?" I answer.

"Got some info on Veronica Panetti."

"Let's hear it," I say, looking at the closed door wondering if my girl is up yet.

"She hasn't been back to Cordeliers since Nate died."

"Is she dead?" I ask.

"Nope, but she's pretty fucking pregnant."

"The fuck? Did Leah tell you this?" I ask.

"Nope. Haven't heard from her since you brought her to the warehouse," he says.

I guess I know what I need to do today.

"Thanks. I'll see you at the warehouse in a couple of hours," I tell him and hang up.

Next, I dial Chance. He picks up right before it goes to voicemail.

“I need you with Noel while I handle some things today.”

“Got it.” He sounds like I woke him up.

“Put Garrett on your tail. She may try to dip. Let her think she has if she tries, but be ready to intervene if she goes to either of her parents.”

He chuckles. Stalking is his favorite assignment.

“Got it. Later,” he says and hangs up.

Downing the rest of my water, I walk down the hall to wake her.

My bedroom is still dark as night thanks to blackout curtains, so I prop them open to help her along. She’s almost completely uncovered, spread out across my Alaskan king bed. Her honey and chestnut curls fan out across her pillow. The room smells of her soft, vanilla scent.

Sitting in a chair across the room, I decide to wait a little longer. After last night, I’ll be damned if she goes back to her own house. Even though Isaiah agreed to work with me, I don’t trust him not to take advantage of the situation. Conner’s desperate to keep his money, and she’s only ever been a fucking pawn to him. Isaiah stands to gain a lot by taking his offer.

Noel could take things one of two ways this morning. She’s either going to distance herself and stick to her plan of handling shit on her own, or she’s going to wake up resigned to letting me deal with it.

Personally, I hope she chooses to fight. Not that I will let her handle any of it on her

own, but she needs to find her voice in all of this. I want him to pay in blood for keeping her from me and threatening my family, but I won't take away her opportunity to fight her own war.

The light filters in through the blinds, landing on her face. I've imagined this moment for years. Since I was sixteen falling asleep to her voice on the other end of the phone, I imagined how she'd look when she woke up from our first fuck. Years haven't changed my obsession with her. I may have chained her up last night, but I've been wearing her chains far longer.

She moves, and the light is now directly on her eyes. They flicker open a few times. When she keeps them open, she lays perfectly still looking up at the ceiling. Finally, she sits up. She looks at me, smiles, and stretches. That's when I see the pain flash across her face. She stops mid stretch then lowers her arms back to her sides.

"Good morning."

She swallows hard. "Good morning," she says cautiously as the memories of our night seep in.

I stand slowly then stalk toward her, limiting the time she has to make up her mind about this plan of hers. She maintains eye contact as I close in on her, and right before I get to her I see her decision flash across her beautiful face.

Her sweet smile doesn't touch her eyes as she takes my outstretched hand. Lie better.

"Sleep well?" I ask, brushing my thumb under the corner of her eye.

She blushes as I help her out of bed. "What time is it?" She asks then reaches for her throat.

“Come on. Coffee will soothe your throat,” I tell her, trying to hide my smirk as she wobbles to get dressed.

Her eyes question me, and her cheeks flush.

“Don’t be embarrassed. Your screams are my new favorite sound. I heard everything you don’t want to say in them,” I stare into her eyes, searching into her soul for what I know she’s already buried back down deep.

I kneel to kiss her thigh and help her into her shorts. After I’ve buttoned them, I look up at her from my knees. They say eyes are the windows to the soul, and hers are burning with desire.

“Do what you think you need to do, sunshine. As long as I know your fire burns for me, I will do the same.”

She remains perfectly still, trying to decide how to respond. I stand and take her hand to lead her into the kitchen, not bothering to wait for a response.

She sips her coffee slowly, and I take the time to send some texts and emails .

“Declan, I have to ask you something,” she says, clearing her throat.

“Anything.”

She pauses, trying to find the right words. “How many women have you brought into that room?”

Looking for a fight, I see. I chuckle. “That room is my home gym, Noel. You’re the first to ever be in my house.” I smile.

The dumbfounded look on her face has me chuckling again.

“Why do you have handcuffs and a chain in the ceiling of your gym?” She asks, heating up because her easy way out didn’t work.

“The chain is my spot when I lift, but the handcuffs I did buy for you,” I explain, watching her face redden and her eyes flash.

“Why?”

Licking my lips, I smack them together. “If you’re restrained, you won’t be able to get away from me again.”

The flames burn in her eyes.

“Did you like it?” I ask, sauntering over to her, my thumb tracing the outline of her parted lips.

Bright green eyes glare up at me. “Yes,” she breathes.

“Good.” I lean down to take her lips.

She holds back. Then she breaks the kiss and turns her head.

“I would’ve done anything, Declan. For you. For us. You should’ve told me,” she says, her voice shaking.

“It doesn’t matter now,” I whisper, pressing my forehead into hers.

“It does! You want me to believe you just let me marry someone else? He couldn’t send me away after I turned eighteen! Why didn’t you step in?” she presses.

Fuck.

“My hands were tied. You don’t understand,” I offer, knowing it isn’t the explanation she deserves.

“No! You don’t understand!” She tries to push away from me, her anger building.

I hold her to me, not willing to let go.

“You were there when I closed my eyes the first time he kissed me. You were there when I closed my eyes the first time he made love to me. No matter what I did, I couldn’t get rid of you, not all the way. He deserved better. It took me so long to love him, and I had to live with that guilt. Because of you. Because it should’ve been you.”

She slaps at my chest every few words, trying to push me away. I can’t bring myself to let go.

“He didn’t deserve your love, Noel,” I growl.

She stops shoving me away, but the distance in her eyes might as well be a slap in the face.

Her voice chills me to my core. “But you do?”

What the fuck do I say to that?

My eyes bore into hers. I may not deserve her, but she's mine. I'll do whatever it takes to right the wrongs—to make it up to her.

“Take me home, Declan.”

“Noel,” I stop before I even begin. My jaw clenches shut.

“Do you plan to handcuff me to your bed? Keep me without giving me the option?” She asks, pointedly.

I take a few steps back, raising my hands in surrender. She’s fucking right. I promised her she’d only do what she wanted from now on. I’m no better than them if I force her to stay.

The drive to her house is silent other than the radio. She finally breaks it when we pull into her driveway.

“I don’t know that truck,” she says nervously.

“I do,” I say, meeting her eyes. “Chance is going to be with you today as a precaution.”

“What?” Her voice squeaks out in surprise.

“I won’t leave you unprotected,” I tell her.

She huffs and gets out of my truck. Chance greets her, nods at me, and follows her inside.

I pull out of her drive and go straight to the warehouse where Leah is waiting to see me before her shift at Cordeliers.

When I walk into the office, I see she’s doing her best to win Zander over. He’s standing as still as a statue while she circles around him, touching him everywhere. She stops when she hears the door but only to look at me with a pout.

“I want to renegotiate,” she says.

“Don’t fucking care,” I clip.

“Keep the money,” she continues before turning to face Zander again, “I want you.”

He winks at her and walks away.

“You gonna save me some money?” I ask him to fuck with her.

He scoffs and looks at her. “Whores aren’t for me. I don’t share well.”

“Keep me in a cage, baby,” she suggests.

“Now, that is tempting,” he says as if he’s considering it.

“Leah, where the fuck is Veronica?” I ask—too pissed to listen to them dance around whatever this is between them.

“She got knocked up and decided to keep the baby. She hasn’t come to work in about six months,” she says as understanding dawns on her. “Oh, fuck. I didn’t think you’d care since you only asked me to keep tabs on Conner and get information about Noel.”

“You didn’t think Veronica having Nate’s baby might pertain to Noel?” I ask, my voice dripping with sarcasm.

“If he didn’t get his wife pregnant, he probably didn’t get Veronica pregnant either,” she snaps back.

“Ever seen this man?” I ask, holding up my phone with a picture of Grant Williams

and ignoring her attitude.

“Nope,” she says, as she smacks the “p” at the end of the word.

Well, fuck. I was hoping he was involved, so I wouldn’t have to deal with the pregnant chick directly.

“Do you keep in touch with Veronica?” I ask.

“Of course. She will be back after the baby is born,” she answers as though I’m an idiot for not knowing how it works.

“Give me the address,” Zander says, stepping into her.

She nods, all sarcasm—even words—gone.

Neither of them back away from the other as she reaches into his pocket to take out his cell phone. She holds it up to his face to unlock it with facial recognition then types something in. When she’s finished, she presses the phone against his chest and stares up at him.

“Good girl,” Zander says as he tucks a piece of hair behind her ear.

He takes the phone and gives her his back a few feet away.

“Run along, pet ,” he says without looking at her .

She leaves without another word.

“All bark and no bite,” he says as he locks up the office.

Grabbing my phone as soon as we get into the truck, I scroll through my messages to find out that Noel did already slip Chance. She ran straight to her father-in-law. Interesting.

“Are we really about to rough up a pregnant girl?” Zander asks.

“Didn’t I just witness you agree to lock an actual whore in a cage?” I ask, utterly confused by him implying he lives on the right side of wrong.

“She’s already going to hell, Dec. The unborn is different,” he tries to reason with me.

“We aren’t going to lay a finger on the pregnant girl, Zander. I just want to know who’s paying the bills now that she’s not working. I’m sending someone to watch the apartment. You and I have other shit to do.”

I peel out of the parking lot and call Isaiah.

“Hey, Dec, your old man is fucking awesome with this shit,” he answers cheerfully.

“So I hear,” I answer. “Has Conner come by to see you yet?”

“Yep. Yesterday. I signed everything, and it was exactly what you thought. When is this all gonna blow?” He asks.

“Soon,” I say and hang up.

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:31 am

Chapter fifteen

Noel

Grant closed the blinds to his office as soon as I showed up with tears in my eyes. Now we sit in silence as I try to process that it's all true.

"Noel, I'm sorry," he offers after several minutes.

"What's on this?" I ask, holding up the USB drive that I grabbed off the table when the commotion started last night.

He shakes his head. "I don't know what is on that drive, sweetheart."

"What does Isaiah and his club have to do with me?" I ask, trying to get some answers.

"Isaiah wanted money that his father couldn't touch, so Nate put the account in his name. Isaiah probably doesn't even realize it's in your name now," Grant speculates.

I nod my understanding and get up to leave. "What does Jaclyn mean by wanting justice?" I ask.

"Noel, do not meet that woman alone and don't open that file. Whatever it is can't be good," he warns. "In fact, let me handle Jaclyn myself. She is a grieving mother grasping at straws to blame someone for her pain."

“No, I need to know,” I say solemnly.

“Call me naive and perhaps blinded by love, but I do not believe my son would’ve done anything to hurt you,” he says, but his face says otherwise.

He and I both know the facts don’t support that assumption .

“I’ll be in touch either way.” I stand to leave.

He hands me a business card before hugging me goodbye. “Call him anytime should you find yourself in need. I’ll let him know to be on standby for you.”

“Thank you,” I say, taking the card and leaving his office.

Once inside my car on the private level of Grant Holdings parking garage, I pull my cell out to send Kate a message.

I’m coming to stay for a few nights.

My phone chimes as soon as I back out of my parking spot.

Yay!!

I smile, thankful for her more than ever today. I’m sure to watch my mirrors the entire way to her house to be sure no one is following.

Parking inside her garage, I hide the USB drive inside my glove box and get out of the car. The door in the garage opens into a mud room off of her kitchen, which is where I find her waiting for me with a glass of wine.

“Oh, you are an angel,” I moan, taking the glass from her.

She laughs and follows me into her living room where I plop down into an oversized chair and tuck my feet underneath me.

“Spill it, ma’am,” she orders, “Every juicy little detail!”

I fill her in on everything in regards to how the meeting with Jaclyn went last night and what I learned from Grant.

“Whoa. A child? As in, you need to have one?” She asks .

“I don’t know what she meant, and the only way I’ll be able to find out is if I can meet her again since Grant said he didn’t know what she meant either.”

“What about Declan? He was there? What did he think about all of this?” She asks.

“He already knew. And he’s keeping other things from me too,” I admit. Saying it out loud somehow makes it hurt worse.

“Maybe he has a good reason?” She suggests.

“Maybe, but we can’t build a relationship on secrets, Kate. My entire life has been built on fucking secrets.”

“He’s going to make up for it. I’m giving him the benefit of doubt. Your tune has changed quite a bit about him. You stayed with him again? Did you sleep with him this time?” She asks.

I sigh, knowing I can’t lie to her because she’d be able to see it in my face.

“Ah! I knew you were walking a little funny!” She squeals and giggles, not even needing my admission to know the truth.

“Great, like that’s not embarrassing,” I say, blushing.

“He gives big dick energy, so I’d be super disappointed if you weren’t sore all over. I like to pride myself on being able to read that particular quality in a man,” she says as she flips her hair.

I smile to myself and sip my wine.

“Why are you here instead of with him?” She asks.

“Because I’m going to deal with my shit. And because I’m pissed at him for keeping secrets from me. I can’t be with him until I’m done with my dead husband’s family drama. Well, and my own family drama, I suppose,” I admit.

“And why not!?” She asks, completely appalled.

“I’m more likely to get the answers I need if my parents don’t know I’m with him yet. Also, my dad threatened to keep him away from me before, and he stayed away for ten years. He could’ve come to me, but he didn’t. I need to not feel like hitting him for that before I can see him again. What if my dad threatens him again? He’s just going to leave me in the dark again?”

“For once in your life, Noel, fuck everyone else. Who cares what your parents think about who you date now? The fact that they arranged your marriage to Nate is proof enough that they don’t deserve the opportunity to explain themselves. Declan does not strike me as a coward. He must’ve had a good reason to stay away.”

If only I could bring myself to tell her that Declan wants to kill my dad, literally. Or that he chained me a fucking ceiling to literally keep me from leaving him again figuratively. It sounds dumb even in my head.

“Well, I’m going to get answers first,” I placate her.

My phone chimes in the kitchen, and I know in the depths of my soul that it’s Declan. I ditched Chance to go to Grant Holdings. I couldn’t show up there with him without having to explain who hired him to Grant. Plus, I need some space from Declan to figure this out, and I can’t have that if he knows where I am. I ignore the phone for now and ask Kate about her coffee beans.

Kate’s family owns a coffee shop, and she recently began experimenting with roasting her own coffee beans. She says it’s her way of having her own piece of the pie. Her brothers have handled the business since her parents retired a few years ago.

She was a surprise baby when her brothers were already in high school. Her father has always spoiled her, and her brothers do the same. The only difference is her father turns a blind eye to her wild lifestyle while her brothers watch her like a hawk, always there to protect and save her when she takes things too far. They were all shocked when she said she wanted to roast coffee beans and mass produce them when she settled on the right flavors .

“Hello?” Kate is staring at me from across the room.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t hear you,” I admit, my mind wandering.

“Aren’t you going to check your phone?” She’s looking at me like I’m losing my mind.

“Yeah, I better check it,” I say, getting up.

I have two messages from my mom. I reply that I do want to meet her for lunch on Tuesday. That works out even better than going to their house. I’d much rather ask her some of these questions in person without Dad around.

Setting my phone back down, I realize how much I wanted it to be Declan. The man admits to wanting to kill my own father and keeping life-altering secrets from me, but I desperately want a text from him. What does that say about me?

“Was it him?” Kate asks.

“No,” I reply, unable to keep the disappointment out of my voice.

She looks at me like I’m missing something. “So, call him, Noel.”

“Maybe later.”

“Okay. Why don’t you tell me what really happened between you two in high school?” She asks, crossing her arms.

I sigh and decide it’s time to come clean.

“Declan and I met at school and exchanged numbers for a group project. After the project was done, we kept talking. My parents found out about him after we had hung out with groups a few times and basically wouldn’t let me do anything with anyone. They never told me I couldn’t talk to him, but they started coming up with other plans or excuses as to why I couldn’t leave the house.

When I finally convinced them to let me go to a baseball game with friends, my dad showed up early to find us right before we kissed. That same weekend there had been a party that I wasn’t allowed to go to because my parents were keeping me from him. He got mad because I refused to sneak out to meet him there.

That Monday, the rumors were everywhere. He had hooked up with two girls at the same time. I didn’t want to believe it. The guy I thought he was wouldn’t have done that. But he avoided me the rest of that week.

I finally worked up the courage to call him the following weekend. He immediately asked me if my dad knew I was calling him, and the conversation crashed and burned from there. He wouldn't admit or deny the rumors, but I didn't push. We ended up agreeing that we couldn't be together because of my dad, and that was that."

Kate sits quietly when I finish giving her the gist of the situation. It sounds so simple and silly, but it didn't feel that way at the time.

"So you never found out if he really did it?" She asks.

Surprised by that being the part she focuses on, I shake my head. "Not until last night."

Kate clears her throat. "And...?"

"My dad threatened to send me away to an all girls boarding school if he didn't make me believe it was true. He said he didn't want to put me through that and that my dad had resources to keep us apart. I'm not sure what that last part meant. I guess that he knew my dad could send me to a school like that?"

"Damn," she says in disbelief.

"Yep. I need a change of subject." Grabbing my wine glass, I gulp the rest down.

"Then let me tell you about the ridiculous first date experience I had last night!" Kate takes the sad mood and flips everything upright again with her bubbly story .

"I thought you were in love with the other guy from the charity event?" I ask, laughing.

"Oh, I am! But we're seeing other people when he's out of town," she explains as

though this is perfectly normal.

We spend the rest of the evening cooking dinner, watching TV and drinking way too much wine. We both stumble into her bed, and I don't even think to look at my phone before I pass out.

The pounding in my head wakes me up to Kate's sunlit room. My eyes and mouth are dry and scratchy from too much wine last night, so I stumble out of bed rubbing my eyes on my way to the kitchen.

The aroma of fresh coffee fills the air. This will be the first time I've tried Kate's newest blend. It smells amazing, and I desperately need it. The Cozy Cup's Ember Roast. Based on our conversation last night, Kate is ready to talk to Declan about shipping logistics.

Declan.

The thought of him has me searching for my phone.

Know this, sunshine. I'm in every shadow.

"Jesus Christ!" I yell.

Kate comes running. "What's wrong?!"

I show her the message from Declan, and she stares at me with wide eyes.

"Stalker, much?" She says, laughing .

I glare at her.

“Noel, men like him don’t play by the rules. You think he’s ever had to chase a woman? I don’t think he’s even considered dating one other than you. Your house was broken into, and you’ve got all this shit going on with your in-laws and dad. He’s probably actually keeping tabs on you to keep you safe.”

She’s right. He probably knows where she lives by now and has Chance following me again.

Stay in the shadows as long as you'd like. I'm going to find a flashlight.

He responds immediately.

Tick Tock

A shiver runs through me at his threat.

Chapter sixteen

Noel

Day two of no contact with Declan. I fluctuate between wanting to call him and reminding myself that he has my number and knows exactly what I need to hear from him.

My morning at work blurs past, thankfully. Before I realize the time, a knock on the door takes my attention from my laptop to see Mom stepping into my office.

“Hey, Mom,” I say, realizing the time.

“Hey, Elle, did you forget I was taking you to lunch?” She asks with a smile.

I haven’t heard from my father since Saturday night, but I have no doubt he put her up to this. What I don’t know is how much he’s told her, so I have to play along with how she behaves.

She hugs me, and we stop by to see Uncle Joe in his office before leaving. My mother is my opposite in so many ways. She’s 5’7” to my 5’2” and blonde to my brunette. She is outgoing like Kate, but I’m more reserved. I’ve always suspected that she needs me to be this way. Mom likes things to go her way, and I learned early on not to fight her on most of them.

She chats about random topics in the car. I mostly add in a comment randomly to keep her talking. So far, she seems oblivious to the whole fiasco with Jaclyn and

Declan this weekend .

We're seated immediately at her favorite lunch spot. She finally decides to show her cards now that we're in public, surrounded by people on all sides.

"Well, sweetheart, I'm not going to beat around the bush here. Joe came over last week just raving to your father about your new client."

My alarm bells immediately start ringing. The only new client I have is Declan, so is this how Dad found out about him coming back into my life? He certainly wasn't surprised to see him with me when he barged in on my meeting with Jaclyn.

"I know you fancied yourself in love with him as a kid, but I thought you understood your responsibilities to this family now."

My entire body is burning with rage. I can't even speak.

"Oh, don't look at me like that. We didn't want to bother you with minor details since you had Nate, but it's time you know. Daddy needs a legitimate heir with whom to leave the estate, and that Adams boy is not good enough to father our grandchildren. We actually have someone else in mind. It's time we discuss Isaiah Canton as an option."

"What the fuck, Mom?" I shriek loudly.

"Noel Elise Williams! This is exactly why you can't be trusted to make these choices for yourself. You get back in touch, and he's already poisoning you with his subpar manners." She chastises me in whispers across the table.

"I know that my marriage to Nate was arranged. Have you done the same with Isaiah?" I ask, unable to hide the anger vibrating in my voice.

“The ‘how’ and ‘why’ doesn’t matter, Noel. You will marry the Canton boy and get yourself pregnant within the year,” she says coldly.

Suddenly, a sense of clarity washes over me. Standing from the table, I stare her down. The waitress rushes over asking if everything is alright. My mother turns her best smile on to placate the girl as though nothing is happening when she just confirmed that my entire life I’ve just been a puppet on a string for them.

“Noel, please sit,” she says calmly with the same condescending smile she gave the waitress.

Without a word, I turn and walk away. Walking through the restaurant, I notice all the happy couples having lunch together, blissful in their ability to choose their partners.

They’ve misjudged me. There’s not a damn thing they can do to trick or force me into marrying someone of their choosing again. I have no doubt they will try, but it’s much harder to pull off the same trick a second time.

There’s only one person I want to be with, and they won’t stop me this time. I find his name and press call.

“Sunshine?” He answers on the second ring. I can sense a tone of annoyance in his voice, but I’m relieved to hear it regardless.

“Will you come get me from Ashwood Bistro?” I ask, holding my breath.

“Get into the blacked out Camaro right outside,” he says.

I stop walking and look around. The window to a black Camaro rolls down just to my left. “Declan?”

“It’s Chance. Get in, and he’ll bring you to me,” he says and hangs up.

Putting the phone down, I quickly duck into the passenger seat of the car waiting for me. Chance squeals the tires as he speeds down the road.

“How long have you been following me?” I ask.

He side-eyes me and smirks but doesn’t answer. I stare at his profile for a few moments hoping he’ll change his mind. When he doesn’t give in, I look out the window. My heart is pounding with anticipation of seeing Declan again .

Chance pulls up to the door at Velocity and waits for me to get out. When I open the door to the lobby, I notice the Camaro slip into a parking spot beside Declan’s truck. I guess keeping up with me is his sole purpose today.

Claire’s smile greets me when I step inside. “Mr. Adams is waiting for you,” she says, gesturing to the hall that leads to his office.

Before I make it to his door, I try to think of what to say to him. I wanted to slay my dragons alone, but they’re my fucking parents. Taking a deep breath, I open the door and step inside.

“Close the door,” he says without looking up from his computer.

I do as I’m told, frozen just inside the doorway. A moment passes.

“Come here, Noel.” Leaning back in his chair, he crosses his arms over his broad chest.

When our eyes lock, the anxiety of the past couple of days melts away. The heat in his stare pulls me in, and I go to him without hesitation.

He turns his chair to face me as I find myself behind the desk with him. His unreadable expression gives nothing away. But his eyes dare me to touch him. His arms remain crossed as he stares up at me, forcing me to make a move.

My fingers run through his soft hair then down his face. His jaw clenches beneath my touch. I lean down to kiss him. As soon as I make contact, his hands are on me. He stands to spin me around so my back is against his front.

“Did you find the answers you needed?” He whispers into my ear.

Trying to control my erratic breathing, I nod my head in response.

“Use your words,” he growls.

“I don’t want to face this without you.” My confession rushes out.

He turns me back around to face him, and his hands grip my hips. His thunderous face searches mine.

“I want you. Yesterday. Today. Tomorrow. Right now, Declan, please.”

He pulls my dress up to my waist and shoves me backward before lifting me to slam me down on his desk.

“Declan,” I cry out at the roughness.

My hands gravitate to his belt. He shoves my top down as I do the same with his pants.

“Two fucking days, Noel,” he says as he moves my thong to the side and shoves his cock inside of me.

I cry out in a mixture of pleasure and pain at the fullness. He remains still, allowing us both a moment.

He sucks on my ear and whispers, “Goddamn, I missed you.”

I whimper and move my hips against him, letting him know I’m ready for more.

He stands back to his full height and slowly pulls out of me before slamming back in, taking my breath away. He does it again, but this time I feel his finger slide in too. While he fucks me, his finger curves inside to rub the spot that forces my insides to tighten. My orgasm is already building even though he’s just begun. Right before I reach the edge, he pulls his finger out and stops moving.

I’m panting, trying to rock against him before I lose it, but he stays perfectly still.

Shoving his finger into my mouth, he says, “Lick it clean.”

I suck his finger hard, still trying my best to fuck him while he stays motionless, punishing me.

“Please,” I beg, desperate for him to continue.

“This is what the past two days have felt like for me, Noel,” he growls.

“You mean the past decade,” I snap at him, pulling his waist into me.

His eyes darken. “Exactly. Fucking torture.”

He slams into me once, stopping again. His eyes narrow.

“Do you think I’d put myself through that without good reason?”

Another punishing thrust. I moan and grind into him as best I can.

“No,” I admit.

“No,” he clips, slamming into me once more.

“Please, Dec,” I whimper as he stills again.

“You’re mine, Noel. Fucking mine. Trust me to take care of what’s mine,” he growls.

His eyes are clouded by all the emotions he keeps to himself.

“Yours, Declan. I’m yours, and you’re mine,” I agree, grabbing his hips again.

“More. Tell me you understand what this is,” he demands.

“Take all of me,” I beg. “Give me the darkest parts of you, and take all of me.”

“Good girl,” he says, his voice husky and deep.

He pulls my wrists together and places them behind my back in one of his giant hands. The other grips my hip.

He sets a pace that allows me to feel each delicious stroke as my whole body clenches in anticipation of my release.

He has me right on the edge when he says, “So fucking perfect. Come for me, baby.”

“Yes!” I scream as he speeds up just enough to send me over the edge. He lets me move against him to ride out the orgasm at my speed until it’s done.

“I’m going to fuck you harder now. Just so you can see how fucking perfect you are for me,” he says.

My legs shake, and my mind is still full of fireworks.

“Yours,” I say, giving him permission.

His eyes are molten when I meet his stare. His mouth meets mine. The kiss is so intense my head spins when he breaks away.

He kneels to take off my thong. When he stands again, he grabs my face and shoves my thong into my mouth. My eyes widen, but his grin sets my insides on fire. He palms my chest to push me down.

Lifting my ankles across my stomach, he pushes his cock deep inside. His body keeps my legs in place long enough for him to grab my wrists, which he puts under my ankles. Both of his hands hold my ankles in place, trapping my wrists. He has me curled into a ball, unable to move.

He smirks. Then he fucks me harder than I thought possible. The look of ecstasy on his face as he uses me for his own pleasure is intoxicating.

“Mm, look how good you take it,” he says, his voice all gravel and breath.

The pressure building radiates heat from my core to the rest of my body. Realizing my hand is close enough to touch myself, I play with my clit. The look on his face intensifies when he notices.

“Dirty looks so good on you,” he says with a grin as he slams into me.

His cock throbs as he comes, and it sends me over the edge right along with him. I’m

screaming behind the thong in my mouth and convulsing on his desk while he grinds into me, calling out my name.

When we're both still, he pulls away. Still holding my ankles, he opens my legs wide and stares at my pussy.

"When this stops dripping, I'm going to fill you up again," he says as he tucks himself back into his jeans.

Laying perfectly still, I let the weight of what just happened settle over me. I've given myself to a sex god who wants to kill my father, but not before he fucks me in completely unexpected places. Who am I?

Declan types on his laptop beside me. He kisses my ankle as though it's perfectly normal for him to work while I lay on his desk dripping with his come .

The only thing I've done for the past five minutes is remove the thong from my mouth. At first, he raised an eyebrow at me. I thought he was going to make me keep it in. Instead, he took it and put it in his pocket.

Laying here exposed to him, I realize the best way to deal with my problem is simple. If I'm going to be with Declan, I need to let him help me. I told him I wanted to face this together, so he has to know what I know.

I turn my head to Declan. Noticing the movement, he stops typing to look at me.

"If I give you the USB drive, could you figure all this out without getting blood on your hands?" I ask.

He chuckles. "Grant gave it to you?"

At first, I'm confused as to why he would ask about Grant. Then, I remember the way Chance laughed at me when I asked how long he had been following me.

"No, I took it off the table when you pulled me from the table."

Something flashes in his face. He hides it just as quickly. Irritation?

"Good move. I'm not making any promises."

I roll my head to stare back at the ceiling, thinking it over. Declan traces a finger from the inside of my ankle, up to my knee, and down to my pussy.

"What's on it?" He asks.

"I still don't know," I admit.

"Let's find out then," he coaxes, rubbing his palm over my sensitive clit.

"Mm. It's password protected. With only three, Dec-," I try to explain.

"Three what?" He asks, removing his hand.

"Three tries every 24 hours. I haven't tried today. But I'm six tries in and out of ideas." I finish .

He stares between my legs in awe. He exhales then lowers my legs and helps me sit up. I fix my top then pick up my bag on the edge of his desk to get the drive and hand it over to him.

Plugging it into his computer, he starts typing away. Within minutes, we're looking at the contents of the file.

“How?” I ask. I tried every password Nate ever used plus his birthday.

“The only thing I know about him is you.” He looks up at me. “And I know that subject better than anyone.”

A storm rages in his eyes as they search my face.

“I should’ve come back sooner,” I admit.

“You’re done doing things for other people. You came back when you chose to,” he says. “I want you every fucking day, but it has to be your choice.”

“I choose you.”

His office door opens, and a man walks in talking.

“Dec, I’m ready when-” He stops when he realizes Declan isn’t alone.

He resumes walking after a beat and says, “It’s nice to see you’ve found your way back.”

Declan rubs his palm on my thigh just under my dress as I say, “Yea, um, hi.”

Zander sits, and I lean into the corner of the inside of the desk to give them a line of sight without separating myself from Declan.

Turning to his monitor, Declan clicks through the files. Zander and I wait quietly for a few minutes, and I’m uncomfortably aware that my underwear is still in Declan’s pocket as his come trickles down my thigh. I shift to rub my thighs together, and Declan looks up at me with a smirk then back to his monitor.

“We'll handle this,” he says, searching my face, his smirk from a moment ago gone .

“Please, I need to know,” I say.

“Zander, give us a minute?” He asks while holding my nervous gaze.

When the door closes, he stands. Our breath mixes together as he leans down into my face, his lips inches from mine.

“I can already see that it’s going to be hard to tell you no,” he whispers.

“Then, don’t,” I meet his stare, trying to plead with my eyes.

He rests his head on mine. “Alright, a compromise then. I’ll tell you everything when I’m sure I’m right.”

“Declan, no. Tell me what this is. What is going on?” I demand, grabbing his shirt.

He grabs my wrists to hold me to him.

“I’ve waited so long for this. For you. I’m going to take care of you. No one will cloud your light again.”

“What are you going to do?” I ask.

“Protect you, sunshine. Eliminate the threat. Burn the fucking world if I have to. Love you the only way I know how.”

My breath catches, and I’m completely caught under his spell. The promise is clear in his eyes, and I believe he will do whatever it takes.

If only he didn't believe that included murder. He may be willing to make that kind of sacrifice, but I'm determined to find another way.

"Come on. I'll take you to lunch. Chance said you weren't there long enough to eat. You can tell me all about what she said to send you back to me," he says, grabbing my hand to pull me out of his office and away from the secrets in those files.

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Chapter seventeen

Declan

After lunch, I take Noel back to my office. I'm not taking any chances after her run in with her mother today. She can work from my office or not at all, but she won't be somewhere these fucks can get to her.

Pulling out of the parking lot, I dial Zander.

"Chance should be pulling into the parking lot in a few minutes. He'll keep an eye on her. Which warehouse do you want me to set up for this?" He gets down to it as soon as he answers.

"I'm not trying to shake them down, Zander. We're going to take them out right where we fucking find them," I snarl.

"Where do you want to start?"

"Grant Holdings," I snap and hang up.

An hour later, Zander and I are walking into the lobby of Grant Holdings. The receptionist looks between us with a seductive smile.

"Good afternoon, gentlemen, it would be my pleasure to help you," she draws out.

Zander props his arms on the counter and gives her a fuckboy grin. "Mm, I think

you're just right."

She blushes and bites her bottom lip. Zander eats this shit up, and girls fall all over themselves every time. He looks like a surfer from California, but his ice blue eyes and tattoos give him a dangerous edge .

"What can I do for you?" She asks, leaning toward him.

He reaches out to wipe his thumb just below her eye and blows on it. She visibly shivers as he explains, "Eyelash."

Clearing his throat, he says, "Mr. Grant Williams is expecting us."

She stands. "Let me show you to the elevator." Then, she turns to lead us to the elevator making sure we have a full view of her ass.

After she punches in the access code, she blocks the opening door. Zander steps into her and chucks her chin. "Thanks, babe," he says, side-stepping her.

When the elevator closes, I shake my head at him.

"I do it all for the cause," he says, holding his arms out wide.

I chuckle. Then, we ride the elevator the rest of the way in silence. When the door slides open, we walk out to a floor filled with offices and board rooms. We set a fast pace toward the corner office. Zander's tattoos earn us a few glances, but no one stops us.

As soon as we're both inside of Grant's office, Zander closes and locks the door. He closes the blinds while I close the distance to Grant, ripping the phone out of his hand before he can alert security.

His eyes widen, and he holds up his hands.

“I’m sure we can figure this out if you boys want to tell me what this is about,” he offers.

I pull out the drive and hold it up in the air.

“How did you get that?! What have you done with Noel?!” He bellows and stands.

I scoff. “You’re going to transfer that Cordeliers account out of her name and into Isaiah’s where it belongs. Right now.”

“That can’t be done without her consent,” he says, raising his chin .

“Scribble. Her fucking name. On the dotted line!” I shout and step around his desk to close the distance between us.

I pull out my knife and flip it open. Might as well start crossing fuckers off the list right here and now.

“Whoa! Calm down. I’m going to need to understand your relationship to my daughter-in-law and if she knows you are here,” he says, stalling.

“Not your concern. All you need to know is that you will die right here in this room if you don’t take her name off of every fucking account that has any attachments to Cordeliers, Isaiah Canton, and Veronica Panetti.” I slam him into his chair and rip his shirt open with my knife.

“What is on that drive?!” He screams at me.

I scoff at that. “Zander, he doesn’t know. You believe that?”

“Nope. Sure don’t,” he says from behind me.

“Noel showed me that drive on Sunday when she asked me to let her into the boxes I kept from Nate’s office.” He looks from me to Zander. When we don’t speak, he continues, “I know about her meeting with Jaclyn.”

“Is Veronica having Nate’s baby?” I ask.

“That’s irrelevant,” he says.

“Take her name off the fucking account!”

“Fine! I’ll move the account, but you need to tell me what’s on that drive,” He demands again.

“Move it, and plead your case. I’ll decide after it’s done,” I counter.

He sets to work on his computer and prints out a lot of paperwork. While he works, he tries to convince me that he is on her side and needs to know what his son left on the drive.

“Dirty fucking secrets,” I answer.

“He promised she would be fine,” he mumbles .

Zander jumps toward the desk at the same time I spin his chair around, pressing the blade into his throat. “The fuck did you just say?” My voice barely above a whisper.

All color drains from his face. I knew I smelled some bullshit.

“Her father! He has some deal with Jeff Canton. He came here yesterday asking

about her accounts and if she had gotten that drive. All he would tell me was that she wasn't in any danger."

Narrowing my eyes at him, I step back. He turns his chair around and continues working on the account transfer. I look at Zander, and he nods, agreeing that he's hiding something. We need more information before we can kill him. When Grant finishes the paperwork, he hands over copies for both Noel and Isaiah.

"You don't say a fucking word to another soul about any of this, or I will cut you into a thousand fucking pieces. The only thing keeping you alive right now is the fact that I may need you again soon, so you make sure downstairs knows to let me in," I tell him, pointing my knife in his face.

He nods his understanding, but I just can't help myself. I stare down at his chest. Zander walks around and pulls Grant's arms behind the chair, pinning him down. I carve the X over his heart.

"X marks the spot. Don't forget," I tell him, wiping the bloody knife across his face.

The fact that he knows well enough to hold in his screams confirms he's not as innocent as he pretends to be. He's in on this, and I will be back to make good on my promise.

Zander keeps fidgeting with the receptionist's phone number in his hand. I cock an eyebrow at him before we get out of the truck.

"Jade's on borrowed time, and the secretary was fucking hot. I'm just saving it for a rainy day," he says, shrugging his shoulders.

I chuckle and shake my head. Zander likes short term monogamy. He falls fast and loses interest faster.

Walking into Velocity, I find Jessica sitting in the lobby. I've been so busy today that I forgot I scheduled a meeting with her. Looking at her, I nod in the direction of my office and keep walking. I can hear her heels clicking behind me.

Opening the door, I notice it still smells like sex, and I smile at the beautiful brunette sitting in my chair. Her peaceful smile turns into a confused scowl when she looks past me to Jessica and Zander. Noel stands while I sit down in the chair. My fingers slide up her slides before I grip her hips to pull her into my lap.

"Please, have a seat," I offer to Jessica and Zander, resting my chin on Noel's shoulder.

Zander sits, spreading his legs and getting comfortable. Jessica looks between the three of us, obviously pissed at the turn of events.

"Alright, Jessica. What did you find?" I ask.

She clears her throat and shows us the properties she found in Tennessee and Georgia. Zander and I ask questions about laws in both states, and we eventually narrow down our choices to one in each state. Noel remains quiet throughout the exchange .

"Tennessee or Georgia, Noel?" I ask.

"What is this for?" She asks, eyes searching mine.

"Velocity's expansion. Which one?"

"Georgia makes the most sense, Dec. It's closer to your current location, so you won't have to market yourself as hard," Jessica interrupts.

Noel's eyes narrow as soon as Jessica abbreviates my name. Anger flashes in her eyes. Well, fuck.

She turns her glare to Jessica, and says, "We always said we'd move to Tennessee. Right, Dec?"

"Tennessee it is," I confirm.

Jessica coughs and stares at me. "I'm sorry. Who are you?" She asks Noel.

"Jessica, I don't want to screw you out of this commission or violate our contract, but this isn't going to work for us. I'll pay you the commission on the Tennessee property right now, and you go straight to your office to tear up my contract."

She hesitates, glaring at me.

"Offer expires in three," I urge.

She needs to get the fuck out of my office before Noel loses her shit. Her nails are already threatening to break the skin as her grip tightens around my thighs.

"Fine," she snaps.

Keeping my arm firmly around Noel's waist, I lean forward to pull my checkbook from the desk drawer. I rip the check out and hold it up. Noel gently holds my hand as she takes the check from me and stands. Reluctantly, I let her up.

"Here you go. I'm sure you earned it in more ways than one," Noel tells Jessica as she holds out the check.

Jessica's jaw drops. Zander chuckles. She quickly closes her mouth and glares at him

then me. I stare back—she has herself to blame. She huffs, grabs her bag, and leaves without another word or the check.

As soon as the door slams shut, Noel turns on me.

“Zander,” I sigh, dismissing him.

“Yep,” he agrees and leaves.

She doesn’t speak even though we’re alone, so I start for her.

“I would’ve warned you if I had not forgotten about that meeting, Noel,” I explain.

“How long ago did you sleep with her?” She asks, her voice barely above a whisper.

I take a deep breath. “I haven’t touched anyone since Nate’s accident. Before that, I don’t remember exactly, maybe a week or two.” Her face is unreadable.

I haven’t seen Jessica in over six months. It’s fucking ridiculous that she’d act that way.

“Why would you continue to work with her?”

“I signed a contract that I wouldn’t work with other realtors,” I state, taking her hands in mine.

“Okay,” she replies.

“Okay?” I ask, confused.

“You get a pass. This one time. And only because you fired her before I asked you

to,” she says, stepping toward me.

“It won’t happen again,” I promise.

“So no more associates who are also past fuck buddies I should know about?” She asks for clarification.

“Most of my associates are men,” I deadpan .

“I don’t know what all you’re into these days,” she says, pressing her perfect little body into me.

“Oh, but you’re going to find out,” I whisper into her chest before I bite down on her perky tit, shirt and all.

Chapter eighteen

Noel

A jolt wakes me. I look around to find Declan sitting next to me. I'm usually terrible at sleeping on planes, but I don't remember a thing about our flight. I must've crashed soon after we took off. Declan hands me a bottle of water, and I take it graciously.

We didn't sleep at all last night. My body is sore everywhere, and my brain is still empty from so many orgasms. Declan knows my body better than I do, and it was euphoric to let him take control.

Between rounds, we talked. He told me he transferred my ownership of Isaiah's investment account back to Isaiah. I was shocked that he had gone to Grant, but he left my former father-in-law in one piece.

Aside from looking at the potential expansion property, we plan to enjoy Nashville without the stress of the past week hanging over our shoulders. Traveling is something I love to do. It feels so good to be getting off a plane now, breathing in different air from a few hours ago.

Declan takes my hand as we walk through the airport to baggage claim. We find our things and go pickup the rental car keys.

Walking up to the black Tahoe, I ask, "Do you drive anything other than black vehicles?"

He gives me a sideways glance and grins, showing me one dimple on his stubble-covered face. “No. ”

I smile and shake my head. I get in while he puts the bags in the back. Instead of driving into downtown Nashville where most hotels would be, he takes us out of the city. We pull into the driveway of a cute little house.

“No hotel?”

“The way you scream? People would think I’m murdering you. We need privacy,” he says and gets out of the SUV to grab our bags.

My cheeks heat up. He’s joking. Right? Deciding to be a little quieter next time, I get out in time to follow him inside.

The house is nice and clean but pretty generic for a rental. I follow Declan into the bedroom to unpack some of my things.

He wraps his arms around me from behind as I set things on the bathroom counter. I look up at him through the mirror as he rests his chin on top of my head. The sight of us together has my heart fluttering. I’ve never seen us together before.

As if reading my thoughts, he says, “I’ve waited almost half of my life to see this.”

I lean my head back into his chest, not sure what to say. “We’re here now,” I say more to myself than to him.

Kissing the top of my head, he walks over to turn on the shower. He takes off his shirt, and I watch as his muscles work at the movement. When my eyes find their way back to his, he undresses me. His lips meet mine as his fingers work, and my hands explore the ridges of his abs on my way to the button of his jeans.

He lifts me up to wrap my legs around his waist as he carries me into the shower. Standing me under the water, he begins to wash my hair while I keep my arms wrapped around his middle. I close my eyes as he massages the shampoo into my scalp.

“Why did you stay in Birmingham?” He asks .

“It’s just how things played out,” I say.

“Hmm, you mean it’s what Nate wanted,” he counters.

Opening my eyes, I stare up at him.

“Not that it matters now, but we had a deal. Live in Birmingham but travel often. A compromise,” I defend myself, knowing he wouldn’t understand but trying anyway.

“Sounds fair. Where did he take you?” He asks.

“Declan,” I warn, pulling away from him and rinsing my hair myself.

He pulls me back, forcing my hands to his hips before continuing my hair.

“Oh, wait, Italy is the only place so far. It’s alright, sunshine. I’m going to make your dreams come true. Speaking of dreams, where would you live if you had no ties to Birmingham?” He continues to push.

“My life is in Birmingham,” I deflect.

“Answer the question,” he demands.

“I don’t know. This is where I want to be now. With you,” I answer honestly.

“You name the place, and I’ll put Velocity right in the center of the fucking town. With me is a given, but I know you don’t want to be in Birmingham.”

“I haven’t thought about leaving in such a long time,” I say, unsure.

“Then, start,” he says, like it’s so simple to uproot myself now that I’m established in a career. “I’ve taken you out of Birmingham, out of Alabama, even. While we’re here, think about what you want.”

He kisses me then gets out of the shower, leaving me with my thoughts.

Declan and I had so many late night phone calls when we were younger about getting out of Birmingham. Yet we’re both still firmly planted there.

We used to dream about living in the mountains of Tennessee. It’s hot enough in the summer to have a swimming pool but cold enough in the winter to snow. The best part was that it was far enough away that I couldn’t be under my parents’ control.

We were just kids though. We didn’t do any of the things we had planned together. Well, I guess that’s not completely true. Declan did.

He created a successful business like he said he would. But me? I love my job, but it isn’t my passion. I didn’t even get an art degree, and I never rarely visit studios anymore.

That’s what he sees. A girl who didn’t grow up to be what she had dreamed of becoming. I look at myself in the mirror, ready to accept his challenge. When I’m finished getting ready, I walk out of the bathroom to find Declan on his laptop at the desk in the living room.

“I’d like to go to a museum today,” I say without waiting for him to stop typing.

He finishes up whatever he's typing then closes the laptop before he looks up at me.

"Let's go," he says, grabbing the keys and walking out the door.

We find ourselves in an art museum, wandering around when my phone rings. Quickly silencing it, I see it's my dad calling me. I show Declan, and his expression turns violent.

Grabbing my arm, he pulls me along with him to the stairwell close by.

"Answer it," he grinds out, clenching his jaw.

"Hello, Dad," I answer the phone, trying to keep my emotions out of my voice.

"Noel, where are you?" He asks without a greeting.

"Out of town. "

"Mom said you ran out on her at lunch yesterday. I came to your office to discuss things with you myself as it was not her place to do so," he says, sounding impatient and angry.

Declan steps into me, putting a hand on the wall above my head and taking the phone from me with the other. He switches the call to speakerphone as I lean against the wall, my head spinning.

"What do you want?" I stammer out.

He sighs into the phone. "Elle, I didn't want to trouble you with the details. Jeff and I just thought the two of you may find some comfort in your shared loss. Just two fathers not wanting their only children to be alone and grieving, honey. Your mother

took things she overheard out of context,” he says.

Declan narrows his eyes at me. “Noel is far from alone or grieving,” he says, his voice low and threatening.

“Who is that, Noel?” My dad asks, yelling into the phone.

Declan chuckles darkly into the phone.

“Her past, present,” he draws out in a threatening tone. Then he pauses to search my face before saying, “and future.”

Fuck. My breath leaves my body in a rush of air.

My dad yells into the phone, but I don’t hear a word.

Declan ends the call and slips my phone into his pocket. While his hands are busy, I wrap mine behind his head to pull him down into a kiss. His arms find their way around my back just as I press my body against his. Our kiss deepens, blurring the world around us.

When we pull apart to look at each other, he stands to his full height again.

“It’s time you take me home to meet Mom and Dad,” he says .

“What? Declan, this is bigger than just introducing you to them. They’ve already made plans for me to marry Isaiah. We need to stay away from them all,” I protest.

“There will be no more talk about you marrying anyone but me,” he growls.

“Declan,” I gasp.

“That’s right, baby. My name is the only one that belongs on these lips.”

He kisses me hungrily, slipping his hand under my skirt. His hand grabs my pussy as he slides a finger inside.

“Does the idea of marrying me make you wet, baby?” He asks into our kiss.

I whimper, sucking on his bottom lip.

“Can you be quiet?” He asks.

I nod.

He smirks. “We’ll see.”

His slow movements turn violent. His fingers slam into me.

“Oh, god,” I moan.

He presses his free hand over my mouth, gripping my chin to keep me in place and quiet. My eyes widen as his lips trace down my neck. His hand is relentless. The heat pools at my core, and my hips move against him on their own.

“Come for me, baby,” he whispers.

His eyes meet mine. Brows pinched together. Lips parted. I could get off just staring at him. The orgasm unfolds, and I’m screaming into his hand.

“Good girl,” he says, voice dripping with desire.

He licks his fingers while he holds my stare. His hand slips from my mouth to my

throat.

“Have you seen enough art today?” He asks.

I stifle a giggle and nod my head .

He smiles. “Come on before you get us kicked out.”

Declan found a liquor store on the way back to the rental house after dinner. We made drinks and got into the hot tub just in time to watch the sun setting behind the mountains. It’s so beautiful, and my soul feels at peace here.

“Can you believe we ended up here in spite of it all?” I ask, turning to look at him.

“I promised we would,” he says.

I smile and tilt my head. “I’m pretty sure that was just to get in my pants.”

“I’d prefer it if you didn’t even own pants,” he says, winking at me.

“Our lives could’ve been so different if my dad would have cared more about my happiness than money,” I say with regret.

He looks at the sunset again, the orange sky reflecting off the gold flecks in his brown eyes. Then, he looks at me with something sinister lurking just below the surface.

Alarm bells ring in my ears at his shift in mood, and I’m covered in goosebumps. He grabs my knees to pull me across the hot tub into his lap. His hard expression mere inches away.

“Noel, he’s a dead man walking.” His voice is low, dripping with rage.

“No,” I try to use the hardest voice I can muster.

His smirk doesn’t meet his eyes.

“Some part of you wants it, too. Don’t lie to me.”

I stiffen, searching his face.

“No,” I fail completely this time, and my voice is only a whisper.

“He derailed the life you wanted for yourself. ”

“No, Declan, no,” I’m shaking now.

“He signed you away to marry a complete stranger and is ready to do the same again.” His anger is stronger than I’ve ever seen.

“That won’t happen this time. I can’t lose you to this,” I plead.

“Shh. Nothing will ever keep me from you again.” His expression smooths as his hands roam up my body.

He lifts me to suck on my nipple. My protests die on my lips. He stands, pulling me out of the water. The cool night air meets our wet bodies. I gasp at the sudden change, and he covers my mouth with his, stepping out of the hot tub and bringing me inside.

He sits on the couch and reaches for a blanket to cover us. I pull away from our kiss to hover over him. The hiss he makes when I grab his dick heats me to my core.

His hands find their way to my hips under the blanket. He doesn’t force me onto him. Instead, his mouth explores my body while he holds me steady.

He tears his eyes away from watching his tip rub up and down my slit to look at me. The intensity of his stare does nothing to prepare me for his words.

“You’re not a prisoner in that ivory tower anymore, Noel. I’m going to tear it down brick by brick. It will be as though it never existed. Now show me what you will do with your freedom,” he says in a deep, rough voice.

My insides melt at his dark promise. The delicious offer to let me have him however I choose has my imagination running wild with possibilities. I stand, letting the blanket fall to the ground. His abs tense as his hips tilt forward, and he slowly strokes himself as he looks over every inch of my body.

“Lay down,” I say.

He does as I say, and the power high courses through my veins .

I kneel on the couch just above his head, taking in the sight of this strong, beautiful man laying down for me. When my eyes find his, I see he’s staring at my pussy hovering above his head.

I inch forward to hover above his mouth, my heart pounding. I’ve never done this before because I was always too embarrassed to ask for it. With Declan, I know he wants me just as I am.

“You want me to eat this pussy?” He asks from between my legs.

I don’t answer at first. The words stick in my throat. I lean over him, placing my hands on either side of his hips. Dipping my head down slightly, I suck on the tip of his cock.

“Yeah, sunshine. Take what you want,” he breathes out in whispers that I feel against

my wet pussy.

His hands wrap around my thighs. “Own it. Run the fucking show, baby girl.”

I lower my mouth until he’s in the back of my throat, and I use my hand to cover the rest of him.

“You like my cock in your throat,” he says, lifting his hips to shove himself farther in. “I love fucking your mouth.”

My hips wiggle, and I moan around his dick as he pumps into me.

“Your pussy is soaked. Don’t you want to sit on my face?”

Yes! I squeeze his cock harder and drool runs out of my mouth.

“Noel,” he growls, his fingers digging into my thighs. “Sit the fuck down.”

I can’t hold out any longer. I lower myself onto his waiting mouth while I continue to suck and deep throat his cock. He growls into me as he covers me with his tongue, and the sensation has me crying out around him .

His hands wrap around my hips to pull me down harder on his face. I notice his pace matches mine, so I pick up the pace to see if he follows. When he does, I play with him until I find the right pace for me.

He inserts a finger to touch my sweet spot as I ride his tongue. When I grab his balls, he moans into me. I feel myself building, but I want more of him.

When I sit up to move, he holds me down onto his face. I try to lift off of him, but his hands don’t give.

“I want to ride your cock now.”

He immediately releases me with his hands, but doesn't stop licking me until I move.

I crawl down his body to hover over his cock as he holds it in his hand.

“Take it, baby.”

I take it in my hand, and he lets go. His hands tickle my back as I lower on top of him.

“That's my girl. Fuck me. Show me what you like,” he pleads, his voice husky with desire.

I start to move, grinding into him. Leaning back, I rest a hand on his stomach, and he grabs my arm to hold me in place.

“You're so good,” he breathes, grabbing my hip with his free hand.

I guide his fingers to my clit. He reaches lower to wet his fingers with my arousal, then circles my clit as I rest my hand on top of his to feel him pleasure me.

My insides are clenching around him as I pick up the pace and bounce on him.

“Goddamn, Noel. Use me, baby,” he says between breaths.

I completely lose myself on top of him.

“Oh, Declan, come with me,” I yell out .

“Fuck,” he says, grabbing my hips to move me at his speed when my orgasm steals

my rhythm. Then, he's pulsing hard inside of me as he comes, too.

He sits up, wrapping his arms around my front to hold me in place. A giggle slips out as I try to catch my breath.

"Did you have fun using me?" He whispers against my back before he bites it.

I cry out at the pain and try to move away, but he holds me to him.

"I'm not done with you." He slips out from under me, and flips me over. He pulls me to the edge and looks down at me, licking his lips.

"Don't move."

He walks down the hall, turning lights off as he goes. It's too dark to see anything now, so I listen for him to come back. My eyes begin to adjust to the darkness when I hear his footsteps coming closer. Turning my head to the side, I see him walking toward me.

Once he's standing in front of me, I can see he's holding a box and has something draped over his shoulder.

"What's in the box?" I ask.

He opens it, takes something out, then tosses it away. I hear the vibration before I feel it. Without a word, he rubs the vibrator over me then slips it inside. It's thin on the inside and clamps down over my entire pussy.

"What-?" I ask and start to pull myself back from the edge, but his hand slaps down onto my thigh to keep me there.

“Who do you belong to?” His voice is all gravel now.

I swallow and try to steady my breathing as my attention is split between the vibrator and the monster I just unleashed.

He uses his foot to push my ankles farther apart one at a time and asks again with a growl, “Who do you belong to? ”

“You.”

“Mine.”

He slips the rope from his shoulder, using it to wrap my hands together in front of me. Then, he kneels and picks something else up off the floor. He holds it up between us.

“It’s time I show you what that means.”

I whimper and move my hips, trying to make contact as he leans over me.

“You’re a greedy little thing, aren’t you?”

He chuckles as he puts something in my mouth. My tongue circles around the rubber ball, and my eyes widen as he wraps a strap around my head.

I try to speak, but it’s just sound. Oh, god.

He pinches my nipples hard, and I cry out around the gag.

“Good. I don’t need your words, but I love the way you scream.”

He lifts my arms over his head and picks me up from under my legs so that my knees are bent over his elbows. Kissing and nibbling my neck, he carries me over to the table in the dining room. Sitting me down on the edge, he leaves my arms around him and uses his hand to guide his cock inside of me.

The vibrator continues to pulse over my clit as he fucks me slow and hard. The slide out allows me to feel him teasing me from the inside out while the sudden reentry of his cock has my body clenching around him involuntarily.

“I’m going to choke you while you come this time,” he says as he wraps his large hand around my neck.

He squeezes harder than I expect, and I start to breathe heavier through my nose and shake my head at him. When he doesn’t loosen his grip, I try to scream at him.

“You can breathe,” he says without letting up.

I realize he’s right, but my head feels fuzzy. I slap at his hand to let me go .

“I’m going to fuck you into oblivion. You’re so fucking close. Enjoy the fucking high,” he demands.

The room around me starts to spin as his words sink in. The threatening tone of his voice seeps into my skin burning everything it touches. When his words reach my core, I explode around him.

“That’s it, baby, yes,” he praises.

Color bursts behind my eyelids as the orgasm rips through me. He loosens his grip around my neck. The blood rush causes a throbbing sensation in my head as my body continues to shake from the second orgasm.

One arm holds me upright while the other lifts my arms. He lays me down and shoves both arms above my head.

“Hold the table.”

I do as I’m told and wrap my legs around him, pulling him into me.

“You are fucking perfect,” he says, trailing his hands down from my elbows to my hips.

I whimper around the gag. It’s harder to swallow with it in my mouth, so I turn my head to the side to keep from choking on spit. He lifts my legs over his shoulders and kisses the inside of my lower legs as he moves inside me again.

My hands grip the edge of the table to hold myself in place. My hips are lifted above the table to him. He works into a faster pace, and reaches down to click the button on top of the vibrator still in place. It’s now on a lighter setting to balance out how hard he is fucking me.

“Are you about to come again already?” He asks in surprise.

I realize he’s right. My insides are coiling up again. The heat slowly builds with each thrust. I moan into the gag, liking the way it fills my mouth. Circling my tongue around it, I feel myself at the edge .

He moves his hands to my hips, tilting them. My legs fall around his arms, but he holds my body so that he’s pounding into that sweet spot pushing me over. The thunder of this orgasm rolls over me, and I’m choking on my own spit between screams.

“My girl loves it rough. My perfect fucking girl,” he breathes out, losing control. He

pulls out fast. His come lands on the side of my face and down my body.

When he's finished, he takes the vibrator out and throws it on the table. Then, he pulls on my arms, throwing them over his head again to pick me up. My head rests on his as he kisses my forehead, walking us through the house to the shower.

After he unties me and removes the gag, we shower and crawl into bed. He pulls me into him and kisses my shoulder before I fall asleep in his arms.

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:31 am

Chapter nineteen

Declan

A tingling sensation in my arm wakes me up, and I look over to see that Noel's head is resting on my bicep. Her wild hair is all over the place, including wrapped around the arm I need to slide her off of before I lose all feeling in it. Moving her slowly, I manage to free myself and get out of bed without waking her.

After I clean up from last night, I check my phone. A text from an unknown number is waiting for me.

It seems you think you've found a loophole to our original agreement. I'd like to invite both of you to dinner at my home on Tuesday evening at 6:00 to discuss my daughter's options.

Can't fucking wait .

I also have a missed call from Leah's burner. After starting a pot of coffee, I step outside to call Zander. We have too much to discuss over text, and I'd rather she not overhear most of it. He answers just before it goes to voicemail and sounds like I woke him up.

"Late night?" I ask. Zander is usually leaving the gym by now.

"Had to get under one to get over one," he groans.

“There better not be a whore in a fucking cage in my warehouse, Zander.”

“Wha-? Oh. No, the receptionist,” he stammers out.

“Good.”

Zander gives me a rundown on why Leah called me. I tell him about my dinner invitation just as Noel emerges from the house with messy hair and a dirty smile.

“Gotta go, man,” I say and hang up.

“Good morning, beautiful,” I say, inviting her to sit in my lap.

She stumbles over to me, and I help her sit down gently on my thigh. Laying her head on my shoulder, she kisses my neck.

“I think you broke me,” she says, her voice hoarse.

“That’s the idea,” I smirk.

“Hey!” She says, playfully.

“If you think there’s a life for you after me, you’re wrong, Noel. I want you to feel me deep inside of you every fucking day, and I know you’re strong enough to take it,” I tell her, just in case she was confused.

She pops up with her eyes wide in surprise. When she sees that I’m completely serious, she turns on her usual sunshine to lighten the mood.

“So, no girl trips ever?” Trying to keep a straight face, she bites her lip.

Brat. “I tell you what. We will get a dildo made of me for you to take on girl trips.”

Her face lights up with a smile. I guess I’m going to have to make her a fucking Declan dildo for every room in the house now.

“A vibrating dildo,” she adds.

“Fuck,” I say with a chuckle, standing her up. “You’re insatiable.”

“I didn’t even know what that word truly meant until now,” she says, looking up at me with bright green eyes.

Scooping her up, I take her straight to the bedroom to fill her up again.

“Will we even be able to see anything?” Noel asks. We pull over to the side of the road in front of the property. She has a point—it’s heavily wooded.

The realtor pulls in behind us, and we get out of the truck to meet him. After introductions and talking about the overview of the property, he tells us about a side entrance that is cleared some. He points to the side-by-side on his open trailer.

We unload it and ride with him to the clearing. He takes us through as much of it that’s driveable. Then, he stops to let us walk some while he hangs back.

“What do you think?” I ask her.

“Is it big enough for a side business?” She asks, digging the toe of her shoe in the dirt.

“Side business?” I walk over to her, so she will look at me when she asks this time.

“Velocity Marketing, maybe?” Her eyes are guarded, but she stares up at me without blinking.

“No, baby,” I shake my head, and she looks away. “Sunshine Art Studio or Gallery, Noel’s Whatever The Fuck She Decides Today, but whatever you call it, it’s yours, not Velocity’s, not anyone else’s. And not a compromise like marketing.”

She jumps on me, arms and legs wrapping around me. She covers my face in kisses before she lands one on my mouth, and I don’t let her go. When we break away, I turn to walk back to the realtor.

“Sold,” I tell him.

“That’s great!” He exclaims, driving us back to our vehicles .

I spend the next few hours in his tiny office finishing the paperwork, while Noel checks out an art studio close by. When the wire transfer shows complete, he hands over the stack of documents, and I’m out the door.

Noel is already back, waiting for me outside. When I look at her, I know something is wrong.

“Can we fly back tonight?” She asks.

“What the fuck happened?”

“Jaclyn text me. She said she has proof that Nate was murdered and needs me to go with her to the police station.”

“She’s fucking lying to you, Noel,” I grab her hand and help her into the Tahoe.

“I need to see it for myself,” she says, and I know she isn’t going to let this go.

We grab our things from the house and get to the airport just in time to catch the last flight to Birmingham.

Thank fuck it’s almost midnight before we make it out of the airport, so I don’t have to talk her out of dealing with this bullshit tonight. She hasn’t said much all afternoon, but I’m trying not to push her.

When we’re finally in my truck on the way to my house, she starts talking.

“Did anything on that USB drive point to something like this?”

Fuck . I don’t mind hiding shit from her or even redirecting her when she gets close, but I don’t want to lie to her. Not for her fucking Dad.

“There was proof of a motive.”

“What motive?” I can feel her glaring at me.

“The marriage contract between his dad and yours states you have to have a male child before you turn 30 or the entire estate will be donated,” I deliver the news like it means nothing, doing my best to soften the blow .

She gasps and takes a few minutes to catch her breath. “But how would that be motive? For who?”

I take a deep breath not wanting to tell her the rest, but I know she won’t let this go.

“He saved fertility charts. He was tracking your cycles and every time you had sex for years,” I stop to let it sink in before I add to the pile of bullshit I’m about to tell

her.

“What?! He knew I was on birth control. That doesn’t make any sense!” She’s starting to panic, so I stay silent.

Several minutes pass before she’s calm enough to speak.

“What else, Declan?” Her voice is a whisper.

“Your pills were placebos. There were folders of charts like yours for other women, Noel. Instead of going to a doctor, he was using other women to see if he was the reason you hadn’t gotten pregnant.”

Stealing a glance, I see her leaning over with her head in her hands. Pulling the truck to the side of the road, I pick her up like a child and put her in my lap.

She buries her face into my chest and lets out a heart-wrenching cry. I hold her as she mourns the life she thought she had and I plan the desecration of his fucking grave.

When she finally settles, she looks up at me. “Fuck him. Fuck them both. Who does this? One trades me off for money, and the other tries to get me pregnant for it? All of it was based on lies. Fuck them.”

“That’s my girl,” I say and wipe her tears.

“Take me to the cemetery, Dec,” she says and climbs back over to her seat.

Here we fucking go.

Before the truck completely stops, she jumps out. I have to slam it in park and jog to catch up to her. But I don’t say a fucking word to stop her.

We jog and walk up and down a few hills down the main path before she veers left down a row of graves. Our only light is the small flashlight I had in my truck.

She stops abruptly, and I silently walk up beside her. She stares at the headstone for a moment then marches up to it. Ripping the flowers from the vase, she screams.

“Loving husband? What a fucking joke, Nate!” She yells at the sky.

“What the fuck were you thinking? You didn’t have enough money already? You never even asked me if I wanted a baby! What if you caught something? I guess it wouldn’t matter because I would’ve been stuck with you regardless, huh? What if I died in fucking childbirth?” She yells and cries out a long procession of questions to his grave, to his headstone, to the sky.

I stand perfectly still, holding the flashlight. She’s fucking magnificent. Her anger is pure and raw, and I’m tempted to find a way into hell just to get the answers for her myself.

When she runs out of things to say, she plops down in the center of the light and stares at the headstone silently.

“By the way, this is Declan. He fucks so much better than you. That’s a low blow I know, but you deserve it. And it’s true. I think I may marry him just so I can fuck him everyday,” she rambles.

I chuckle, unable to hold it back.

She stands up to face me .

“Fuck me, Dec,” she says, ripping her shirt off.

“Noel,” I warn.

“Show him how I like it,” she challenges, letting her pants fall to her ankles.

I close the distance between us, picking her up without hesitation. I set her on the headstone and kneel before her. She opens her legs wide for me.

I lean forward to suck her clit between my teeth, and her fingers tangle in my hair immediately.

“Yes,” she whispers.

I slide my tongue into her hole and close my mouth around her perfect little cunt. I love the way she wraps her hands around my face. I growl into her, burying my tongue as far as it will go.

When I feel her relax, I stand. She unbuttons my pants and shoves them down. I’m so fucking hard for her, I won’t last long.

I slam into her, and she screams out my name.

“Wake the fucking dead, sunshine. Tell them who you belong to now,” I growl and fuck her the way she likes it best.

It doesn’t take her long before she’s clenching down on my dick, coming for me on his fucking headstone.

“Dec, yes,” she moans.

I’m right behind her, filling her little body with as much of me as it will hold.

“All mine,” I say, my voice deep and raw.

Chapter twenty

Noel

Watching Declan wash his vehicles might be my new favorite thing to do. If this is how he spends most Saturday mornings, I'll be sure to set an alarm from now on.

He grips the towel as he dries his blacked out Corvette the same way he grips my legs when he's spreading them wide. His brows pinch with determination just as they do when he thrusts into me.

After watching him wash and rinse the car, I decide I can't take it anymore. I set my coffee down and walk over to him. He turns when he hears my footsteps splash through the puddles, and looks at me in confusion.

"Wanna help?" He asks, holding out the towel.

"Something like that," I tell him with a smirk and pull off my shirt, revealing my bare chest to him.

His eyes darken. He walks over and spins me around. Using the rubbery towel, he ties my hands together behind my back and shoves down on my shoulders, forcing me to kneel on the wet concrete. Walking around to stand in front of me, I can see his dick hardening inside his thin shorts.

Looking up at him, I lick my lips and say, "Use me, baby. I'm yours."

“Mm. What’s gotten into you?” He grabs my hair from underneath, holding my head in place as I stare up at him.

“You,” I tell him .

Pulling his hard cock out to rub against my lips, he says, “Only me. Now be my good girl and swallow this cock.”

He shoves himself to the back of my throat, holding it despite my gagging.

“Breathe through your nose,” he orders impatiently, and I do as I’m told.

When the gagging stops, I wrap my lips around him and slide my tongue out flat beneath his shaft.

“That’s it,” he praises and begins to move, holding me still by my hair.

Keeping my eyes on him as he watches me has me craving more, so I try to bob my head with him. He loosens his grip on my hair enough to let me move some, but if I go too far he yanks my hair tighter.

My hips begin to rock from side to side to find friction against my blue jean shorts. He hasn’t taken his eyes off me, so he notices immediately.

“You like being my toy?” His deep voice is all gravel now.

The only way to answer him is to blink, and fresh tears fall down the sides of my face. He slows his pace before pulling out completely. Then, he stands me up to walk me over to the car. My back presses against smooth metal, just behind the passenger door.

He unbuttons my shorts and slides them off along with my thong. When I lift my foot to remove the shorts the rest of the way, he grabs my ankle. He throws my leg over his shoulder. He does the same to my other leg. His hands hold me up under my ass, and he has my pussy right in front of his face.

Without a word, he slips his thumb inside of me and devours the rest with his mouth. My legs wrap around his head instinctively. It feels as though I could fall without my arms to hold me up. He fucks me with his fingers while he sucks on my clit.

“Declan,” I cry out, and he rubs his unshaven face from side to side, scratching my sensitive skin to give me a mixture of pain and pleasure .

When he feels my orgasm building, he stops. Instead of letting me finish, he shrugs his shoulders to force my legs to fall to his arms. I squeal at the brief fall.

He smirks and stands while lowering me to lay across the car. He slowly pushes his cock into me.

He moves so slowly, that I can feel myself squeezing him, wanting more.

“Fuck,” he breathes, and I know he feels it too.

When he starts to move, he uses a hand to play with my body. He twists and pinches my nipples until I cry out. He squeezes my tits and slaps them.

My arms are crushed beneath me, and I try to shift my weight as best I can to relieve the pressure. Watching his face change from desire to pleasure to the darkest depths of losing control, I find myself craving whatever pain he needs from me to feel that good.

I wrap my legs around him, so he can use his hands more. He takes the opportunity to

grab my shoulders for better leverage and slams into me.

“You’re so fucking perfect,” he praises just as an orgasm begins to tremble through my body, gripping him hard deep inside.

“Oh fuck,” he cries out as he finds his own release because of mine.

He leans over me to kiss my nipples and bites one before he stands to pull out. “This should be the picture hanging above our bed. My come dripping out of your perfect cunt,” he says, staring at it.

I keep my mouth shut, watching him stare at me. I should protest, but I’d be lying. He looks up at my face when I say nothing and cocks an eyebrow.

“Yours,” I manage to say.

“Fucking mine,” he agrees and helps me off the car.

After he unties me, he follows me inside to take a bath, leaving his morning chore unfinished. We soak in silence for a few minutes before I tell him what I’ve decided to do .

“I want to speak to a lawyer about the inheritance. Can you give me the contract you found on the drive?” I ask.

He sighs. “You don’t need the money. I’ll add you to every one of my accounts first thing Monday morning,” he says.

“Oh. No, I don’t want the money. I want a way out,” I explain.

“Tell him Tuesday night when we go for dinner.”

“What?” Splashing water, I turn around to look at him.

“He invited us over. We can tell him we’re moving to Tennessee, have dinner, then after I’ll make sure he understands you want out.”

I stare at him speechless. If I can find a way out of this inheritance before then, maybe Declan will reconsider his plans for my dad.

“It’s nothing for you to worry about,” he says, getting out of the water. “Chance can take you to my lawyer’s office on Monday, if you must. I’ll email the file to her today, so she can be prepared for you.” Then, he walks out of the bathroom.

I jump out and grab a towel, chasing after him. “She?” I ask.

He turns to see I’m serious, and I hope he sees the murder in my eyes because I feel it spreading over every inch of me. He cocks an eyebrow.

“Do you have a problem with female lawyers?” He asks.

“Don’t send me to meet a woman you’ve fucked, Declan,” I warn between grinding teeth.

He looks amused. Smirking now, he asks, “Haven’t we already covered this?”

“Do you have any past with this woman?” I ask, my blood boiling.

He chuckles, pulls on his shorts, and leaves the room. What the fuck!

Following him outside, I ask again. “Have you fucked her? ”

He turns and walks right up to me. “Don’t take what he did and make it my fault. I

would never hurt you. We've already discussed this, and I told you I didn't have history with any other associates," His breath fans my face.

"You never outright said you didn't," I counter, standing my ground.

"Do you want a list, Noel? A death warrant for every woman I've fucked?" His voice barely above a whisper. He tsks. "That's half of fucking Vegas just from the night you got married."

I gasp. How does he know when I got married?

"I don't even remember their faces because they were all you in my head. So how will we find them all, hm?" His fingers touch a piece of my hair.

I search his face as he remains inches from mine. The hurt in his eyes is plain to see. I should've known it was all a lie. I should've fought harder for him. He would've always been mine if I hadn't been so naive. I take a deep breath and press my forehead to his, closing my eyes.

"The sun outshines every other star in the universe. Don't fucking forget it," he says and walks away.

What the fuck is wrong with me? I go back inside to find his workout room. Obviously, I need to blow off steam.

It's not like me to get jealous or pick fights. Something about the way he said "her" instead of a name sounded so much more personal. The thought of his hands on someone else makes my own hands itch to strangle someone.

Jesus . I find out my husband was trying to get other women pregnant, and I'm just grossed out. But Declan having a past makes me murderous. I jump on a treadmill

and crank up the speed until I have to focus not to fall.

“Chance will be here at 2:00 to follow you to the lawyer’s office,” Declan says, pulling the car to a stop by the front door of JV Marketing.

“Follow me?” Since he’s bringing me to work, I don’t have a vehicle to drive.

He looks out his side window, and I follow his line of sight to see a blacked out Range Rover. When I look back at him, he holds out a key.

“If he bought it, you don’t fucking need it,” he says as I take the keys.

“You bought me a car?”

“Mmhmm.” He nods.

“It’s so sexy! Thank you!” I kiss him.

He holds me to him so that I can only pull away a few inches.

“I’d sign his death warrant if I could,” he says. “I did not fuck the lawyer.”

I exhale all the anxiety I’ve felt since our argument Saturday. He didn’t bring it up again, and neither did I.

“Thank you,” I breathe out and kiss him again.

Jumping out of the truck, I go check out my new ride. His all black obsession is definitely growing on me. I watch him laugh at me as he drives away.

Joey pulls into the parking lot while I’m looking at all the features. He walks up to

the open door. “Nice!”

“Thanks! Declan just surprised me with it!”

“Who?” He asks, confused.

“Oh, um, my boyfriend?” I explain even though that word doesn’t feel like the right one.

He chuckles and shakes his head. “Damn, girl. Don’t even know what to call him, but he’s buying you a car. ”

I blush but don’t bother explaining. Locking up, I walk into work with Joey.

My day drags by while I wait for 2:00. I’m worried that my dad will show up at my door all day and can’t get anything done because of it. When the time finally comes, I practically run out of the building.

Chance’s Camaro is parked next to my new Range Rover Sport, so I wave to him and get into my new seat. After punching the address to my GPS, I pull out of the parking lot with Chance following close behind.

The office is a stand-alone building with a wrap around porch. Chance opens the door for me and follows me inside a cozy waiting area.

A tall, blonde steps out of an office to see who walked in. With a polite smile, she walks over with her hand out.

“You must be Noel. I’m Cassidy Thomas, Mr. Adams’ lawyer. Please, come in.” She gestures to the office she just came out of.

I look at Chance, and he's standing by the door. "I'll be right here."

I nod and walk into Cassidy's office.

"I've reviewed the files Mr. Adams sent. Would you like for me to go over them with you or do you have specific questions about them?" She begins.

"To be honest, I'm not completely clear on what he sent you, and I've never seen any documents pertaining to my inheritance. I knew my parents were wealthy, but it wasn't something they discussed with me."

"Alright, well. Let's start with that," she says, handing me a thick packet of paper. "Your inheritance isn't really yours. It's meant to pass down to a male heir. If there's no male heir by the time you turn thirty, the estate is to be dissolved and donated. This is a very outdated practice, but it's essentially done to ensure the continuation of a family with a male as head of the family."

"How can I opt out of the inheritance completely?" I ask.

"Your grandfather would have to change it," she states .

"Well, that's not possible," I say.

"That's usually why things were done this way. The only option would be to comply with the requirements, or the family loses everything. Another option would be to have the beneficiaries agree to amending it in court, but it's not likely that these charities would be willing to do that." She gives me a sad smile.

"What if I did have a male child before I was thirty?" I ask, trying to understand why my father would be against my being with Declan now.

“That is where your inheritance gets interesting. There are additional criteria outlined as to whose child would be considered legitimate. Your grandfather listed specific families.”

“You’re telling me that my grandfather decided which families I could marry into?” My heart twists in my chest. My parents would’ve known all of this my entire life but never said a word.

“I’m afraid so. I’m sorry, Noel. I don’t pretend to understand how you must feel,” she offers.

“I was only five years old when he died!” My stomach turns sour at the thought. She stays quiet while I process the information.

“What if I had been a man?” I ask.

“No marriage stipulations, but you would’ve had to have a male grandson by the time your youngest daughter reached age thirty if you did not have a son of your own,” she says calmly.

My mother always said that wealth came with its own set of responsibilities and sacrifices, usually when I’d point out how she had every reason to be happier than she was. I’m starting to glimpse her meaning, but I still have so many questions.

“I took the liberty of looking up the families listed because I expected you’d want to know. Only two families had a son around your age. Your late husband’s family and the Cantons,” she says.

The world stands still as it all falls into place. My parents want me to marry Isaiah, and they will lose everything if I don’t. Not only would I have to marry him but also have a son with him in less than three years.

Feeling the bile rise in my throat, I run out of her office. Not sure where the restroom is, my only option is to get outside. Chance is on my heels. Unfortunately, he witnesses my getting sick in the bushes.

“Noel, are you alright?” He asks from behind me.

I look at him and shake my head. Of course, I’m not alright.

Walking away from my parents is one thing. Single-handedly destroying their lives is going to be much harder to live with. Being in a room alone with Isaiah gives me the creeps. The last thing I’d do is marry him, much less have his children.

But more important than all of those things is Declan. He’s the missing piece of my soul, and I won’t live without him.

“Where’s Declan?” I ask Chance.

“He’s expecting you at Velocity when you finish up here. Are you alright to drive?” He asks, concerned.

“Yep. Let’s go.”

It’s time to see what Sport stands for on this new car. Pushing the pedal to the floor as soon as I merge onto the interstate, the Range Rover hits 100 in no time. I’m weaving in and out of traffic. Being in control of this much speed is just what I needed after learning how little control I’ve had over my life.

My head is spinning at the thought of what my parents have done. Realizing that Nate knew when he met me at school that I was going to be his wife makes me feel sick again. Did he know all of those things about me? Did my own father tell him exactly what to say to me to get me to like him? To fall in love with him? Who the fuck did I

even marry?

According to Declan, Nate was trying to get other women pregnant because he didn't want to believe he was the reason we hadn't had a baby yet. Was my father pressuring him? Jaclyn thinks he was murdered, and Declan thinks this would be the motive. If my father killed Nate with time to spare, he'd absolutely try to kill Declan now.

Oh, god! What am I going to do? I can't fathom a life without Declan. My dad knows I'm with Declan. What if dinner tomorrow is a set up? How can I protect the man I love?

My vision gets spotty as the fear of losing Declan takes over my entire body. The car slides into the parking spot as the brakes lock up. I close my eyes to the darkness, expecting the front end to crash into the side of the building. My arms go cold as my hands grip the steering wheel hard and both feet tingle from pushing so hard on the brake pedal. I lose myself to the cold, dark as the panic takes me under.

"What the fuck happened!?" A voice bellows beside me.

"I don't know! She threw up and dipped! Why the fuck did you buy her a car this fast?" Another one sounds farther away.

"Noel? Baby, can you hear me? Noel Elise Anderson, let go!"

I'm slammed back into the seat by what must be the airbag deploying and scream. My arms are pulled from the steering wheel, and I'm yanked sideways, falling out of the car. My hands instinctively find my face as my legs give out, but I don't hit the ground. Instead, I'm floating. I open my eyes to smoke and Declan's beautiful face.

Is this heaven ?

He laughs. Oh, God, I died. Now I'll never be able to tell him how much I love him. I wrap my hands around my Heaven Declan, thankful he smells like the Earth Declan I left behind. What have I done?

We float away, but I don't open my eyes. I focus on breathing him in just in case I can't take this memory with me to the other side. My nose finds his skin first, then I kiss his neck.

"Thank God you taste the same," I whisper into his perfect neck and lick him for good measure. Oh, shit. Licking probably isn't allowed.

He laughs again as I feel a hard surface beneath me.

"Open your eyes, Noel," he says from above.

Slowly, I open my eyes to see his face with a halo of light around it. Staring at him, I wait to be told what comes next.

"Turn off the overhead light," he demands as his face turns serious. My heart picks up at the possibility that something isn't right.

When I try to sit up, his hands push down on my shoulders to keep me in place. "You're alright," he says, soothing this time.

"Declan? Where are we?" I ask once the lights dim. The room looks familiar to me, but I can't place it.

"We're in my office. Can you tell me your birthday?" He asks.

"January 10th, 1998. Why?" I feel my face scrunch in confusion.

“Does your head hurt anywhere?” He asks as he searches my face with his hands and eyes.

“No. Did I hit the building?” I ask, remembering now that my vision went black when I was trying to stop.

“I’m not sure how you didn’t,” a voice behind him speaks.

“Oh, God, Declan, I tried to stop, but everything went black,” I say, panicking again .

“You did stop. You’re alright. Can you sit up for some water?” His voice soothing me again. “Everyone out!” He yells.

He helps me sit up. I watch the office door close and realize I’m on his desk. He holds a glass of water to my lips for me to take a small sip then sets it down. He pulls a chair up to sit in front of me, rubbing his giant hands over my thighs.

“You blacked out, Noel. Chance said you drove like a bat outta hell from the lawyer’s office to here after you threw up in the bushes.”

“My whole life has been a lie. They just used me for money. If he killed Nate, he’ll kill you, too. The only option I have is to disappear until the money’s all gone. Otherwise, you’ll have a target on your head,” I tell him.

“You’re not running.” His deep voice is full of authority.

“What else can I do? If I don’t marry Isaiah and have a boy in the next three years, they lose everything. The only way to protect you is to marry Isaiah or run. My dad isn’t going to care about what I want.”

“He won’t be able to do much from where he’s going,” he threatens.

He tugs on my knees gently to help me into his lap. His hands frame my face as he lightly kisses my lips.

“If you ever get behind the wheel in that state again, I will spank your ass with a belt until you can’t sit for days. Do you understand?”

My eyes pop open to meet his very threatening ones. I search his face but don’t find any trace of humor in his expression and feel myself blush.

“I won’t,” I whisper. Then, I add, “I thought I died.”

He scoffs. “Yes, apparently licking might not be allowed in heaven.”

I gasp. “Oh, God!”

He chuckles at my embarrassment as I hide my face in my hands. I try to remember everything that ran through my head, wondering what else I said out loud .

Pulling my hands away, he puts them around his neck instead and uses his own to rub my back.

“Why are you embarrassed, sunshine?”

“I just didn’t know I said that out loud. What else did I say?”

He smiles but doesn’t answer. Instead, he looks down at my chest as he rests his hand over my heart. Placing my hands on either side of his face, I breathe in. His eyes meet mine again, full of adoration.

“You’ve already told me how you feel about me. Every kiss. Every scream. Every touch. Every lick . The word I need from you has five letters not four, and I’ll make

you say it every day for the rest of our lives. Now, tell me you're mine."

The hand covering my heart presses down to feel the beating speed up as I answer him.

"Declan, I'm so selfishly in love with you that I don't care who I hurt to be yours."

"If my sun goddess requires a sacrifice, so be it." His voice is barely more than gravel now.

The words settle around us, and I'm trapped inside his gaze. The world fades away, and all that is left is the truth. Sacrifices will be made for our love.

Pressing my forehead against his, I close my eyes. After a moment, he stands with his hands under my thighs to set me back on his desk.

Lifting my chin with one hand, he presses a gentle kiss to my lips. When he pulls away, he takes my left hand and slips a ring on my finger. I look down to see a round, canary diamond engagement ring wrapped around my finger.

Gasping, I look back up at him.

"The sun from my universe was stolen from me before I was old enough to grasp the true meaning of what I had lost. I've walked in darkness ever since, searching for you. Be the light to my dark, marry me, sunshine. "

Tears cloud my vision as I press my left hand over his heart this time. He presses my hand down into his chest to be sure I can feel his heart pounding.

"Today," I say.

His smile cracks my chest wide open as he pulls me into his embrace and buries his face into my neck.

“Today,” he whispers before setting me down to kiss me again.

“Let’s go,” he says, taking my hand.

When we walk into the lobby, I see several people sitting around. Chance is sitting on a sofa doing something on his phone. Declan’s father is here leaning against a wall. Zander is propped against Claire’s desk while she is busy on her computer. Everyone stares at us in unison, and we stop walking.

Declan holds my hand up to show everyone my ring, and they all smile before they move at once.

Chance walks to the door resuming his responsibilities with a smile. Claire beams and nods at me, watching the rest unfold. Zander walks up to give Declan a bro-hug before he wraps me in a full-on bear hug.

“Don’t go swimming with that thing on,” he jokes.

When he steps away, Declan’s father, Levi, is right behind him. Instead of addressing his son first, he takes both of my hands in his.

“My son has loved you since he was only a kid. There were times I wished he had never met you, so he might be able to find someone, but he never gave up hope that a day would come when he could be with you again. I can’t tell you what it means to me to finally welcome you to the family, love.”

He kisses my cheek then turns to Declan. The tears swell in Levi’s eyes as he hugs his son.

“Dad, come with us,” he asks .

His father nods, and Declan takes my hand again to lead me to the parking lot. Outside, I see my new Range Rover has been parked correctly in a parking spot, but the tire marks on the pavement show where I almost crashed. Declan helps me into his truck as his dad gets into the little truck parked next to us.

As Declan drives us to the courthouse, he kisses my hand around his ring.

“What about your ring?” I ask.

“I’m getting mine tattooed.”

“I want one too,” I tell him.

“You don’t like the ring?” He asks as he side-eyes me.

“Oh, the ring is unbelievable, Dec. It’s absolutely perfect! I want to get a tattoo with you, not as a ring, something else.”

“Yeah? What do you want?” He resumes rubbing his lips along my fingers and hand.

“Something that proves I’m yours and can’t be removed.”

“I have an idea,” he says, pulling into the courthouse parking lot.

Chapter twenty-one

Declan

Waking up next to my wife has to be the only reason worth getting up at all. She's facing away from me, so I lift her hair to look at the tattoo of the sun goddess just below her neck. It's fucking perfect. Studying her body in the dim lighting, I decide to have a taste before my workout.

Starting with her nipples, I suck one into my mouth feeling it pebble on my tongue. She stirs under me but doesn't wake. My stubbled face may wake her up before I even reach my goal, but I can't help myself. Her vanilla scent and smooth skin invites me to trail kisses down the center of her chest to her stomach. Her moan hits me right in the dick, and I hurry along to my favorite part of her before she fully wakes.

Sliding the tip of my tongue between her lips, I start with her clit. Her legs tense and her hands find their way to my hair.

“Dec?” Her sleepy voice twinkles in the dark above me. “Wha-“

Sucking her little bud between my lips, I tease her with the tip of my tongue to stop her questions. I'm rewarded with the sexiest of whimpers and her legs part for me. Making my way down, my tongue glides across slick juices into her hole. I pump my tongue into her a few times before working my way back to flatten my tongue over her clit while I fuck her with my finger .

Her insides are so soft and squeeze my fingers so fucking tight that I almost sit up to

bury my throbbing cock inside her instead. Then, she runs her hands over the sides of my face, and I settle in to pleasure my wife.

Just as she gets close, her hips begin to move causing her to grind her pussy into my mouth. I fucking love the way she rides my face. I close my mouth around her and growl, and she's screaming out as her body shakes and her pussy clenches down on my fingers.

Once her body relaxes, I kiss her inner thigh and get out of bed.

"Where are you going?" She asks, reaching out to grab my arm as I pull the covers back over her.

"It's early. Go back to sleep. I'll just be in the weight room," I tell her and watch as she closes her eyes.

Today's going to be a big day for her. Hopefully that extra orgasm will add a couple more hours of sleep for her.

My cock is still hard when I walk into the weight room to start my first set. Luckily, I'm starting with my chest and working out at home.

After my second set, Zander calls interrupting the music in my ear buds.

"What's up?" I answer.

"I think I've finally found Rocky," he says, sounding like he's been running.

Fucking finally. "So who is he working for?"

"Grant Williams."

“Of fucking course. Keep an eye on him, but don’t spook him. Her dad is first on the list. I can’t risk anything happening before tonight’s dinner. Anything new out of Leah?”

“She’s tried, but she still doesn’t know who the baby daddy is. You know, Dec, if it is Nate’s baby, that means Noel-“

“You let me worry about that.” I cut him off with a growl .

“Yeah, my bad, man.”

Without a word, I hang up. I’ll find a way to give her babies of our own if she wants them.

By the time I finish with my usual routine, I’m still too pissed off about letting Grant live when I had him under my knife, so I add a few more sets. My chest and shoulders are screaming by the time my mood allows me to stop. I clean off my equipment before going to grab a quick shower.

Walking through my, our , bedroom, I notice the bed is empty. Glancing around the dark room, I don’t see her, so I check the bathroom. Empty.

The fuck?

Walking a little faster back down the hall, I check the office and the kitchen. As I’m pulling up the camera app on my phone, a shadow passes over the living room. Looking out the window, I see her pacing on the back porch in the dim, early morning light.

If she wanted private phone calls, she shouldn’t have married me. Wasting no time, I step out to hear what she thinks she’s plotting.

“...just thought you should know.” She stares at the wood line waiting for the other person to respond. “It’s over, Dad. Find another way to keep the money.”

Turning to pace more, she freezes when her eyes meet mine.

“Gotta go,” she says before ending the call.

I clench my jaw and breathe through my nose, recalculating the plans that her phone call just shot to hell.

“Noel,” I manage to say in an even tone.

“I don’t want to have dinner with them, Declan. I don’t even want to see them in the foreseeable future. I’m not willing to share our happiness with them. I’m just done,” she says, explaining herself .

I’m so fucking proud of her, but she doesn’t understand everything I had planned.

“Why are you up this early?” I ask instead of addressing the situation.

She looks confused. “I have to let Joe know I’m taking off the rest of the week. He would definitely tell my parents, so I wanted to call Dad first.”

“Come with me,” I say with a smile.

I walk her straight to the shower. As soon as I turn the water on, she undresses and stands under the water. Her thick brown curls flatten and darken down her back. My eyes wander down to her tight ass to watch the water trickle down.

I wish I could do this all day, but her phone call just made me pressed for time. Walking up behind her, I grab her tits and pull on her nipples, loving the way she

cries out for me. Then I dip my fingers into her pussy. As soon as my fingers are slick with her, I bend her over.

“Put your hands on the bench,” I coax.

She does what she’s told, and I turn on the vibrator to rub along her clit then dip it into her wet cunt.

I set a bottle of lube next to her before replacing the vibrator with my cock. Plunging into her warm, slick hole, I bury myself deep inside her. Using the vibrator against her clit, I work her slowly to an orgasm.

Her whimpers turn to moans as her pussy squeezes down on me, and I know she’s getting close.

“That’s it, baby, come all over me.” My voice is hoarse as I lose myself in her pleasure.

I slap her ass hard and move the vibrator just as she screams out my name.

While her pussy clenches down on me, I let her ride my dick slowly, pushing against her as her walls squeeze. I take the opportunity to grab the lube and coat the vibrator. Before she stills, I pick up the pace .

“Rub your clit for me,” I tell her.

Her arm lifts from the bench, and I watch her shoulder move as she plays with herself.

“Good girl. Do it like I would. Push down in a circle.”

“Declan, oh, God,” she moans.

“That’s it, baby,” I praise her as she tightens her pussy against my cock again.

I reach down to pinch her nipple, and she cries out. Thrusting into her harder now, I have to hold onto her shoulder to keep her in place. My girl likes to move her hips against me, and I love watching that ass pop.

“Goddamn, Noel, you’re gonna make me come before you,” I grind out.

“Yes!” She screams out. “Oh, Declan, yes!”

Her orgasm comes out of fucking nowhere, so I’m glad I already lubed up. Keeping my pace, I feel my balls clenching as her pussy tightens. Her screams set me over the fucking edge.

“Fuck, baby girl, take it all,” I slam into her hard. While I come deep inside her, I start to fuck her ass with the vibrator slowly. She tries to wiggle away, but I grab her hips and shove my cock back into her as she continues to pulse around it.

“Let it in, baby. Let it in, while you’re still high on my dick,” my voice is deep and rough even though I meant for it to be soothing.

She takes a deep breath and grabs my thigh, as I push the vibrating butt plug inside of her ass a little more each time. When it sinks the rest of the way in, I turn it off. Pulling my semi-hard dick out of her cunt, I rub her ass to admire how good she looks from here.

“Baby girl, you are the perfect fantasy,” I tell her.

Her little whimper is so fucking cute. I wish I had time to play with her some more,

but I don't.

Standing her up, she looks at me wide-eyed. "Aren't you going to take it out?" She asks.

"No," I say, pulling her back under the water to bathe her.

"What do you mean?" She looks down at me with her hands resting on my shoulders while I wash her pussy and legs.

"In a couple of hours, you will turn it back on and fuck yourself with it." I stand to wash the rest of her then myself.

"What?" She giggles.

"I'm not joking. I want a video of you getting off by fucking yourself in the ass by lunch."

"Um, I don't know. Wait, where are you going?" She asks, still wide-eyed.

"I need to go take care of something this morning, but I won't be gone too long. Start packing while you wait. The more comfortable you are with that plug, the more you'll enjoy it when it's me."

"Oh," she says, realizing my intentions.

I grab my towel, wink at her and leave her dazed in the shower.

After throwing some clothes on, I leave the bathroom while she's still in the shower washing her hair.

I set the alarm and grab all the keys to make sure she doesn't try to leave the house while I'm gone. I'm not convinced she won't try to see her father without me, and I can't take that chance today.

I put my gear on in the garage and mount my bike.

In no time at all, I meet Zander on the side of the road. We walk our bikes into the woods for safekeeping and follow the trail we mapped out last week to the house. Her mother's car is gone but an older white Buick in its place. Based on our surveillance over the past couple of weeks, I know it belongs to the cook .

Zander and I don't speak. Our plans have already been discussed to avoid any confusion in the moment. We've planned for as many fuck ups as possible, and it's finally go time.

Slipping on our masks, we walk up the steps to the kitchen entrance. No sound of movement in the kitchen could mean one of two things. Either way, we're free to enter the house. Zander goes first, so he can go to the control room. I lurk through the shadows to find the man responsible for all of my wife's misery.

By the time Zander has the power shut off, I'm already near enough to the guest rooms to hear him fucking the cook. Neither of them seem to notice the loss of power, so I open my blade and peek through the door. Conner has her on all fours on the floor. Her head is practically underneath the bed as he pummels her from behind.

Considering this would be a fucking great way to die, I decide to wait him out. He doesn't deserve to go out that easy, and I don't want to kill an innocent if I don't have to.

I sneak into the room to hide behind a large dressing room divider. Several minutes later, the fucker finally finishes. I listen as they both get dressed.

“When will she be back home?” She asks him.

“Later in the week. I want you on the table tonight as the first course, so go ahead and cancel your help tonight.” He tells her.

She giggles and runs out of the room.

Show time.

Slipping out from behind the divider, I see his back is still to me, so I creep up behind him. At the last second, I kick the backs of his knees and grab his arms. Before he has any time to react, I’m kneeling on his legs and holding his wrists together behind him .

He hollers out, but Zander has caught up to me. He shoves the needle into his neck and pushes the plunger down. The yelling stops almost immediately as his body goes slack.

Zander holds up one finger, letting me know he only saw one staff member in the house before he cut the tapes. I nod, and he checks the hall to make sure she isn’t coming back. He turns to give me the all clear.

Lifting Conner over my shoulder, I walk down the hall. Zander stays in front of me to check around corners.

We’re almost to the kitchen when I hear something across the hall. It sounds like she’s showering, so we continue through the house, slipping out the way we came in.

Chance is waiting for us by the road when we make it back to the bikes. He pops the trunk to give us the all clear, and I throw Conner in. Slamming it shut, I bang on the trunk lid, letting him know to go.

Zander leaves ahead of me, and I stay hidden in the woods until the next gap between cars.

“Damn, I’m a little disappointed,” Zander says through the headset.

“You can wait for him to wake up before you strap him down,” I respond, laughing to myself.

“Fuck yeah!”

“Next target will be more difficult,” I warn.

“The receptionist is basically planning our wedding already. I got you, bro,” he laughs now.

Taking the final bend in the road, I watch Zander pull into the warehouse parking lot ahead of me. Chance is already parked around the back.

Not wanting to drive my bike across gravel, I park out front. I walk through the office down the dark hall to the back storage room .

Chance and Zander drop an unconscious Conner Anderson on the floor. The cell phone in his pocket is steadily ringing. Walking over to the table, I open my box of knives to choose one.

“Chance, go back and offer the cook a plane ticket and some cash. Tell her Conner had to leave suddenly and wants her to join him. Make sure it’s a one-way ticket,” I tell him before he walks out.

Zander kicks Conner in the ribs, trying to wake him up.

“How much did you give him?” I ask, cocking an eyebrow when that doesn’t even result in a grunt.

“We still have a few minutes. I just thought he should wake up sore,” he says, shrugging his shoulders at me.

He grabs some things out of the cabinet, prepping for a fun afternoon.

I take the opportunity to send little miss sunshine a text.

I bought you several things. Look in your nightstand. I want a pic ASAP

Conner starts to stir, so I set my phone facedown on the counter. Picking up the first knife, I turn around and sling it into his arm.

He screams out. He tries to sit up and grab his arm at the same time.

“About fucking time,” I say.

His eyes meet mine, and all the color drains from his face.

“What the fuck are you doing?” He yells so loud the veins in his neck bulge out.

“Making sure you can’t hurt Noel anymore. Oh, and making sure you don’t kill me in the next year or two,” I tell him as if it’s completely obvious.

He makes it to his feet before he sees Zander off to the side .

“What the fuck is that?” He half-yells, half-squeals at him.

“Razor wire,” Zander replies, walking toward Conner.

I watch Zander have his fun for a few minutes as he slings the wire around, cutting Conner here and there. When he gets too close to a main artery in his neck, I decide to step in.

“Uh uh.”

There’s already blood everywhere, and Conner is as pissed off as he can get.

My turn.

I wrestle him to a chair, and slam my head into his. Kicking his ankle, I force him to sit. Zander wraps a leg to the chair with zip ties while I pound on his face, determined not to stop until I hear something fucking crack. By the time Zander finishes the second leg, Conner is out cold again.

“Fuck, dude, at this rate, you won’t get to make him into a human pin cushion. He’s too old for that shit,” Zander says.

I nod my agreement and wait for him to wake up...again. My phone beeps on the counter, and I smile to myself at the perfect little reward waiting for me at home.

Zander tilts his head. “How the fuck do you decide that one woman is enough?”

“Not sure I can explain it to you, but you know how you get when I take your Staccato?”

“The fuck you mean when you take my Staccato? When did you touch my fucking Staccato, bro? I’ve told you to take any of the other ones, but leave that one in the fucking case—, ohhh,” his rant turns into understanding.

“Like that,” I say, nodding my head.

Conner blinks awake again, so I grab his hair to make him look at me. My face is level with his when his eyes start to focus. He spits in my face and bounces his chair like he's going fucking somewhere. Wiping my face with the back of my hand, I stand up.

"You think Noel will stay with you after this?" He asks.

"She'll forgive me before she falls asleep tonight. Her world is safer without you in it," I answer.

He laughs at that.

"I'm not the only one who wants something from her," he warns.

Those words inject rage into my veins. Ripping his shirt open, I carve a giant X across his chest. He yells out, which only fuels the flames of hell scorching my heart at the thought of someone hurting her the way he has. It's time to balance the scales.

While I walk over to the counter to get my smaller knives, Zander speaks up.

"Why the fuck would you allow a threat to your own daughter to live?" He asks.

"They've kept that bitch under lock and key. I will handle it when she has the baby," he tries to plead his case.

"You're done handling Noel's affairs," I snap.

I throw small blades all over his chest and stomach. They're too small to cause any significant damage on their own, but the inverted prongs at the end make them hurt like a bitch.

“Fucking stop! I’ll leave you two alone. Just stop!” He pleads.

Holding a longer knife, I walk up to him.

“She believed I didn’t want her. Because of you.” I pull out one of the blades from his chest and rip his flesh out with it.

“She fell in love and married someone else. Because of you.” Another blade from his stomach. The hole left behind is bigger from the softer flesh and blood pours out of it

.

“She was cheated on and widowed. Because of you.” I press the blade against the artery in his neck.

“But you’re together now.” The panic in his voice matches the fear in his eyes.

“That’s right. She’s my wife now. Mine to protect. Tell me. Does Grant know you had his son killed?”

His face changes. The pleas are gone, replaced with disgust. “Of course he knows! Powerful men always choose money over love.”

“Choosing money over love opens you up to being outbid. You can’t trust your allies that way, Conner. Isaiah let me know the minute you dropped the hit on my dad because I could offer him more than money. You see, loyalty is what feeds power.”

“Your dad may be safe now, but you won’t get away with this,” he growls through clenched teeth.

“You of all people know that’s the easy part. I just wish Noel were here to do this herself,” I say as I plunge the blade into his neck, pulling it out again to watch him

bleed to death.

Over his gurgling, I hear the alarm system notification on my phone and jump to action. When I reach it, I open the app to see men in my living room. Searching the cameras, I can't find Noel on any of them.

“Zander! We have to go now!” I run through the building, leaving everything where it sits.

Within minutes, I hear Zander's voice come through the headset. “What's going on?”

“Men are at my house! I couldn't find her on the cameras. We have to get there right fucking now! ”

I pull back on the throttle, pushing the bike to its limits, not even checking to see if Zander is behind me. My only thought is getting to her.

We make the twenty minute drive in ten. There aren't any cars outside when we pull in. I'm certain they didn't leave on foot.

Opening the app to track her phone, I follow the signal. I pray to the God I don't deserve that she somehow stayed hidden and really is inside, even though I know better.

The app guides me to her phone on the ground in the bathroom with a broken screen. There's clothes scattered on the floor from the closet into the bathroom where she must've been hiding. It looks like she put up a fight, but the mother fuckers found her and drug her out.

“FUCK!”

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Chapter twenty-two

Declan

The sky is pitch black, not even a sliver of moonlight to soften the darkness. Zander steps up behind me, shoving his hands in his pockets. We stand in silence while my rage destroys me from the inside out. I welcome the pounding in my head. If she's hurting, I want to hurt too. Fuck, I just hope she's not.

"Isaiah is on his way," Zander says.

Opening and closing my pocket knife, I turn to look at him.

"Is Leah with him?" I ask.

"No."

The past several hours have been spent tracking people down. Inside, my house is full of people waiting to be set in motion. I know who took her, but I don't know where.

It's going to take manpower to check every property, so I've called in every fucking favor I have owed and made promises in exchange for more. I'd sign my soul to the devil right now if he'd just fucking appear.

"Fucking go get her, Zander."

He's been tracking Leah's every move since he gave her the burner, claiming it's for

me, but I know better. He thinks I'll kill her if he brings her here, and he might be right. But I will fucking kill him if he keeps me from the one person who might know where my wife is .

Knowing he can't put it off any longer, he gets on his bike and peels out in a circle, leaving a black tire mark on my pavement.

I stand perfectly still and stare at the black sky waiting for the motion lights to shut off again. When I'm enveloped in darkness once more, I close my eyes to focus on the pain in my chest. Silently, I pray that her fear and her pain become mine.

I listen to the sound of a car coming down the drive without turning. Eventually the lights turn back on. I turn around to see Isaiah getting out of his Bentley.

"I've got my guys taking the building now. I'll know more in a few minutes," he states like a businessman.

I've never seen him sober or responsible. But here he is—making good on our deal. He reaches out to shake my hand. I take it and squeeze too hard.

"If I find out you played a part in this, I will gut you and burn your club to the ground."

He chuckles but holds my hand firm and maintains eye contact. I can see his conscience is clear, so I let go.

Isaiah has a lot to gain by helping me. On the other hand, he has the resources to create a situation that would force me to do anything—one like I'm in right now.

Even I have to admit that he isn't the type to beat around the bush. If he had her, he would've already tried making a deal. For now, I have to trust him.

“We’ll have her back by morning, Declan,” he says.

Jessica walks out.

“There’s only one out-of-state property that I can find, and it’s in Augusta, Georgia. I’ve looked in every state I have a contact for, but that’s all I can come up with. I’m sorry, Declan. Is there anything else I can do?”

Instead of walking inside to get him, I call Chance on my cell. Through the floor-to-ceiling windows in my living room, I can see him pull out his phone. He puts it back into his pocket and walks outside. There’s too many fucking people in there for it to feel as empty as it does without her. It makes my skin crawl.

“What’s up?” He asks.

Nodding to Jessica, she asks, “Can you check private airports to see if any flights have left this evening for Augusta, Georgia?”

He walks away to start making calls, and I give her my back. I listen to her footsteps retreating and hear her get into her car to leave.

Noel would be livid if she knew Jessica was here. But she was already here offering help before I knew Zander had even called her. I have to admit, she got us farther than we would’ve gotten without her. She was able to give us a full list of properties owned by Grant Williams to search.

Chance paces and talks on the phone behind me. Needing space, I walk into the garage. I place my hands on the hood of the Challenger and lean over to breathe.

If I’m being honest with myself, he took her as far away from me as he could. He’d have to wait until bank hours tomorrow to drain her accounts, and he’d need the

distance to prevent me from getting to her before he was finished with the paperwork. Fucking piece of shit.

Zander's bike hums outside. I overhear Chance tell him where I am, and the door opens.

He walks in with Leah tucked safely behind him. Stepping around the car, I close the gap between us in three strides.

"Where is she?!" I roar into her face over Zander's shoulder.

Chance rips the door open, slamming it against the wall .

"What the fuck?" He asks.

Leah meets my glare without cowering.

"I've been calling her, but her phone is off. The last time I saw her was two days ago. She wouldn't agree to the paternity test, so there wasn't much else I could do."

When I lift my hands to shake her, Zander and Chance grab me, shoving me back. Leah doesn't move even though Zander is screaming at her to leave. Chance keeps repeating something, but I'm hyper focused on ripping this bitch to shreds for not doing the one thing I was paying her to do.

"She's in Miami, Dec. Noel is in Miami," his words start to sink in.

I snap my eyes to him.

"Let's go," I clip.

I shrug them off by stepping backward.

“We don’t have an address. The only thing we know is that she was put into Grant Holdings’ company jet just after sunset, and the flight plan was to a small airport outside of Miami. We need more information,” he counters.

“We’re leaving right fucking now, Chance. Get Isaiah. We can deal with the details after we land,” I order, my voice deadly calm.

Chance whistles loud enough to alert everyone inside that it’s time to move. Motion explodes around me as I walk to the Bentley. People are pouring out of my house to get into vehicles parked all over the yard. Isaiah gets into the passenger seat of his own car and cocks an eyebrow at me as Zander, Leah, and Chance climb into the backseat.

“Only because I know you can drive and have had a shit night, fucker,” Isaiah says, giving me permission to drive .

I scoff at him and turn the car around too fast, flinging Leah into Chance. Isaiah gives me directions to his private hangar while I push the gas pedal to find out what his car can do.

The clock on the dash reads 10:29 PM. She’s been gone for over twelve hours. Pushing the pedal down on the backside of a curve, I try to close the gap of time that’s been wasted on fucking logistics.

Fuck the logistics, and fuck the irony. I don’t want to be efficient, I want to get to her right the fuck now.

“Damn, I didn’t know it ate like this!” Isaiah scoots down in his seat, spreading his legs to keep from sliding in the curves.

If there's one mother fucker who is ever down for almost dying, it's him.

"You're gonna make my fuckin dick hard, man!" He shouts.

"Why you gotta be weird, bro?" Zander calls out from behind me.

Isaiah laughs. "Alright, slow down. It's the next left." Isaiah points to the dimly lit hangars to our left.

We pull into the hangar and watch the pilot climb the stairs before getting out of the car. Isaiah walks up first, and Leah follows.

Zander and Chance wait with me for the other cars to pull in. Once everyone shows up, we decide who is flying with us and who needs to stay back to hit the other properties.

Chance pulls our clean up crew off to the side to talk to them before sending them up—we've kept them busy today. Zander tells two guys to get in the plane and sends the rest to each of the properties on the list Jessica provided.

I take the stairs two at a time into the plane with Zander and Chance behind me. Isaiah tells the pilot and flight attendant to roll, and we're moving in no time .

Leah sits between Isaiah and the window. She's wearing a sparkly top that barely covers her tits with a tiny skirt and thigh-high boots. She has her hair in pigtails and wears the black framed glasses like she had on the day I met her.

"It's Nate's baby," I tell her.

It's the only reason Grant would do something like this.

She turns her head to meet my stare.

“She was with multiple men since she secretly had her IUD removed. Without a DNA test, I wouldn’t bet on that.”

“She’s mine to deal with,” Isaiah interjects, and Leah cowers to look back out the window.

No one speaks again for a while. The flight attendant offered drinks, and most of us took water or an energy drink. Some of the guys doze off.

“We’ll start out with a small load of cigars,” Isaiah explains his plans for our new business deal.

“When?” I ask.

We might as well talk about it. At least it gives me something else to think about while I sit here.

“Next week. I’m expecting the delivery on Wednesday in New Orleans. Sometimes they’re early, sometimes they’re late. I’ll need a truck on standby near the area for my guy to call,” he says.

I nod.

“No one fucks with me, Declan. It’s an easy money-maker for you,” he says.

“Didn’t think you gave a shit,” I snap at him.

He laughs. “If you get caught, I lose money. That wouldn’t help my end game.”

“And what’s that, Isaiah?”

He scoffs, obviously not willing to share .

“This has an expiration date,” I remind him.

“I know what we agreed. What are you going to do if Zander decides to stay in?” He asks.

Leah turns her head slightly at the mention of Zander.

“Zander can do what he wants, but Velocity is only giving you a year,” I clarify.

As soon as we land and pull into a hangar, Leah checks her phone. Veronica still hasn’t responded to her texts, but they’re showing delivered now. At least we know her phone is on. Isaiah calls her, but she sends him to voicemail.

“She’s bold now. She thinks she got away,” he says, slipping his phone back into his pocket.

“Chance, go find the Grant Holdings plane and search it,” I order.

I exit behind him to stretch and get some air. The heat and humidity make me think of hell, and I’m suddenly very fucking glad Noel wants to move to Tennessee. We’re crossing Florida off her travel list and won’t be back after this.

My phone rings.

“I need an address, G,” I groan into the phone.

“I’m sorry, boss. There’s nothing here connecting Grant to Miami.”

Ending the call, I put my phone back in my pocket and walk to the only hangar out here with light creeping through the cracks.

Chance pulls a gun on me when I open the door out of instinct and holsters it just as quickly when he recognizes my face. I follow his lead to the cargo door of the plane to see a man tied and gagged.

Thank fuck .

Grabbing the rope around his hands, I drag him out and back into the moonless night toward the open hangar I just came from.

His muffled shouts are loud enough to alert everyone else, so I don't bother. Instead, I hang his hands over a fork lift and turn it on to lift him so that he's dangling by the rope between his hands. By the time I'm finished raising him high enough for his feet to hover, Zander and Isaiah have joined me.

"Who's this?" Zander asks.

Pulling my pocket knife out, I say, "Let's fucking find out."

Grabbing his left shoulder, I put all my weight on him to pull up. My knife slices his face as I cut the gag. Before I'm done, I can feel his shoulder dislocate. He tries to use his legs but doesn't have the leverage to shake me. I grin, enjoying the sound of his pain.

I fall back to the ground with a thud and wipe the blood off my blade onto his pants.

"Fuck you!" He screams from above me.

Zander takes the phone out of his pocket and passes it to Isaiah. Then, he snatches

down on the guy's right leg suddenly. The fucker screams out almost immediately as his right shoulder dislocates from the angle and weight.

"Are you fucking crying?" I scoff, looking up at him.

"Who the fuck are you?" He asks between his groaning and moaning.

"I'm her husband and your worst fucking nightmare. Where did they take my wife?"

I fist the handle of my knife, ready to stab his thigh when he refuses to answer, but Isaiah rattles off an address behind me before my human target has a chance.

"You sure?" I ask over my shoulder, glaring up at the man I'm about to end.

"They have a pretty impressive tracking system. There's three men inside that address. It's about twenty minutes away. "

"Fuck!" The man screams, and I stab him in both inner thighs and walk away. Before we make it back inside the plane, he's done screaming.

Isaiah sets the phone down on a table, and everyone sits around it. Zander works on gathering the things we need from the cargo bay while the rest of us discuss strategies for getting in quietly. We don't want to create an unsafe situation for Noel.

It's a small house surrounded by woods. An old real estate listing shows the layout of the home, so we're able to get a fairly detailed plan together with some contingencies.

An hour fucking later, the Tahoes Isaiah rented finally show up. We jump in and haul ass to the address, parking down the street.

We walk through the woods to surround the house, staying hidden from view. The

sun is rising, so we can't use darkness to sneak up to the house.

I'm in position towards the front of the house with an ear bud in to hear from everyone else as they get in position, compliments of Isaiah. My phone vibrates against my thigh unexpectedly. Checking it, I see it's Garrett again.

"Grant is fucking here," Garrett says.

"What?" I growl, trying to keep quiet.

"I'm watching the cameras, and he just walked into the elevator inside this fucking building."

"Grab him. Call me when you know who the fuck took her to Miami. We're already in position here," I tell him and hang up.

"I don't know what we're about to walk into. Grant just got in the elevator at Grant Holdings. He isn't in this house," I whisper into the quiet.

"Wait for Garrett to call back. This might be a fucking set up!" Zander puts my thoughts into words .

"Fuck! You're right, but goddamn it I don't want to fucking wait!" I'm whisper-yelling and definitely being too loud anyway.

"I'm going in to get Veronica either way, and it's more likely that Noel is in there with her than in Birmingham with him," Isaiah speaks.

"I'm in. Let's do this," I confirm.

Chapter twenty-three

Noel

The sound of a music box playing is the first thing I notice. Between sleep and reality, I'm not sure if it's from a dream until I hear a soft voice singing.

"You are my sunshine, My only sunshine. When you're not happy, My skies are grey.

You'll never know dear, How much I love you. Please don't take My sunshine away."

My eyelids slide open and shut back immediately as the pain in my head roars with the intrusion of light. Trying to grasp the fragments of memories floating around my foggy brain, I hear the music box repeating itself.

Opening my eyes again will most likely bring more pain, so I wait for my thoughts to make sense before I try again. That song. I need it to stop .

The last thing I remember is Grant taking me to his plane and telling me to drink some water. He kept apologizing, telling me I'd understand when I learned everything.

What I've learned so far is what I already knew. Grant and Jaclyn wouldn't say much, and they kept Veronica away from me. But I saw her. I'm not stupid. They wouldn't have her around if she wasn't carrying Nate's baby.

I tried to explain to them that I would give her Nate's money, but they said I had to

go with them. Grant kept saying it wasn't about money.

We flew somewhere, but I don't know where or how far. My head hurts so bad, and that song has me even more on edge..

"Good morning, sunshine," a man's voice says.

Chills prickle all over my body. I know that voice. But it can't be.

"I've missed you, baby," he says.

Oh, God.

"Nate?" My voice croaks as I open my eyes.

The light burns, and my head throbs, but I force myself to look for him. My heart is racing at the possibility.

"Yeah, babe, it's me. Take it slow," he says, his voice just as beautiful as I remembered.

"How?" I ask in disbelief.

My eyes land on his form, and I blink until he comes into focus. His eyes shine bright blue. His skin is more golden than I remember, his hair a lighter blonde. My heart threatens to explode at the sight of him alive after all these months.

"I'm so sorry I've had to put you through all of this, but I'm here now."

I knew it. Knew he would come for me. Knew it couldn't have been him. The tears fall like rain .

“I looked for you. I told everyone it wasn’t you in that car,” I sob.

I begged and pleaded with God for so long to let me see him again, to make it untrue.

“I knew you’d wait for me, my love. Dad said it was a bad plan, that you’d move on. I told him you could have a small distraction. You needed to get him out of your system, anyway. I forgive you, Elle,” he says.

What? I didn’t wait. Oh, no. Declan.

The tears slow as the reality of my situation begins to creep in. My brain is still so foggy, but he knows that’s not true. I was at Declan’s when I was taken. I wiggle the fingers on my left hand. My ring is still there.

Nate knows . Nate’s alive, and he knows I’m married to Declan.

His smile fades as I sit up straighter. When I try to wipe my face, I realize my hands are tied behind my back. Panic takes my breath away.

“Nate! Nate, untie me! What is this?” I squeak out, pleading with him.

“We have some things to discuss, and you aren’t going to like some of the things I need to say.”

He stands up, finally turning off the music.

“Why would you kidnap me? What did he give me?” I try to sound stronger than I feel. I need to stay in control to figure this out.

“It was a sedative to help you sleep. Apparently, you gave my parents a really hard time, which surprises me. The woman I married was gentle. I’m not sure I like this

new side of you,” he says, looking over me disapprovingly.

My instincts tell me to keep my mouth shut. This isn't the man I knew, and he's got nothing left to lose. He's dangerous.

“We'll work at your pace, Noel. I don't want to hurt you anymore than I already have,” he says .

My throat tightens at the realization that he expects me to leave Declan. Am I supposed to want that? Months ago I would have.

He must not realize all that I know about what he did before he died. What has he been doing since that accident? Whatever it is, I'm not taking this man back. He can be with his pregnant whore, not me.

“ You're mine,” Declan's voice anchors me in my confusion. I just need to figure out how to get away, so I can get back to him.

“Where have you been?” I ask, deciding to avoid the harder topics for now. I need answers and strength before starting a fight.

“Here. I needed to reinvent myself and establish a new firm before I came back for you. I had to wait for a couple of things to grow,” he says and smiles.

Chills cover my body at the way he says the last word.

“What things?” I ask, taking the bait.

“Noel, has your father ever explained the way the Williams estate works to you?”

“A lawyer did.”

“Good. And you know how I feel about kids, anyway. You might be a little upset by this, but I need to explain some things.

Our story began when you and I were fifteen. My father needed a loan. Your father agreed to give him the money instead, in exchange for me.

I have to admit. I was furious when my dad told me he arranged my marriage. It took me a solid year to believe he had actually done it, despite seeing the documents.

Once I came to terms with it, I looked you up. You were obviously beautiful in every picture I could find on social media, but you also looked so innocent. When I asked my dad for your number, I found out you didn’t know about me yet .

That’s when I decided to move here. I wanted to meet you. I wanted our relationship to be real. And, Noel, I did truly fall in love with you. Arranged or not, I wanted to marry you.

Now, the baby part was the tricky part since I didn’t want you to know about the arrangement or the inheritance clause. We were running out of time, so I messed with your birth control pills. I paid off the pharmacist to give you packs of placebos that looked real.” He waits for the information to settle in, watching me for a reaction.

My face heats up. Even though I knew, hearing him recount his side of our story makes him feel more like Nate again. I can’t help myself. This is my opportunity to get answers.

“You promised we’d travel before having children. Why would you do that?” I question.

He walks over to me and runs his fingers down my jawline and touches my bottom lip with his thumb.

“People travel with children all the time, and we had the means to do it. I thought a happy accident would be what we needed to appease your father. ”

Electricity shoots through me at his touch. I’m so relieved to see him alive but so heartbroken by the choices he’s made. I’ve never felt more confused and conflicted.

“We had until I was thirty. Why would you intervene? Why not just tell me you wanted kids sooner?” I stay the course, needing all the answers.

“Your father didn’t want to wait that long. My car crash was real, Noel. He threatened to kill me if you didn’t get pregnant soon. Then, he found out I had already been trying and,” he pauses, “failing.”

“There are doctors that help with these things. All of this would’ve been so simple if you had trusted me!” I shout.

Damn his prideful immaturity. What he doesn’t know is that I’ve already had time to process most of this. Now that my mind is accepting he’s perfectly alive in front of me, my anger is raging.

“I did my own tests, Noel. It wasn’t easy, but I did find us a surrogate,” he says slowly.

“A what?!” I scream.

“I need you to be calm and listen, baby. For whatever reason, you weren’t able to conceive. But the inheritance clause doesn’t allow for something like that. It does allow for other loopholes though. No genetic testing is required, only a birth certificate. So, when the baby is born, we will go back to Birmingham to claim the inheritance and confront your father,” he says, speaking slowly as if to a child.

“That whore is not a surrogate, and that baby isn’t fucking mine!” I spit out.

“Noel Elise Williams, we do not speak to each other this way,” he yells back at me.

Taking a steady breath, I say, “That’s not my name.”

“Excuse me?” He grabs my chin, forcing me to look up at him.

His expression is pure rage. I’ve never seen him so angry.

Swallowing my fear, I clarify.

“My name is Noel Elise Adams.”

“Over my dead body,” he says. “As you can clearly see now, I’m not, which means you are still my wife .”

I shudder.

“This wasn’t something I planned for, I’ll admit. You remarrying only seven months later? Didn’t see that one coming. But I knew he’d come for you,” he says.

I glare at him .

“I knew all about him. Your father told me everything about you when I moved to Birmingham for you. But the journals you kept in my house about him are why I waited to come get you.”

He walks closer to me.

“He’ll come for you, and I’m going to kill him when he does,” he whispers into my

face.

“No,” I breathe out, knowing he’s right.

Declan would turn the world upside down to find me, but he won’t know what he’s walking into.

“Don’t worry, babe. He’s not worth it, and I’ll prove all that soon enough. Right now, I’d like you to officially meet our surrogate. Veronica!” He calls out.

The woman whose apartment I was taken to yesterday walks into the room with a sweet smile as though all of this is completely normal. It’s fucking creepy that he chose someone who looks so much like me.

“Hi, Noel. Of course we met yesterday. I’m Veronica, but you haven’t been properly introduced to this guy. This is your son,” she says, rubbing her belly.

I search the rope on my hands to find the knot, hoping I can get myself out of this chair to strangle her.

“Veronica has agreed to be our surrogate for a minimum of four pregnancies. She will also be one of our nannies,” he tells me.

“I never had any procedures to have a surrogate, Nate. You slept with this woman! That’s not the same thing!” I yell, trying to get him to see how crazy he sounds.

“Like I said before, time was not on our side. I had to act fast before disappearing since your father wanted me dead. I’m open to trying the doctor route after this if you’d like. I’d love nothing more than to watch your belly grow with my child. But this is a backup plan if that doesn’t work out. ”

I shake my head. Tears pour out of me in desperation.

“I haven’t slept with her or anyone else since she became pregnant, and I won’t again unless you agree to it for the sake of having another baby. I do love you, Noel. I chose her because she looks like you,” he adds as though it’s all just an unconventional love declaration.

“I’ve moved on, Nate. I’m married and in love with someone else. Just let me go, please? This is too much. We can’t recover from this. I will transfer everything you left me to your new identity, and we can go our separate ways,” I tell him.

“I tell you what. I’ll let you get to know Declan Adams a little better while I go to work today. Veronica will be here if you need anything,” he says.

Panic takes over, and I scream and pull on the ropes, trying to get out of this chair. Ignoring me, he turns on a TV that hangs on the wall in front of me and turns the creepy music back on.

The first image on the screen is of Declan with a blonde woman I don’t recognize. She’s walking into his building while he holds the door for her. The next image is taken through a window of his office. Her hands are against the window, and she’s completely naked as he takes her from behind. My stomach turns sour, and I have to turn away, closing my eyes.

“You aren’t leaving me. These images will help you let go of whatever feelings you think you have for him, so we can move on with our lives. When you’re ready, Veronica will untie you. I want you to be the one who throws these journals into the fire.”

My eyes pop open to find him holding the journals I kept of Declan. A part of me could never truly let him go, but I kept them hidden. I haven’t even looked for them

to know they were missing .

“I found them not long after we got married. This is what the men took when they broke into our home. You may have loved him, Noel, but you loved me too.”

With that, he walks out of the room. Shortly after, I hear another door close.

The image on the screen is of Declan kissing a different woman passionately while he holds her hair and presses her back into a wall. This time I can't stop the bile. I throw up on the floor beside my chair.

Veronica runs out of the room to return with towels and cleaner.

“I can't imagine how you must feel. I told Nate it would be too much too fast for any woman. He's just so in love with you. He wants you back and doesn't want to wait any longer.”

“Why would you agree to give up your own child?” I ask her as she cleans my vomit off the floor.

“I'll still see the baby every day as his nanny. I could never give a child the life they deserve, so this is the only way for me to be a good mother,” she says, softly.

Damn it! She's so broken that I can't even hate her. She's just as much a victim in this as her baby, as me.

“Let me go. We can both leave while he's away. Declan and I can help you start a life of your own to raise your baby,” I offer, trying to convince her.

“Noel, Isaiah will kill me if he finds me. I borrowed a lot of money from him to afford to not work for a year. He doesn't know that Nate paid my bills. But I gave

Nate all the money Isaiah loaned me, and I can't pay it back. I've made my choice. Besides, Declan may not be your best option either," she says, pointing at the screen.

This image has a timestamp of only two weeks ago. He's standing in an elevator in front of a woman on her knees. Clothes are piled in the corner, and his pants are obviously undone .

"Oh, God, no," I sob.

"I'm here for you," she says, patting my leg as she speaks.

Then, she's out the door, leaving me to watch image after image of Declan with other women while "You are my Sunshine" plays on repeat from the music box.

Chapter twenty-four

Declan

We watch from various points around the house, as a man wearing all black steps out for a cigarette. When he's almost done, another one joins him. The morning is so quiet their voices carry across the yard and through the trees.

"You gave her too much last night. There's no way he doesn't notice, and he's going to come out pissed at you," the first man says to the second.

"She might have some memory loss, but it won't hurt her," the second answers, shrugging his shoulders.

Rage surges through me. It's all the confirmation I need that Noel is inside. They must've drugged her, and she hasn't woken up yet. If Zander wasn't standing on my feet to keep me in place, I'd already be charging the house. The toes of his boots dig into mine as he shakes his head slowly and warns me to stay put with his glare.

Clenching my jaw and fists, I watch over his shoulder as they both go back into the house. Zander backs off at my deep breath, and I pull my phone out to call Garrett back.

"Who the fuck brought her here?" I whisper-shout into the phone.

"Nate," he says, dropping the name like a fucking explosive.

“Tiny fucking pieces, G,” I say.

“Yes, sir,” he answers and ends the call .

Zander was close enough to overhear. His blue eyes stare at me in surprise at what we just heard.

“He’s mine.”

Zander nods at me just as we hear the door open behind us. Nate walks out and gets into a car to leave. We let him go, not willing to compromise Noel’s safe rescue.

Once the car is out of sight, Leah walks up to the front door. Veronica answers the door, and hugs Leah while asking her how she got here.

Dumb bitch.

I signal to Chance who’s stationed near the back of the house, and he approaches the back door.

“One,” he says through my earbud, confirming that he’s taken one guard down.

Isaiah steps into view and Veronica screams, retreating into the house. The second bodyguard shows his position when he cracks the blinds in a front window. The glass shatters as Zander fires at the movement.

“Two,” he says.

Isaiah rushes into the house to grab Veronica, and we all take off inside after him.

When I step in, a fist swishes past my face as I dodge at the last second. Pulling my

knife, I stab the third man in the neck.

“Are there anymore?” I shout at Veronica.

She’s sobbing in a chair with Isaiah hovering over her. “Answer the man,” he orders.

She shakes her head and cries harder.

“Where’s my wife?”

When she doesn’t answer, Isaiah pulls her hair to show me her face .

“First door down the hall,” she manages to sputter out.

Isaiah rubs the top of her head and starts to speak to her, but I’m not listening. I’m down the hall with Zander on my heels. A music box is playing from inside the room. Inching the door open, I go in with my knife ready in case she was lying about there being no more men.

Once inside, I see Noel in the center of the room tied to a chair. The sight of her is worse than a thousand knives being thrown at me all at once. Rushing to her, I check her everywhere for injuries as she sobs hysterically.

“I’m here, sunshine. You’re alright,” I try to calm her down but focus on cutting the ropes around her hands and legs.

“What the fuck is this shit?” Zander asks behind me.

Turning around, I take in the room. There’s a TV on the wall she’s facing. The image on the screen is me fucking a woman from behind in a hotel room. What the fuck? It changes to another one of me with Leah in the elevator.

I throw my knife into the TV, shattering the screen. When I turn back to Noel, she's crying into her now free hands.

The creepy fucking music box is grating my already frayed nerves. Chills run down my spine when I finally realize the song that's playing. I'm going to rip his fucking face off.

"Zander, shut that fucking song off!" I roar.

Bending down in front of Noel, I take her face in my hands.

"That sick fucker will pay for all of this, but I need to get you out of here first."

Her beautiful green eyes meet mine, and everything inside of me shatters. She's utterly broken. Clenching my jaw, I do my best to hold back my rage, knowing she doesn't need to see me as anymore of a monster than he's already made her believe .

"Can you stand?" I ask her as gently as I can manage.

Her legs are shaky, but she gets out of the chair holding onto me. Once she's close enough, she puts her face into my chest and grips my shirt in her weak fists. She holds onto me as we walk. I stop long enough to yank my knife out of the TV on our way to the door.

Commotion from the front of the house has me shifting myself to shield her from whatever is coming. Zander maneuvers to wait behind the door out of sight just before Nate walks into the room pointing a gun at my head. Noel's tiny fists cling tighter to my shirt, and she presses her head against my back.

Zander tackles him to the ground before Nate has time to realize he's in the room, and the gun slides across the floor. I rush out to take Zander's place, dying to rip this

fucker to shreds.

“Get her out of here,” I tell Zander as I step on the back of Nate’s neck to hold him in place for Zander to let go.

“I’m not leaving without you,” she screams desperately.

“I’m right behind you, baby,” I tell her, smashing my boot harder into him.

Zander has to pick her up and carry her out over his shoulder when she refuses to leave. She’s screaming at him to put her down as they walk through the house, which only fuels my rage.

When I bend down with my knife, Nate throws me off. I stumble back a few steps before catching my balance, giving him enough time to get back on his feet. He charges into me. I lose my grip on the knife when my back hits the ground.

Fuck!

Before I can catch my breath, Nate straddles me. His punches land hard on my face. Blocking him as best I can, I force my lungs to suck in air, so I can do more to defend myself.

My fists start to make contact with him as he continues to lay into me. Reaching behind my head, I grab the chair and smash it on top of his head. The force pushes him back enough for me to get out from underneath him.

We both realize that he is closer to the gun at the same time. I dive for it, but he gets there first.

Before I can get back up, he has it pressed against my temple. Closing my eyes, I take

a deep breath and call her face to my mind. If he pulls the trigger before I can pull his feet out from under him, I want her to be the last thing I see.

Just as I lift my hand to yank his ankle, a gunshot sounds and the cold metal falls away from my head.

Another shot is fired.

My eyes pop open.

It wasn't me.

I jump up, and I'm stunned to see Noel standing on the other side of Nate's body crumpled on the floor.

She's shaking like a leaf holding a bloody knife looking down. Following her line of sight, I see Nate bleeding out from his neck at our feet.

Slowly, I close my hand around hers. When she remains still, I take the knife from her. She lets it go easily. I let it fall as soon as it's out of her grip and pull her into me.

She wraps her arms around my shoulders. I lean into her embrace, finally allowing myself to breathe her in. She jumps up to wrap her legs around me, and I carry her out of the room and away from this fucking nightmare.

"Close your eyes. Don't look," I tell her, not even stopping when I see Zander standing over a dead woman with his gun still drawn .

Once we make it outside, I stop walking and position us so that all she will see are the trees. The car Nate left in is parked in the yard with the driver's door wide open. They must've had a panic button of some sort to alert him so quickly.

There's another car parked in the street that wasn't here originally, and I'm going to guess it belongs to the dead woman in the living room, whoever the fuck she is.

Soft lips kiss the side of my neck, and I'm pulled into a vacuum with her. My arms squeeze her tighter, and I turn my face into hers, trailing kisses across her face as she turns her head slowly.

Finally, my lips meet hers. I release a sigh into our kiss that I've been holding since she was taken. We hold each other this way, kissing softly through her tears, for quite a while.

When she pulls away, I see the questions behind her eyes. I kiss her forehead and set her down.

"Am I going to jail?" She asks.

"Fuck no," I scoff at her. "This may not be the best time to tell you this, but I have people who make shit like this go away."

She looks confused but relieved. "My head is really foggy, but I think you just said you have people to cover up murders. Dec, why do you have people like that?"

"Another day. For now, do you think you can sit with Leah while I get things sorted out inside?"

"Her name is Veronica."

"No, you won't be getting anywhere near her again. Leah is my informant. I paid her to get close to Veronica for information."

"You knew about Veronica?" Her voice is full of accusation .

“Yes,” I tell her without hesitation. She tries to shove me away, but I grab her wrists.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” She tries to pull away from me, but I’m not fucking letting go of her.

“It was irrelevant to your life,” I state matter-of-factly.

“Apparently not!”

I’m too relieved to have her back in my grasp to care much about her attitude. She doesn’t need to know everything I do to keep her safe.

“If I had known that fucker still walked this earth, I would’ve handled the problem before it became one. For that, I am sorry, Noel.”

Her lips part as she sucks in a breath, and I find myself staring at her pretty mouth. Her tits rise and fall with another deep breath.

Then she whispers, “I can’t unsee all of those pictures, Declan.”

She looks up at me with a face full of pain, and I pull her into me.

“Look at me, Noel. They were nothing. Just a distraction. A way to dull the pain while I waited.”

“One of them was timestamped just a couple of weeks ago,” she says in misery.

Taking her hand, I walk her over to the Tahoe to see Leah has already made it back to the vehicle.

“Get out,” I tell her.

She looks between me and Noel before getting out to join Isaiah and Veronica in the other vehicle. I help Noel into the backseat then climb in behind her.

“Isaiah’s father, Jeff, still watches him and the club. Girls aren’t supposed to leave with men, but I needed to hire Leah. The only way to do that was to make it look like I was using her,” I pause waiting for her to understand .

I wish I didn’t see the doubt in her eyes, but I can’t blame her considering all the other pictures she saw.

“So the elevator was fake?” She asks, fidgeting with my fingers in her lap.

“Yes,” I answer, simply.

“He wanted me to hate you.” She looks into my eyes again.

“Considering I haven’t touched a woman besides you since his accident, I’d say he has been planning this for a long time. You must’ve given him reason to believe you still felt something for me.”

“He found my journals,” she mutters.

“What journals?” I ask.

“I kept journals of us from high school. I never could bring myself to throw them out,” she says.

“When?”

“He said he found them years ago, but that’s why those men broke in. He wanted me to burn them today,” she explains.

“The only thing we’re burning today is whatever bullshit is left of him,” I grind out.

“I can’t believe I killed him,” she states in disbelief.

“I can. You’ve always been strong enough to slay your own demons, Noel.”

When I pull her into my lap, her eyes widen at what she feels beneath her.

“Everything you do fucking does this to me.”

I grab her ass to rub her over it.

“Mmm,” her little voice purrs, and she closes her eyes.

“And I love what adrenaline does to you.”

She smiles without opening her eyes, and I’m sure exhaustion is about to take her. I lay her down across the seat.

“Don’t leave me,” she pleads .

“I’ll be right back,” I promise her.

Walking back into the house, I already see a lot of the damage has been taken care of. The three man crew works quickly to remove all evidence and replace broken items. Zander is helping one of them stuff the woman’s body into a bag.

“Who was that?” I ask him.

“His mom,” he says, looking up at me.

Nodding at him, I turn and find myself gravitating back to the room with Nate's corpse to make sure I didn't miss anything. The music box sitting on the mantle had been playing "You are my Sunshine" while the TV showed pictures of me fucking women in the past. That's some fucked up shit.

The stack of journals sits next to the music box. I open one up and start reading about a conversation that sixteen-year-old me had with Noel. It was one of the many times I told her that I would take her traveling when we were old enough. Flipping the pages around, I can see it's more of that, her catalog of our conversations.

After I finish the clean up in the room, I grab the journals and tell Zander to let the crew finish what's left without us. We walk out to the Tahoe Noel is waiting in.

"Drive us back," I tell Zander when it's obvious he's walking toward the passenger seat. I'm not driving shit if I can be next to my wife.

We join everyone except the clean up crew at the plane. Instead of waiting on them, I give them a call to remind them about the hanging man in the hangar and tell them to catch a flight home when they finish up.

"Get us the fuck outta here," Isaiah calls out to the pilot.

Noel sleeps safely in my lap where she belongs as we take off.

Chapter twenty-five

Noel

Gasp, I sit up in a dark room. I feel around, relieved that I'm not tied up. A light turns on, and I can see I'm in bed, Declan's bed, our bed. Taking a deep breath, I look over at him sitting up beside me.

His hair is messy, and his eyebrows are pinched into a worried expression. His face is covered in thicker stubble than I've ever seen it, and his eyes stare into mine.

I reach across the bed with the hand closest to him, and he takes it into his gently. His touch is warm and strong and real, and I collapse into him. He pulls me onto his lap, running his fingers through my hair.

"How long will it haunt me?" I search his face, not sure if I even want to hear the answer.

The image of Nate's hands attempting to stop the life from pouring out of his own neck is burned into my memory.

"You saved my life," Declan's answer comes after a moment's pause. It shines a little light into the darkness of my heart.

My throat tightens along with my chest, but I refuse to cry anymore. I made my choice, and I'd do it again to save him. I place my hands on either side of his face and kiss his perfect lips. The smell and feel of him is everything.

Placing my forehead on his, I close my eyes to memorize this moment.

“Declan, I have questions. ”

“You can ask anything.”

My head is spinning. I’m not even sure where to begin or what matters most.

“There’s plenty of time. Come take a shower with me,” he suggests.

“What time is it?” I ask, confused by how dark the room is.

“It’s close to 9:00. You’ve been asleep all afternoon.”

“Okay.” Looking down, I see that I’m naked. “I didn’t even wake up when you undressed me?”

“No. Come on,” he coaxes me out of bed and into the bathroom.

Turning on the water in the shower, he pulls me into him kissing me as he washes my hair and body. My hands don’t leave him if I can help it.

The sight of his beautiful naked body reminds me of all the pictures of him with other women. There’s a desperation gripping my heart at the memory of his face when he was with them and where his hands touched them.

“I’m glad we aren’t staying in Birmingham. I don’t think I trust myself to ever see those women from the pictures.”

I know it’s cold and unfair, but I don’t care.

He drops the loofah and grabs my face.

“We aren’t running from the past, Noel. We are leaving to build the future of our dreams. I am going to take you everywhere you want to go in this world just to mark each place with our love. Then, I will find you in the next life and do it all again.”

He searches my face. His eyes stare into my soul, begging me not to hate his past. He did all of those things to cope with losing me. The look of pain in his eyes as he waits for my response has me realizing that it’s me that is hurting him now. He had to accept my marriage, so I need to accept his past, too.

“I need you right now, Dec. I need to feel you inside of me. Please,” I beg .

He lifts me by my thighs and presses my back against the wall, wasting no time to bury himself inside of me. The raw emotions of what has happened only intensifies the connection between us. My lips find his, and I’m instantly lost in the softness of them and the warmth of his tongue. His hands hold my face and thigh as he moves in and out of me.

“So perfect, baby,” he says breathlessly around our kiss.

I tangle my fingers in his hair.

“I love you, Declan,” I whisper.

“I love you, Noel,” his husky voice comes out in a rush as he plunges into me harder.

“Yes, say it again.” I can feel myself clenching around him. His words pushing me to the edge faster than his dick.

“I love you, sunshine. My forever, baby girl, my wife, mine,” he says, kissing and

thrusting into me as I fall over the edge and come undone around him.

“Yes, yours, always, oh, yes, Declan!”

“Oh, you’re so fucking perfect, yeah, come on my cock, baby, oh fuck!” He finds his own release with mine, and we hold each other, refusing to let go.

When the moment passes, he lowers my feet to the ground but keeps his body pressed against mine. My hands explore his chest up to his face then find a place to rest on his neck. Feeling his pulse against my fingers feeds my soul.

“I’d do it again. For you. What does that say about me?” I stare up at him, showing him the ugliest thing I didn’t even know was a part of me until today.

His hand covers the side of my face as he says, “It says you’re brave enough to protect the person you love, no matter the cost.”

Taking a deep breath, I try to accept this part of myself.

“Declan, what if I can’t give you children?” I whisper .

“My life is yours,” he says simply. “I don’t want to share you anyway.” He smirks and kisses my nose.

I smile back at him, but my heart hurts at the thought of that smile not living on after we’re gone. He turns off the water as I walk out of the shower to get towels.

While we get dressed, he tells me that Isaiah has already taken Veronica back to Cordeliers, but Leah stayed back with Zander and Chance.

I can feel myself bristle at the name, remembering Declan’s explanation of the

elevator picture. I talk myself down because I trust him, but I'm not looking forward to seeing her. Even if she didn't touch him, she was naked for him.

Walking into the living room, I'm met with the delicious smell of food. Chance is standing in the kitchen while Zander and Leah sit at the bar talking to him. Chance smiles at me first, then the other two turn to look at us.

"All hail the queen!" Zander jokes and pretends to bow at me. Then he walks over to hug me. "Seriously, though, fucking bad ass!" He steps back to introduce me to Leah.

"It's nice to finally meet you, Noel," she says.

"Thank you." It's all I can manage.

She smiles as though she understands and respects my distance, so I don't explain myself.

Zander clears his throat, and Declan wraps his arms around me from behind.

"Alright, let's eat," Chance says.

Declan brings me to a barstool, and kisses my forehead. He makes us each a plate and sets one down in front of me before taking the stool to my left. After a few bites, I feel my mood lifting.

"Chance, this is delicious," I tell him, and everyone agrees .

When we all finish eating, we get comfortable in the living room. Declan begins to fill me in on what else he's learned since I fell asleep.

"When you told your father we had gotten married, it set off a chain reaction. He

made several phone calls shortly after, and the news eventually made it to Nate through Veronica. That's when he made contact with Grant to have you taken and delivered to him in Miami."

I shudder to think about what lengths he would've gone to make me agree to his plans. "What about his mom? She was in the apartment and on the plane."

Everyone looks at Zander.

He clears his throat. "She showed up right after Nate. She shot at Isaiah and missed. Then, I shot her when she started to aim again." There's no remorse in his face or voice.

"Does Grant know they're both dead now?"

"They're all together, wherever they are," Declan says beside me.

"What? How are we supposed to hide all of this?"

"It's already done," Zander says.

An entire family is gone in a day. I don't understand how that can be hidden.

"What about Veronica and the baby? She's just as much a victim in this," I ask.

Leah scoffs. "She may have made you believe that, but I can promise you it isn't the case. She was in love with Nate. The baby may not even be his. Isaiah will have paternity test results tomorrow. She took several clients after she had her IUD removed, but she knew Nate needed a baby. It was her way out of Cordeliers and to stay with him."

“He just believed her? All of this without proof?” I ask more in disbelief than for anyone to answer .

She shrugs and raises her eyebrows at me as if to say she agrees it was not a good move.

“So, what happens to her?” I ask, still needing to know.

“Veronica will continue to work for Cordeliers after she has the baby. She borrowed a lot of money from Isaiah, so her only option is to work it off,” Leah answers.

“A hair follicle sample is a requirement when joining the club, and we keep records of the girls’ visitors for these types of situations. The father can choose what to do with the baby. Veronica has already said she only wants it if it is Nate’s,” she adds.

“Sounds like this happens a lot at this club,” I say, sounding just as judgmental as I feel right now.

She shrugs. “I think it used to happen before IUDs, but this is the first for us.”

“Us?” Zander asks.

“Isaiah and me.”

“What does that mean?” he asks, turning his whole body to her with a look of confusion on his face.

She stares back at him. Propping an elbow on the couch behind her, she rests her face on her hand as she leans forward.

“We’re cousins. It’s just as much my club as it is his, but it’s best if members think

I'm just one of the girls," she clarifies.

"Hm," Declan says beside me. "Well, I think that catches you up. Y'all are welcome to stay, but I'm taking my wife back to bed."

As we get up, everyone else does the same. Declan scoops me up and carries me to our bed not bothering to see if they stay or go.

Chapter twenty-six

Declan

“A aaaccckkk!”

Jumping up to the sound, I feel around in the dark and can't find Noel.

“Noel!” I shout, jumping out of bed.

“Uuugghh!”

“NOEL!” I bellow, my voice croaking from sleep.

I'm running toward the bathroom where the sound is coming from, stopping in my tracks when I see her hurling into the toilet.

Taking a deep breath, I try to hide my smile of relief when she looks up at me in misery. I walk over to hold her hair and rub her back.

“Go aw—, ughh!” She heaves into the toilet again before she can finish telling me to leave.

“Shhh,” I soothe, rubbing her back.

When she seems to have stopped, I get her water and a cold wash cloth. She drinks then leans against the wall, letting me wipe her face and neck. I was surprised she

wasn't this sick yesterday, but she slept so much. Whatever they gave her to keep her out so long is finally making its way out of her system.

"This is worse than a bad hangover," she groans.

My jaw clenches, but I say nothing.

"Speaking of hangovers, I need to call Kate today. "

"I'm not following," I say confused at the connection.

"She was hungover when I called to tell her we got married. She had gone out the night before with Rocky, and he was still at her house. We didn't talk long. I'll invite her over for dinner, so I can see her before we leave for France. I'm guessing it's best I don't tell her about anything," she says, rambling with her eyes closed.

"Let's get you back to bed," I say, lifting her up from the floor and carrying her to bed. "I'll be in the gym."

After I kiss her forehead, I slip out and go into my home gym. It's a little farther away than my office, and I don't want her to overhear anything when I call Chance.

It sounds like he's driving when he answers, and I check the time. It's just after 8:00 AM.

"You got time for a loose end today?" I ask.

"Yep."

"Rocky is dating Kate Hartford, Noel's friend."

“Fuck. Alright, I’ll take care of it,” he says and hangs up.

I decide to get a workout in before I check on things at Velocity. I’m sure Claire has handled most things, but Zander and I have to get started on scheduling Isaiah’s shipment next week.

The last thing I want is to leave Zander with this when we move to Tennessee. It’s possible that it will take over a year to get us there, but something tells me this is the direction he’s wanted to take things for a while now. If I’m not here to make sure it ends by the expiration date, he may not end it at all.

Zander and I met not long after I started Velocity. He was trying to sneak drugs onto one of my trucks, and I beat the shit out of him. He showed up the next day asking for a job, and he’s lived up to the promises he made. But he craves chaos and loves violence. Going into business with Isaiah will give him both. He may not be able to walk away a second time.

After my workout, I check in on Noel to see she has gotten up and showered and is almost finished doing her hair. Watching her get dolled up might become a new hobby for me. She smiles through the mirror but doesn’t stop what she’s doing, and I’m glad to see she’s feeling better.

My phone beeps letting me know someone is at the door. I leave her to go see who is coming over unannounced, grabbing the gun off the dresser on my way through the bedroom. Coming into the open living room, I see Isaiah’s Bentley through the windows and set the gun down on a shelf to open the door he’s knocking on.

“Got the results,” he says, holding up a piece of paper.

“You could’ve called,” I tell him but let him in anyway.

He scoffs on his way past me.

Noel walks into the room from the hallway and freezes. She hasn't actually spoken to him since all of this happened.

"I'm here as a friend," he says to her, holding both hands in the air.

She looks at me for approval, and I give her a nod.

"I guess I owe you a 'thank you' for helping rescue me, but I don't trust you Isaiah," she tells him.

"Fair enough," he says as he sits down on my couch and sets the paper on the coffee table.

"What is that?" She asks, walking into the room.

"Veronica's paternity test results."

"And?" She presses.

"It's not Nate's baby," he states.

Noel gasps, and I walk over to see the paper for myself .

"There's something else you both should know," he pauses to look at us. "I knew Nate was trying to get you pregnant. I didn't know he was using one of my girls like this, but he told me years ago that he had a deal with your pharmacist. Nate had him on payroll to give you placebo packs of birth control pills. I'd imagine he's still doing it if money still hits his account. Thought y'all may want to know that since you're married now."

My eyes meet Noel's from across the room, and I can tell by her expression that she's thinking the same thing I am. Before I can speak, she takes off down the hall.

"Thanks, Isaiah. Now, with all due respect, get the fuck out," I tell him as I step toward the hall.

"Well, congratulations then!" He calls out behind me laughing.

Fuck!

I find her sitting on our bed with her knees pulled to her chest. Walking over to her, I keep my thoughts to myself and rest my hands on her ankles. When she looks up at me, her eyes are full of tears.

Fuck, fuck, fuck!

"I thought I was late from all the stress. Oh, god, Dec," She puts her head down into her knees again.

"Noel, I'm so sorry," I tell her.

She looks back up at me. "I don't even know if you even want children. We only ever talked about it when we assumed I couldn't have them."

Putting her face in my hands, I wipe her tears with my thumbs.

"I'll admit I would've liked to have waited a while. But fuck yes, I want kids with you. You are going to look so beautiful with our baby growing inside of you, sunshine."

She leans over to wrap her arms around me, and I grab her knees to pull her into my

lap.

“I love you, Declan.”

“Mmm. And you know what these tear-filled green eyes do to me,” I tell her as I grind her hips into my hard cock.

Her eyes blaze as she whispers, “Yours.”

Five Years Later

Noel

“I’ll send a car to the airport to pick you up,” I tell my mother over the phone. “Look, Mom, I really need to go. We’re trying to pack the hospital bags, and Kate just got here.”

Hanging up, I look over at Declan who is trying to put our four-year-old daughter, Esmeray, into his suitcase. She’s giggling so hard that she can’t catch her breath.

He’s pretending to be serious about stuffing her inside but tickling her every time he tucks her arms and legs back in. He is the father I never had, and I’m just as excited to see how he will be with our little boy.

“Alright, Ray, breathe, sweet girl,” he chuckles and picks her up.

She still giggles between breaths as they walk over to me. His smile still takes my breath away.

“Mommy, Daddy wants to pack me in a suitcase!” She exclaims.

“He’s so silly!” I tell her, smiling at them both.

“Grandma will be here in a little while. She and Aunt Kate are going to stay with you while Daddy and I go get you a baby brother!” I try to say as cheerfully as possible .

“Baby sister,” she argues.

We’ve done our best, but she’s still very adamantly against the baby being a boy. Hopefully, she will be so enthralled with helping that she won’t care as much when he’s actually here.

“Was your mom on the way to the airport?” Declan asks.

“Yes. I told her we would send a car for her and that Kate was already here.”

My mother moved into my old house after my father ran off with their cook. Surprisingly, he’s never come back. She thinks he figured out a way to embezzle the money to avoid the inheritance being donated and didn’t bother to divorce her because she’d get half.

It’s been a long road, but we’ve managed to build a relationship. She’s been a much better grandmother than she was a mother. Then again, Declan laid out the ground rules pretty harshly before Ray was born.

He pays her bills and gives her an allowance, since my dad drained their accounts on his way out of town. I’m glad it’s worked out this way. I’m sure I would not have been able to have this with her if my father had stuck around and fought with me over the money.

I put the last of the items I need into my bag and have to stop to breathe through a contraction.

“Ray, go find Aunt Kate and tell her I said you could have a snack,” Declan tells our little girl.

She takes off yelling for Aunt Kate through the house.

His hands immediately rub into my lower back as I breathe through the pain. He moves one hand to my belly to feel as he waits for it to pass.

I stand up straight, my back to his front, and he uses both of his hands to hold the weight of my belly up just a bit. Laying my head back into his chest, I groan at the relief .

“This boy needs his own room,” I say.

“You amaze me,” he says from over my head.

“Women have babies every day,” I say, dismissing his compliment.

“Only one woman has mine, and you are so good at it that I already have some new ideas of how to put the next one in you,” his deep voice turns husky, and his dick hardens into my ass.

“Dec! I’m literally in labor!”

“Can’t tell my cock a damn thing, sorry.”

I turn around to face him, my belly putting distance between me and his cock with its own mind. We discovered Declan’s pregnancy kink when I started showing with Esmeray. Now that we’ve crossed off my major travel destinations, he seems to be on a mission to make lots of babies. It’s sweet, but big men make big babies, and no woman in the history of ever wants to talk about having another one when they’re in labor.

“I’m ready,” I say, pointing to my bag.

“Off to the next adventure, sunshine. ”