



The Right Woman (Case Closed #2)

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Category: Suspense Thriller

Description: Single dad Adon Griffin's only break from his disciplined life is his weekly adventure at a sex club. On a wild encounter, a shiny young woman makes a lasting impression with her innocent request: "Will you be my daddy?"

Except the pixie escapes, leaving him angry and unfulfilled.

Chaos follows Piper Hendricks. On the morning a woman dies in front of her at her regular coffee shop, Piper considers it just another day in her disaster of a life. That is until she recognizes the stranger attempting to save the victim as the grumpy daddy from the club...

This time, he's not letting her get away without satisfying his needs.

When life-threatening events start to surround Piper, Adon's motivations transform from wanting to use her body to protecting her at all costs.

Who is hunting her...and why?

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Chapter

One

ADON

No one touches my radio.

Painted purple nails drum on the leather console next to me. If they make a move toward the buttons on the dash, I'm ready to strike them down. My head bobs forward as a foot lands against the back of my seat.

Through gritted teeth, I manage to maintain a normal tone. "Odin."

"Sorry, Dad."

With a quick glance in the rearview mirror, I make sure he's still got his seatbelt on.

"Can you drop me off around the corner?" My daughter stuffs her fake nails in her mouth and chews on them. Her eyes dart around the school parking lot like she's waiting for something.

I scan the kids walking in, wondering what's got her so nervous. "Why?" As soon as I ask, I spot a few delinquent looking punks schlepping backpacks and kicking rocks on their way in. One carries a skateboard behind his neck. Fucking twerps.

When I pull into the drop off lane, Avery's big green eyes meet mine with a look of

terror. “Please, Dad.”

Muscles along the back of my neck tense, and I straighten a finger to wave it at the boys approaching the truck. “Those kids bothering you?”

“No! Oh my god.” She hurriedly unbuckles her seatbelt and slides onto the floorboard, then covers her head with her backpack. “Dad! Please! They’ll see me!”

Odin sings from the backseat, “Avery’s got a crush on Liaaaammmmm! Dad! Did you know Liam is a drummer and Avery wants to kiss him?”

“Odin!” she screams as heat flames across my cheeks.

The boys make it inside while I memorize what they look like, just in case I need to kill either of them. “Sit in your seat. You’re not having a crush on a drummer. At least pick a horn player.” Desperate to avoid this topic altogether, but knowing I have to do something, I clear my throat. “Better yet. Stick to orchestra. Maybe a cellist.”

Avery’s olive skin turns red as she gets up and huffs at me, then jumps out of the truck.

“Do not slam?—!”

She slams the door. With a deep breath, I steel my nerves. If she wasn’t going to her mom’s this weekend, I’d confiscate everything she has and go through it all for any mention of a Liam . Will probably do that next week when she gets home. It makes me ready to shed the Dad Adon persona and ease into the evening’s festivities.

Odin bobs happily on the cushy bench, a broad grin painted on his face. He’s my little spy, so I ply him for information. “Tell me about this Liam.”

On the way to the elementary school, he spills every detail he's discovered. Avery met the kid in band the first week of class. He's in eighth grade, while she only just started sixth. They've chatted on the school app, and she told her best friend that she wants to make out with him. My heart pounds harder until Odin says he knows she's never had a kiss before.

When I curse under my breath, Odin says, "Dad! You're not supposed to say fuck !"

"I can say what I want. You're not allowed to say fuck. Here's your mother."

Emily catches some of her long brown hair as it blows across her face. My son and I step out, and he immediately grabs his mom for a big hug. With a nod her way, I hand her one of the overnight bags from the bed of my truck. Odin heads toward the entrance with a hop in his step.

"Odin! Wait. You forgot something." Hurriedly, I snag his backpack strap and tug him in for a tight embrace. Every time I show my son affection, I think about how much I screwed up raising my youngest brother, Eli. I won't repeat those mistakes. "Love you. Be good. Do what your mom and the teachers say."

"Love you, too, Dad!" He runs off toward the front entrance while I load the rest of the bags into the backseat of Emily's SUV.

"That it?" she asks, holding my gaze for a moment before we part.

For a moment, I hesitate and lick my bottom lip, then tilt my head and ask, "Do you know anything about a Liam?"

She affords me a rare smile. Not a full one, but it's enough that it feels nice, knowing after all the years of being at odds with each other, she's able to show some peace now. Emily's just another victim of my grave errors. Ones I won't make again.

“Yeah, I do.” The flash of her eyes tells me she knows much more than she’s letting on.

“Anything I need to be concerned about?”

Her hand reaches out to rub my forearm gently, and the touch makes me sad. It’s a reminder of what I’ve lost. It’s rare that anyone is near enough to touch me like this. With tenderness. “Oh, Adon. No. It’s her first crush. Let her have it. Please?”

“I don’t think I’m going to make it through her teenage years.” Running my hands over the short hairs along the sides of my scalp, I clench my back molars. “I can’t do this, Em. She’s too young. Odin says he’s in eighth.”

She purses her lips to keep her smile contained. “Stop. It’s fine. She’s coming to tell me everything right now. If you go barbarian on her, she’ll just shut down. Leave it alone.”

The only thing I can give her is another nod while I kick at the pavement. When I lift my head, I politely ask, “How’s Bryan?”

With her hand on her door, she shrugs. “He’s good. We’re good, and yes, he’ll be around this week with us. If you want to come over, you’re welcome any time, Adon. I’m not stopping you from hanging out with your kids.” Emotion grips my chest as her face draws into a serious expression. I know damn well what words she’s going to say next. “It’s not good for you to be alone so much.”

And the answer I always keep in my head echoes through my thoughts once more: but it’s safer for everyone else.

Not bothering with a response, I wave and turn to my vehicle, then jump in, heading toward the shop. After parking behind the building, I pause and glance up at the sign.

Griffin Bros. Motors . Dad would like it if he were alive. But not how I let things lapse with Elijah, who's currently standing next to Tate in the front bay. Both have their heads inside the open hood of a Ford.

As I approach, Tate's eyes flash to mine with a cautionary look, and my hackles raise with irritation. "He's fine. He's doing fine," my best friend repeats before I reach the engine and inspect their work. Eli hurriedly swaps out hoses like he just got caught stealing something.

Tension returns to my neck, and I slap my hand on it. "This car was here last week. Did something happen?"

Eli won't even look at me, his mumbled mutters aimed at the block in front of him. "I got it." When I don't move, he fiddles around clumsily, then raises his head. His guilty expression changes to anger when I cross my arms and wait. "Tate's helping me. I-I'll fix it."

With a deep breath, I decide that an argument this early in the morning isn't worth it. At least he was here on time. And doesn't look intoxicated.

Tate gives me a nod, then slaps him on the back in praise. Something I probably should do for him, too, but I don't. If I reward him now, he'll just start slacking off.

Fortunately, the rest of the day goes smoothly. Near the end of it, I gather up some paperwork and shut down the computer for the weekend. Tate steps into the office, rubbing an apple on his red jump suit that almost matches his hair. "Heading out for your appointment?"

"Yep."

Slipping into the chair across from me, he perches his feet on the edge of the desk and

smiles like he has a secret. “You going to tell me what this standing appointment is?”

“Nope.”

He takes a big bite from the side of the fruit, crunching into it while chuckling low and long. “Adon, bro . If it’s a hot little piece you don’t want anyone to know about, I get it. But it’s me . We fucked Trisha Long at the same time back in the day. We double deckered all three of Brent’s bathrooms in high school. You stood watch while I fucked his mom! I helped you steal that Pontiac ? —”

Bristling, I stop him from continuing with a sharp wave of my hand. “That was never to be mentioned again.” The chair’s wheels squeal against the concrete floor as I stand and grab my phone. “And you’ll still never find out about my standing Friday night appointment.”

It’s mine .

Something no one knows about me. Because I’m not me when I go.

“Fine, fine. Have a great time! See you Monday.”

Back home, I take my time in the shower and with a clean trim, leaving my black beard at the perfect short length I prefer. At the back of my closet are my two suits that I swap every other week for the occasion. Unless there’s a funeral, Adon Griffin doesn’t wear these types of clothes.

Daddy Don does.

Other than a red paisley pocket square, my dress shirt, slacks, shoes, and jacket are all black. Even the molded mask I tuck into my pocket is a flat onyx color.

Once I slide my phone out of my pocket, I open the app to see where the club is stationed tonight. Looks like it's in the old industrial warehouse turned apartment complex on the outskirts of town. It's not my favorite of their locations, but it'll do. There aren't private rooms in this particular setting, but voyeurism doesn't bother me, as long as my mask stays in place.

It's a dark, moonless night when I approach the steel door in the alley between the large structures. The bouncer recognizes me, but I flash him the invitation on my phone anyway. With a silent nod, he opens the door to let me in.

Tarin's working the bar and spots me with a big smile as she shoves a whiskey in my direction. "Don. Good to see you. Want one or two tonight?"

She knows I don't drink much, wanting to keep my cool for whatever may come up. "Just this. Thanks." I stuff a twenty-dollar tip in her jar, then turn on the bar stool to watch the crowd.

The wide dance floor is lit up with colored strobe lights. Another reason this place isn't my favorite is because it's brighter here than other places and the music isn't to my taste. A DJ blares something younger people probably love. I'll stick with my jazz.

My attention is drawn to a tiny woman in the center of a group of men, waving her arms high above her head and swiveling her hips seductively. Her short pink hair catches the neon glowing spotlights as they skirt across the floor. While taking a sip of my drink, I follow her with my eyes as I find an empty booth along the dance floor. One side has two chairs, the other a bench seat. A black curtain closes the alcove only halfway. It's the closest this place has for privacy.

A few of the women here are recognizable from my previous visits. I nod politely at some of them, but they know my rules.

No repeats.

No kissing.

No emotion.

That last one I keep to myself. This is strictly about getting needs met. My desire for control and theirs for giving it up. I'm not allowing myself the opportunity to engage in something I'll just fuck up, like my previous marriage.

Despite all the older gentlemen surrounding the little pixie, it doesn't take long for her to notice me in the corner. I'm a large man, probably the tallest here. Definitely the broadest. Wherever I go, most people recognize my stature. Only problem is, I also own a very reputable mechanic shop during the daylight hours, and I don't want these two facets of my life mixing.

No one has ever said they recognized me at work, but it could happen. I've seen a few club goers come through the shop from time to time, but I let Tate handle those repairs, while I stay in the back office. The mask helps with anonymity, and also when the gals get too into it and reach for my lips.

That's not something I'll do with someone again. Intimacy was over when Emily walked out the door. As it closed, I knew...I'd failed, and I wasn't sure I could ever succeed in a relationship. She said I never opened up. That I kept things deep inside and wouldn't talk. She was completely right. I'm not even sure how to do that. Or even if I want to.

So here I sit while the rosy-cheeked dancer waltzes toward me with pretend shyness. Her tiny silver flapper dress looks like a mirror ball, sending prisms of light with her every move. She must be under five-five because the gigantic clear stilettos she's wearing make her only about five-nine, if that. Now that she faces me, I catch the

shine of glitter across her chest, too. The girl looks like New Year's Eve.

And I want to celebrate every inch of her.

As she approaches, I slowly drag my thumbs over my open thighs. My cock thickens with every sway of her hips. Her eyes are drawn to the motion underneath my zipper until she stops between my legs and bends over, placing her lips near my mask.

With her this close, I catch a spattering of freckles speckled across her nose. Patchouli and vanilla waft over me, the scent a hint of who she is. But the outfit? The glitz? It doesn't seem to go with the essence of the little creature placing her hand on my shoulder.

"Mind if I sit?" she asks with an arch of her darker eyebrow.

When I nod, she barely hesitates before climbing onto my lap and tossing her arms around my neck. Sure, we're in a sex club, but I've never met a woman this forward.

"What are you drinking?" She picks up my glass and takes a whiff. As she lifts it to her parted mouth, I slap my hand against her wrist and have her lower it back to the table.

"That's not yours. Don't be rude."

Her big eyes startle for a moment as she sets the double back down. "Okay ." It's almost as if she's never been told no. We stare at each other for a long moment, her studying the mask with some curiosity. The vivaciousness she exhibited on the dance floor seems to quell into something deeper. Some intense emotion lies just underneath her surface. What it is, I have no idea...

"What do you want?" I ask her.

Under the dim light, I watch her silver choker shift as she swallows. With a boldness that emanates from her outward persona, she says, “I want a daddy. Like a good one. I need a daddy to make me behave.”

She’s not trying to flirt or fake this. There’s no show she’s putting on, not like the one out in front of the group of guys earlier. My mask feels very apparent while hers has slipped. “Will you be my daddy?” she asks.

Her vulnerability makes the blood surge to my crotch. Here on my lap, she seems so fragile and small. Breakable. Maybe no one else sees it, but it’s there. If I’m not careful, I could seriously hurt her. Still, I came to get some needs met. And that’s what I’ll do.

“For tonight.”

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Chapter

Two

PIPER

Listen. When a man walks into a club wearing a black mask, you fuck him. It's like a cardinal rule of sex. Or it should be.

Put it in Piper's Rules of Life , number one sixty-nine.

Right after, "sit on daddies' laps and make them spank you."

The problem is, I can't seem to follow a rule for the life of me. Not only that, but it's almost an innate need for me to not do what someone tells me. Especially if he's a man and big and broad with thighs like the one I'm straddling.

Any other Friday night, I'd probably grind my pussy on him. Get him to slap me around a bit, ruin his night with a good fight at the end, laugh it off, then drown out the rest of the night in whatever cheap wine is left in my mini fridge.

Tonight, though, things have been wrong .

First was the fight with my mother. Not that it's unusual for her to tell me what a waste of a daughter I am, but it certainly thrust me into coming here once I forced Tarin to give me the location. Next was my sister calling me right after to rub the salt in, but in doing so, she said the forbidden name. The one she's not allowed to say

around me.

The one that made me pop a cork, down three glasses of red, scream from my balcony, get out my old trusty box cutter and make one tiny, tiny scratch on my upper thigh, text Tarin that I wanted to get back together, then show up here and become enraged that she was flirting with the man in the mask...

And deciding I would fuck him before she could.

It's only fitting. After I ate her shaved pussy the last time, she told me she wished she could find a guy just like me. All with a toss of her long, brunette hair, like she had all the confidence in the world to say it because she's pretty.

That was it. Flames across my face, I was going to show up and give her a piece of my mind. But then I decided to ruin her instead.

My usual modus operandi is to take what I want when I see it.

Except for this guy...

The mask is throwing me off. That's all it is. Or his soothing cedar musk. Maybe because he's so very huge, he could slay all my demons. Even the ones buried so deep inside of me, emotional vultures won't be able to pick at them. These covered eyes peer at my face as if they see them all. He seems dangerous. For the first time since forever, I feel afraid.

What if he actually sees me?

If I lie to the mask, then my mother's testimony will come true. I'll truly be nothing, mean nothing, and never get any better. Life will be me screwing it up on repeat. And it can't be. Not if I want to truly live.

“Please tell me to do something. You have to make me. Force me,” I plead with him. If he doesn’t evoke some feeling inside of me, I think I may cease to exist.

“It’s Daddy Don. And you need to sit up like a big girl. Put your back against my chest.”

The alcohol must make me slow enough that he loses patience and grabs my waist to spin me around and set me right back down on the firm rod under his slacks. It’s so long, it slots up my back between the crevice of my ass. As if he’s not done making me his doll, he spreads my thighs wide over his. My dress slides all the way up to my hips until I’m fully exposed to everyone nearby.

Nakedness never bothered me, and though I came here to do everything right in front of Tarin, I didn’t expect the shock I’d feel as the cool atmosphere hits my bare cunt. All the old men in front of us turn around and gape at me, like I’m a freak sideshow.

When I squirm on daddy’s lap, he smacks my outer thigh with his open palm. The sting makes me gasp. “Sit still. Behave. Let all these men see what a naughty little girl I have over here.”

Instead of withdrawing his hand, he slips it toward my center, every hint of movement sending electric sparks down my legs. Just as I think he’ll touch me, he leaves his finger hanging in the air, the heat of it hovering outside my pussy lips. I arch my back into him and his rough mask rubs against my neck. His deep voice vibrates the plastic as he moans. “Ah, ah. I’ll do what I want with you. No hurrying this, Rosy. I bet your pussy is just as red as your cheeks right now. Let them see how much.”

One man standing in front of us bends at a ninety-degree angle to get a better look, though the rest of the group gives us a respectful ten feet or so of space. The way the man in front peeks at me with such hunger makes my belly twitch with revulsion.

“Never seen a pussy before?” I yell, and a sharp smack lands on my soaked cunt. Lurching forward, I cry out, more from surprise than anything.

“I don’t deal with brats well. So mind your manners. These men paid for a show, and they want to see it.”

A few of the guys chuckle and point, making embarrassment stain my flesh. Not sure why. I’ve had sex in front of people before. But losing all my control like this while ten older men stand and watch me lose my shit? It’s just not the same.

With a volley of my shoulders, I inch away. “Never mind. I don’t want to play.”

When I try to stand, Daddy Don grips my wrist and pulls me until I trip on my six-inch heels and tumble back into his chest. He gathers me up in a cradle hold and presses the mask against my cheek.

His sweet whiskey breath seeps from underneath it as he murmurs, “You’re not going anywhere unless you say a safe word. Tell me what that is.”

How does he make me melt into him? He’s the scariest man here, but I feel the most comfortable with his arms surrounding me like they are now, like a shield against the crowd that’s thankfully losing interest. “Victor Vain.” If I had to name him, that’s who he’d be. A real boss ass, not a Don .

“Victor Vain it is. Now. Settle down and daddy will finger you in front of these horny men. Would you like that, Rosy?”

My face hovers over his, still hidden by the mold of the mask. A sharp inhale passes through his mouth hole when I edge myself closer, trying to get a peek behind it. As I press my lips against his fake ones, a tickle of a tongue edges through to wet my mouth. I leave behind a pink stain of lipstick when I back up, making him look more

like a clown than a creature of the night. “Yes.”

Swiftly, those big hands put me back into position, slapping my thighs wide as his finger dances across my clit. “You feel this?” he asks, pressing deeper between my folds. At first, I think he’s talking about how very wet I am, but his hips jut up into my backside and worry surges through me.

I’ve been with men. A few. More women than anything, but the weapon he’s pressing against me is larger than something I’ve seen before. And I am not a big person. I don’t even bother with dildos, preferring the company of a good clit sucker. But I let my ass caress the length of it as I twerk on him once or twice.

“Yeah?” Tossing my short pink hair back, I let the word slip out casually. Like his dick is so not a big deal. I’m fucking lying. It’s huge and he could probably use it as a bat to hit home runs.

He flattens one palm against my abs to tug me back into his chest while the other finally dives inside me, forcing a whimper from my parted lips. “You’re gonna be a good little girl and take care of your daddy tonight.”

Everything he says sends shivers down my spine and makes floodgates open inside of me, which will soon be dripping onto his lap. My hands clutch the thick muscles of his thighs until they twitch beneath my hold.

When the heel of his palm strikes my clit, I grip his wrist and ride his hand. He adds a second finger and rubs harder, dipping the digits in and out in a steady rhythm. Curling them up, he hits a spot that makes white lights dance before my eyes, and I toss my head back into his shoulder. I’m a mess of whimpers and wetness, soaking his hand and sleeve.

“Please...” Delirium has taken over my brain. I don’t even recognize my voice

anymore. A wanton demon takes over as daddy does insane things to my insides.

“Let go, Rosy. Let daddy have control of your body. I want you to come just for me. Show me what a big girl you are.”

Fuck! His words make me into one of those Stepford wives. Ready and willing to obey him. And maybe it wouldn't be so bad to turn everything off and just listen to his voice. Do exactly what he says. It would keep other thoughts away. Bad thoughts. If I could just focus on his orders, maybe I wouldn't feel like my mind was split into a million pieces all the time.

Women know how to fuck me with their tongues, with their hands. Hell, even scissoring is amazingly fun. Guys just don't get it, often needing to be shown exactly what to do and how to do it. But this man is something else. Like he went to school for fingering and graduated cum loud . Because that's exactly what I do.

A scream erupts from my chest as I press into him, head thrown back onto his shoulder. His breath, heat, strength, force, muscle, and a heavy scent of masculinity surround me, only adding to the moment of bliss. When I crumble in his hold, his fingers still buried deep inside my pussy, his cock throbs with urgency underneath me.

Gathering my breath, his hand continues to caress me with little circles on my inner thigh. His hold soothes me like a weighted blanket. My mind becomes a blank emptiness of serenity...

“Such a good girl. Now it's time to take care of your daddy. Stand up.”

Part of me thinks about leaving. I got off. Why should I return the favor?

But that feeling, the fervent automaton vibe he gave me while commanding me to

come, is the same one that has me on my heels in front of him without an argument. With my hands on his shoulders, I steady my stance as he stands.

Oh my god. He's a giant. Like a literal one. I have to take two steps back just to look at his face. "Kneel and take out my cock."

A quick glance over my shoulder shows an empty bar. Tarin is nowhere to be found. Most of the men have dispersed. Feigned confidence helps my posture grow to its full, tiny height until I lift my chin and smile. My palm lands on his broad chest, and I give it a pat of assurance. "No, but thanks for the orgasm. That was fun. Goodnight."

Hope that he'll let me go grows as big as my eyes when I spin on one shoe and face the entrance of the club. But before my foot can take a step forward, large hands grip my bony shoulders, and I bite my lip, knowing it won't be easy.

"Ah, ah, Rosy. Need another spanking to show you who your daddy is?" Baritone waves travel through his reverberating chest, catching my ears as he speaks. I freeze, but quickly snap out of it.

Slyly, I wiggle away from him and shimmy in a half turn to look up into that mask one last time. "Nah. I'm good. It was fun, but I'm bored now, Victor Vain."

Tossing my hair out of my eyes, I dance toward the exit and glance at the bar. Tarin must have been watching the entire show, and her eyes narrow at me as she lifts a double of amber-colored liquid onto a tray. Happy that my plan seemed to have worked, I turn around before I give her a smug grin.

I reach for the door with a smirk pulling at my lips, but then pause and lean around it to look back at where I left Daddy Don. Irritation riles up my blood as I spot Tarin sidle up to him, his hand brushing her arm gently to take his drink. As if he's checking that I'm gone, his mask peeks where I stand near the door.

I give him the finger. Asshole . Couldn't even wait one minute until I left before daddying another girl. Typical.

Rage lights me up like wildfire inside. Tarin must have to find some self-worth on his dick this evening. Fine. If they're both too busy to notice me leaving, then I'll help myself to her unattended station. It only takes a moment for me to glance around the industrial-looking bar before I slip behind it. Lifting onto my tiptoes, I reach for a top-shelf tequila, then bend and scurry toward the door before anyone says anything.

I tuck the bottle under my arm and bust out of the entrance with a confident stride past the bouncer. With an air of nonchalance, I call out, "Goodnight."

"Miss?" he asks, but I keep moving. "Ma'am. Stop."

When I take off in a sprint, my high-heel snaps, and I yelp in pain. While hopping on one foot, I kick the shoe at him, then the other with a hushed curse. As I dart away, I pull out my phone from my bra shelf and hurriedly scan for the rideshare app, slipping behind a different building while my pulse pounds powerfully.

My eyes scan the darkness around me, looking for signs of my perpetrator, while my thumb scrolls through the available drivers. His footsteps near, but so does a crowd coming in from the parking lot. Hmm, a bachelor party?

I stumble near them, falling dramatically into the arms of one of the younger guys. Fortunately, he catches me. "Whoa! Are you okay?"

Sniffing, I point the bottle of tequila toward the club. "There's a guy chasing me. I'm trying to get away, but my ride isn't here."

His gaze lifts to his buddies, who all look like it's a terrible idea for him to say what I think he's about to. Hell, even he looks like he doesn't want to, but has to. Maybe he

has an overbearing mother. Or strict religious upbringing. Whatever it is works in my favor when he releases a little sigh and grunts out, “Need me to take you home?”

Neil is a perfect gentleman during the trip to my apartment. He even declines the tequila shot I offer him as I down some from the cap first (like a genuine lady), then the bottle, after it’s clear he doesn’t want to fuck. Rejected by this mid guy and the hot daddy in the club. It hasn’t been a great night for Piper.

If I checked deep inside of myself, which I won’t, the dismissal by Daddy Don hurts worse than I care to admit.

When I hoist myself from my seat and onto the curb, I tap the roof of Neil’s car and thank him with an air kiss.

I lean heavily on the stair wall as I stumble up the old rickety wooden steps to my second story studio. The painted wood is cold on my bare feet.

Keys...

Keys! Fuck.

Gently tiptoeing to the window at the end of the hall, I dig my hand inside the faux bamboo tree to find a spare buried in the strings of plastic grass. Another swig from my victory bottle gives me the strength to shuffle back to my door and kick it open.

Freckles mewls like he hasn’t been fed in days , but his kibble is still sitting in the dish on the kitchen island. “And the one in the living room is still full, too. Ugh!”

He follows me and continues the dramatics while lacing between my legs as I step to the fridge. “Fine, fine, fine.”

After I scoop some leftover wet food into his bowls, I grab a glass from the cupboard and fill it with the burning goodness. My mind is that comfortable level of numb, and the heat from the liquor makes me feel invincible. I untie my dress and let it fall off my naked body, then flop onto my sofa bed. The springs release aching groans in reply, similar to how I'm feeling.

The alcohol hasn't killed my anger. It sits there, glowing like an ember waiting for enough oxygen to make it spark into flames. With a huff, I flip onto my back and text Tarin.

Me

hope daddy dildo knocks you up and won't leave his wife for you

Tarin

U stole our tequila. You can't come back here, Piper.

Me

no one wants your dusty old snatch anyway, T.

hope the abortion hurts

When I try to text her again in five minutes, it says undelivered...like she blocked me. The bitch blocked me.

I tip up the bottle until it flows onto my face. The hand wrapped around its neck falls onto the thin mattress as I close my eyes, nearing a serene level of blackout. I turn onto my side, just in case. Like I care so much about living. But I do have standards for how I want to go out and choking on my own vomit is not it.

As I succumb to that sweet surrender, my breathing shallow and apathetic, I have a troublesome thought.

I need to find the man in the mask and break him.

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Chapter

Three

ADON

Thunder rattles my skull, along with the windows, when I wake. I should have stuck with one whiskey, but that rosy-haired minx left me high and dry. Had to get something other than my fingers wet.

Pink pussy stained my palms so much, I used it to jerk myself off at home. Sad and alone.

May as well do it again. With my hand covering my nose, I huff some leftover scent from her. I can't tell if it's imagined patchouli and vanilla, or if the smell is really there. Whatever it is makes my morning wood swell until it seeps a bead of pre-cum from the top.

Soft pillows greet my neck as I crane it back and grip my dick with the hand that was inside the brat's cunt. My fingers strangle it as I beat myself off, anger rising that she ran away like she was scared . She thought she was giving off big girl energy, but I see now that a daddy is exactly what she needs.

The thought of taking her over my knee and spanking her ass until the color matches her short strands makes my balls thud with impending release. If I find her again, I'm filling every hole she has while she screams and bucks and fights me off. I'll savor it when she learns to obey. On her knees, waiting for my cum in her little mouth...

Begging for the release of her daddy's seed close to her womb.

"Fuck!" Reams of jizz splash over my hand and up my chest, some landing on my neck. Damn . Haven't come that hard in a while.

As I scrub my skin in the shower, I shake my head with disappointment. That girl reeked of deep-seated issues and looked way too young for me. Definitely acted like it.

I can't stand brats. They're not my thing. It annoys me when subs want to play games that only shorten the good time we could have together.

Rosy didn't look like a regular at the club, and I shirk the thought of seeing her again for good. One and done. Glad that's over.

Although...

A tickle in my brain reminds me that I didn't really have her. We didn't copulate. So if I come across her again, I could tie her to a bed and take her. Maybe I'd put a leash on her for the night and make her crawl around as my personal pet.

"Damn it!" Hard again.

After another masturbation session, I dress for the city gym. When I get to my kitchen, I freeze as my heart stops for a moment. "Christ! You scared the shit out of me."

My brother, Rhodes, turns around from the fridge with a wry smile. "Sorry. I ran out of beer and just got done with my shift at the hospital. Stores are closed this early." Heavy blue bags line his worn-out eyes, which check the clock on the oven as I take a deep breath to calm my nerves. "You slept in. It's almost nine. Late night?"

With a wag of my finger at the hissing can of the ale he opens, I shake my head and warn him. “Don’t drink those around Eli. I don’t want them at your house.”

He chuckles around the rim and squints. “Okay, Adon. We’re both in our thirties. I don’t think you get to tell me what to do in my own home anymore.”

My teeth grit as I grab my keys. “Do you want our brother to fail?”

His throat constricts as he swallows, his grin vanishing. “You know I don’t. But I think he needs to learn to be around normal life. Learn what it’s like to be free again.”

Sometimes my middle brother is right. This may be one of those times, but we can’t give Eli too much room to make a mistake. I need to keep a close eye on him before he fucks up again.

Rhodes sets the can on the counter, a sheepish look overtaking his serious expression. “He’s got a girlfriend now. Seems pretty serious.”

My chest feels like it’s going to cave in. Has he already gone to the strip club? Where would he get a girlfriend? “That could be a problem. She been coming over to your place?”

“No, but he’s been staying with her most nights.” His olive cheeks turn red as he shrugs, like his next words aren’t that big of a deal. “And, uh...I think she’s quite a bit younger.”

Snapping my face to his, his chocolate brown eyes widen. Part of me feels like I have no business judging my youngest brother after what I did last night at the club. But he can’t get into trouble with the law. If he gets himself entangled in something illegal, he’ll get sent to prison for life. And he just spent seven years there.

I almost choke on the reflux rising in my esophagus. Should have stuck with one whiskey. “How young?” I squeak out the question, my body frozen.

“I-I’m not sure. Eli wouldn’t do something that dumb. Let him have fun. Come on, Adon.”

Flashes of our youth pour through my brain. Late nights I spent awake, waiting for Eli to come through the door. When he did, stumbling, high and gaunt, I’d try everything I could think of to scare him sober. Rhodes would come behind me with the soft approach, placing him in the shower and making him something he would eat.

Maybe if I’d been stricter, he’d have stayed out of prison. I don’t think I’m good for anybody. My brother thinks he’s the screwup, but his mistakes are my fault. I should have been there for him. Mom and Dad would have wanted that.

“Well, I’m heading to the gym. I guess he’ll be there. I’ll try to ask him about her.”

Rhodes’s shoulders relax, and he smiles while chugging the rest of the beer. “Keep me updated. I’m heading home to get some sleep.”

He follows me out the door, and as I lock up, I nod at him. “Hey! Watch him. Make sure he doesn’t do something stupid. He needs us both.”

As he slides into his car, he calls out, “I will. I am.” He gives me a mock two-finger salute, and I watch him drive off before getting into my driver’s seat.

This urge and longing to correct my failures makes me think of my kids. I hit the button to call Avery’s phone on my navigation system, but she doesn’t answer. Visions of her sneaking out to be with Liam make me grip the steering wheel tighter. Teenage pregnancy, alcohol, drugs... I can see the path now. She’ll tell her future

parole officer that her dad's the one to blame. That I didn't love her enough or because her mom left. Because I couldn't fucking open up to anyone.

Frustrated, I dial Emily, who picks up on the second ring. "Hey! Need something?"

As I pull into the gym parking lot, my breaths grow shallow. I can't relax until I hear their voices. "Just missed the kids. Where's Avery?"

Some irritation rings in her voice as she answers, "She's sleeping in, Adon. Teenage girls do that on the weekends."

Growling through the phone, I slam the truck into park. "She's not a fucking teenager yet, Em. Will you just go to her room and make sure she's there?" Before my question is finished, her breathing picks up like she's making her way upstairs.

The sound of a door creaking sounds through the speakers, and she sighs. "Yep. Asleep." More panting and then a pause. "And your son is up playing his game. Want to talk to him?"

"Will you tell him I love him? Sorry to bother you."

"You're not?—"

I press the button to end the call before she's done telling me what I'm not. When I hop down from the cab, I grab my bag from the back and head inside. Eli's hogging the squat rack in the corner and gives me a slight nod in the mirror.

One earbud in, I turn up some jazz, then make my way over to him. I drop my bag next to his at the station, and he pauses his rep to wipe some sweat from his forehead with a nearby towel.

“Hey. Where were you last night?” I try not to sound like I did when I was eighteen and had to become his guardian fast. But I can’t help my worried tone.

Defensiveness creeps across his tense trap muscles as he scoffs and shrugs. “I was out. Why?”

I know my brother. He’s not going to tell me something directly. Especially not about pussy he’s fucking. Pretending to busy myself by grabbing my weightlifting gloves out of the bag, I Velcro them to my hands and stand.

Casually, I toss out, “Ah, just curious. Rhodes says you haven’t been staying at your place. Is it not comfortable?”

Like a kid, but now larger than even me, he kicks out his foot and shakes his head. His mannerisms are in such contrast to how big of a man he’s become. “I’m seeing someone, okay? I have a girlfriend.”

His eyes are steady, not bloodshot and...if I think about it, he looks happy . All I can do is grunt a reply. I pick up my bag to turn around, thinking he won’t answer more, but I pause, deciding to give it another go. “Where’d you meet her?”

Through some tight lips, he gives me, “Bookstore.”

Well now, that’s a fucking lie. “Okay. How old is she?”

If I’d punched him, he would look less pissed. A deep furrow forms between his eyebrows as he snaps back at me, “Why? What the fuck does it matter?”

I take two steps closer and lower my voice. “Eli, is she at least eighteen?”

A beefy shoulder hits my sternum as he shoves me away from him. “Fuck you. Yes.

God , do you think so little of me?"

Ignoring the last question, I clarify. "So she's eighteen."

His chest expands with his deep breath, and he puts his headphones back on. I could really lose him here. If this girl means something to him, and it seems she does, I should probably get to know her. Make sure she's not going to sway him into doing stupid high school shit. "Why don't you bring her to the shop?"

Slipping his fingers from the squat bar, he blinks at me several times. "You serious?"

My hand grips his shoulder. "Yeah. I'd like to meet her. Bring her by sometime."

He nods slightly, but seems quite uncomfortable with the direction of the conversation. "O-okay. I'll ask her when the time's right." As he returns to his weights, he tilts his head toward me. "Thanks, Adon."

The heavy dumbbell weighs as much as the guilt settling on my back. It's my fault. I should have done things differently. If I could have gone to prison for him, I would have. But it's time to do things right. For everyone.

I need to set a good example and be the big brother they expect of me.

And that involves not showing up to fuck young women at the club on Friday nights.

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Chapter

Four

PIPER

If someone asked me about my ex-crush, I'd say, "Tarin who?"

Honestly, what was I thinking? She's not even that cute. I hadn't given her another thought after waking up from my haze. It's good she blocked me. I'm over her.

In fact, most of the weekend, I thought more about that daddy's dick than anything. And I'm not much of one to consider men. Especially not growly, alphaholes who think I should get on my knees for them just for having a cock. He can't control me.

Applying a smooth layer of purple lipstick, I tug on a long, orange cardigan over my painted, wide, flared jeans. Freckles curls on his back in his sunny spot on the windowsill, ignoring my morning routine in favor of sleeping in. After filling his dishes, I smirk and say goodbye, but he just ignores me. Spotting my collection of hats on the rack, I decide at the last minute to throw on a checkered beret and head out the door.

With the crisp fall air, everything seems new. College kids are walking downtown toward campus for their early classes and the stores are opening their doors. The smells of warm sunshine and wet leaves give the aroma of a fresh start. I love this time of year.

Bopping into the Rainy Day bookstore, I can't help but smile at the new autumn coffee menu, including pumpkin spice lattes. Maggie's long brown ponytail whips around as she makes espressos and steams up milk for the customers in line. Her gaze lifts to catch me, and she holds up an empty paper cup, pointing to the chalk drawing of a pumpkin on the sign. I nod and give her a broad smile, which she doesn't return.

Fine. So I burned her Steve Maddens after the last time she left them at my place, saying we were over. But then she let me finger her in the back of The Warehouse. I thought we were back on by now.

When I get to the counter, I let my lashes flutter a bit and lean over to get a pretend peek at the pastries. "Mm, these look good."

Her lips are firm as she snaps out, "I'm making you a latte, and that's all I can do for you today, Piper."

A little laugh bubbles up from my chest. "Come on! Are you still mad about those platform sneakers? They were ugly as fuck anyway. Don't be that way."

She rolls her eyes and turns around to make my drink.

"Maggie."

Ignoring me, she continues to steam the milk and even turns up the steam.

But I just increase my volume. "Maggie!"

"Come on, lady. You're holding up the line."

"Hurry up!"

A couple of people behind me grumble complaints. Turning around, I open my mouth to tell them all to shut up, but the absolute tower of a man standing behind me makes me lose my breath. His face is contorted with so much anger that I trip backwards into the cash register. With a snarl on his lip, his cavernous brown eyes stare me down with disgust. I can't form words to snap back at him, but I want to. The curse about it is...he's insanely attractive.

He wasn't the one to say something, but he looks like he's about to. "Hold your fucking horses," I say, but instead of making it sound cute, it's like a hesitating whisper of anxiety.

"Here. I'll put it on your tab, but Bob wants you to pay it by the end of this month or no more free coffees, Piper." Maggie gets my attention back to her, and I flash her a flush-cheeked smile.

When I'm about to ask her out again, Bob pops his head through the metal swinging door to the kitchen and yells, "I mean it, Piper!"

Swallowing my annoyance, I walk away with my coffee, but not without keeping someone's attention. The giant continues to give me the evil eye as I skirt away from the crowd, who look relieved that I'm leaving. My stomach twists in a knot when I see my mother and sister sitting in a booth by the door. Practically squatting behind the planters that divide the ordering line from the dining area, I try to duck and walk by without them seeing.

"Piper, darling? What in the world are you doing?" My mother's high-pitched, irritated voice calls me out.

Everyone at the back of the line turns around to gape at me. Shaking my shoulders back, I straighten up and divert my steps toward them. "Oh, I didn't see you there. Hi."

With a heavy sigh, my sister rolls her eyes while sipping her coffee mug. She's always careful not to damage her perfect makeup, a mannerism she learned from our mother. Both look like news anchors in their ridiculous navy pant suits, with nearly identical blonde hair styled into perfect waves around their faces.

I slide into a seat across from their booth as they both give me looks of utter disappointment. Maeve squints her eyes at my mouth, then sneers. "Purple lipstick? Ugh..." I give her a nasty look back. She ignores me and turns to our mother. "Anyway, like I was saying, Omega are voting on bids this weekend, so I can't make it. And Sean and I are celebrating our three-month anniversary, if all goes well." My sister taps her pink-polished fingernails on the table.

"How is boring Sean?"

She tosses her shiny locks over a shoulder and sits up straighter, keeping her unamused expression intact. "He's just fine. How's your prostitution going?"

My jaw drops at her insinuation, and the heat rises in my gut as my fist curls, ready for a punch. "Even if I were making money that way?—"

Slapping her long fingers between our cups of coffee, my mother narrows her eyes and lowers her voice. "You two need to stop . We are in public . Act like you have some manners ." She grits out the last word of every sentence for emphasis. It's like we're children again any time we're together.

Being the pink sheep of the family has its disadvantages. For one, the only thing these two care about is how things appear , not how they actually are. Second, they still try to force me to get along with them and attend family functions. I'd rather set their houses on fire.

Maeve's greatest achievement in life after becoming Omega Nu Epsilon's president

(where you find “ The One”) is landing Sean Harrison. Not only is he that boring type of dimpled conventionally attractive specimen and a proud virgin, practically teaching incels on campus to cage their dicks. He’s also the son of the prominently tenured Poli-Sci professor, Mr. Harrison. And Maeve is determined to be President Sean Harrison’s first lady someday.

Worse than all that, my mother encourages this behavior. Except one thing: Maeve has recently had a weird itch to get my parents back together, claiming that divorce is a stain on our family’s legacy. I’m sure that’s coming from Sean’s warped brain and Maeve’s need to please her closeted gay boyfriend.

Maybe she doesn’t remember the horrific battles they fought while together, but I sure as hell haven’t forgotten. All the affairs. The times he swore he would kill her. And those nights I’d lie in bed planning to Lizzie Borden my entire family.

No one has ever believed me. No one has ever believed in me. If I brought up what life was like there in our perfect suburban home, it didn’t make sense to their little brains. Not with how presentable everyone thought the Hendricks were. So well-mannered and polite.

It’s always been Piper’s attitude that’s the problem. My inability to sit still or to throw a tantrum when they’d try to fit me into outfits like my sister’s. Hiding when it was time to curl my hair. So violent when they’d accuse me of making things up...

I grow my lack of conformity to be a thorn in their side.

Changing the topic, Maeve smiles sweetly and asks, “So, have you given more thought to inviting Dad out for coffee? I think he enjoys this place. He told me he’d like to come here.”

I scoff, and she snaps her green eyes to mine.

My mother ignores us both and sips her coffee delicately. And like a true gossip, she says so nonchalantly, “I’m sure your father is busy with other interests. Like brunettes with bad boob jobs.”

Maeve’s jaw clenches, and through her perfectly veneered white teeth, she tries to maintain a polite tone. “That’s why I’m saying, Mother, that maybe it’s time to get him away from those distractions.”

Unfortunately, Cora Hendricks sees every other woman my dad has fucked as some type of direct competition to getting everything she wants. Instead of immediately realizing what a bad idea this is, she looks as if she’s considering it. My stomach rolls from not just the latte (Did Maggie poison this?), but from the look on my mother’s face. One of conniving determination.

“I have to go to work. I don’t want to be late.” Pushing my chair back, neither bids me a goodbye, nestling their heads together to devise some type of scheme I want no part of.

Just as I pull out my phone to text my father a warning, I run smack into the titan that was standing behind me in line. He huffs and stands back, a grumpy scowl coating his face. With a wave of his hand, he flicks it toward the door. “Please. After you .”

There’s something oddly familiar about him, and it makes my belly ache worse than being around my family. Looking straight ahead, I rush past him and out the door, my phone buzzing from a text.

Dad

Your mother just can’t handle that I’m happy now.

Hurrying toward the library, I try not to trip on some wayward cracks in the pavement

and make it to the back door to open it just in time for my shift. Another text pops up when I check the time on my phone.

Dad

She's a complete fucking bitch like that.

Once I've clocked in and settled behind the desk to go through the returns, I punch Essa's number and put it on speaker. "Hey, pretty lady! So when am I meeting this handsome porn cock boyfriend of yours?"

My best friend's giggly laugh takes the stresses of the morning away immediately. "How about you come over for dinner tonight? You can meet him then."

"Perfect. I'll bring some cookies for dessert!"

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Chapter

Five

ADON

Feels like my brain is running through a meat grinder. Can't get my favorite coffee anymore for fear of running into that pink pixie. Well, not fear as much as just thinking of taking her across my knee, spanking her until she behaves, then fucking her into next week.

Because it's Friday, and I am not going back to the club now. She's invaded every fucking space I have. Surprised she hasn't stolen my car or moved into my house.

She's in my every thought and I can't get her out. Usually, I'll flip through a catalog of the previous week's sex club events. But no. She had to ruin that by leaving me high and dry. Literally dry. Not a drop of cum was spilled into her tiny twat.

So I've been fapping to the little girl squirming on my lap since last week. Came three times to what her face would look like when I entered her. Bet her lungs would lose air from how big I am.

"I'm not doing this again." Voice aimed at my hard dick, I shake my head, then get up from bed. My palm rubs down my face until I can stand and make it to the bathroom, starting my routine for the day. The good thing about today is that the kids will be back with me after school. They'll make a good distraction from that rosy-cheeked woman invading my life like patchouli poison.

The water isn't getting hot. I hold my hand under the stream for several minutes before turning it off. Wrapping a towel around my middle, I march down the hall to the water heater closet. The pilot light is still lit, but I can't get the water warm in any of the sinks, either. I don't have time to deal with this.

With a loud growl, I hurriedly take a freezing shower. As I'm stepping out, I slip on the tile and almost land on the edge of the tub. Great. Now my back is tweaked again. Which means no gym for a day or two. The tension of not being able to lift already makes my neck tight.

When I go to make some coffee in the French press, there isn't enough left to get a scoop for what I need. "Fuck!" I forgot to pick some up. Throwing the bag in the recycling, I grab my jacket.

I'll just have to stop by a fast-food restaurant and get a cup on my way to the garage. Like a lost lover, my mind rests fondly on Rainy Day cafe and that perfect autumn roast they make. I can taste it on my tongue. Feel its warmth easing the irritations of the morning... But then, all I can see is Rosy flirting with the barista, distracting her from being able to do her job and get me my coffee.

The only good thing about the exchange is that I don't think she recognized me. If she had...I'm not sure what I would have done. Paid her to keep quiet? Grabbed her arm and taken her to the bathroom and shoved my dick so far down her throat she couldn't talk again?

My hips raise off the driver's seat as I adjust my firm erection. Damn it! Why won't this thing go down? I'm thirty-six. Not a teenager.

I roll up to the drive-through window and place an order for black coffee. Considering the cramping grunts my stomach makes, I may as well treat myself since I won't be getting any pussy tonight. I ask for a breakfast sandwich to go with my

morning joe. When I pull up to pay, however, the woman waves off my credit card.

“Sorry, sir. Our machines are down. Only taking cash.”

“What? Are you serious?”

She lowers the microphone on her headset and stares at me, asking silently if she needs to repeat herself.

Heaving a sigh, I roll up my window and drive away. I don't have any fucking cash, either. Going through a mental checklist, I plan a visit to the store for coffee, cash, a new water heater, something to eat for breakfast this week...

And pussy. Maybe they have it in a hidden aisle in the back.

By the time I get to the garage, I'm late. I hate being late anywhere, but especially when I'm trying to set a good example for Eli. Who has already irritated two customers by the time I get to the back office he's using as his own now that I made him office manager, encouraging him to step away from the cars with his disastrous mechanical abilities.

“Sorry!” He sounds all whiny, like he used to when we were kids. Catching my eyes, he shrugs sheepishly and says quietly, “I thought I knew what I was doing by now. Thought I could help Tate out when it got busy, but I should have known better.” Slumping into the chair across from my desk, he runs his hands along the sides of his shaved head. Guilt racks my heart once again. He looks so fucking defeated .

He's doing good with the customers and running the business aspects of things, but some days, I don't know what to do with him. He has to have a job. It's part of his parole. And no one hires ex-felons. Especially one who was in on drug trafficking charges.

“It’s fine. I’ll straighten things out and offer free repairs for those customers on their next visits.” Hurriedly, I add, “Just let Tate and I handle the service.”

Looking out the window over the long table in the back corner of the room, he sighs. “Essa’s going to come by today, if that’s okay. Her car’s not doing good, so I said we’d take care of it for her.”

I cross my arms. Eli rarely opens up, and this seems like a rare opportunity to hear what’s going on in his head. I wait to see if he’ll say something more. But, just like me, he stays silent. “What’s she do for work?”

His chocolate brown eyes greet me, and I see it. This man is head over heels for this woman. My youngest brother is smitten. “She’s in school at Northview University.” He sits back in the chair with a squeak and smirks bashfully. “Uh...I think. God, this is stupid, but...I think I may try my hand at some classes, too.”

A mixture of pride and jealousy twists my guts. It must be very serious if she’s convincing him to achieve an untold dream. Eli’s always been bright. I spent years trying to convince him of that fact. This girl has helped him see his worth in just a month. Why wouldn’t he take what I said as the truth? See how proud I am of him?

Emily’s words during an argument come back to haunt me. “I’m not a mind reader, Adon. No one knows what’s going on in that head of yours. If you feel like sharing, we’re waiting with open hearts.”

“That’s fantastic. I think that’s a wonderful idea.” Visions of expanding the family business across town, with each of us running a franchise, enter my mind. Rhodes would never, though. And I’m not sure I can trust Eli to handle the pressures it would take, at least not yet. While sober. “Have her pull into a bay, and Tate can take care of her car.”

The tension leaves his body in a giant wave and a broad smile spreads across his lips. He looks just like that time I said we'd all go to an outdoor concert when we were teens.

It was just after Mom died and Aunt Maria was on her way from Greece to help me out. The three of us were mindless, disgusting zombies walking around the house. I tried my hardest to get Rhodes and Eli to clean and cook under my supervision. What did I know about grieving? I was just an eighteen-year-old kid myself and now a guardian to my two younger brothers.

Eli had been bugging me for weeks before she died, wanting to go to some concert. Mom said for me to take him, that it would be good for us to go. But after she left, I thought it would be irresponsible.

Until one night, the grief got to be too much to bear. I couldn't take feeling so fucking sad anymore. So I marched into his room where Rhodes and he were talking. Probably about me being such a fucking tyrant. And I told him we were going.

The brightness in their smiles was all I needed to feel like living another day. Those fucking grins kept me alive. And I eat it now like it's my last meal.

Emotion grips my heart so powerfully, I think my eyes water, but I won't let him see. Instead, I focus on the computer screen and clear my throat. "Okay, so I'll call those customers. Get back up front."

Once he's gone, I focus on cleaning up his messes. And spend the rest of the day dealing with angry people and rude suppliers.

The lack of coffee catches up to me after lunch when my head pounds harder than it has all day. I forgot to stop to eat so my stomach has acid pouring through it, waiting for any protein. My hand slams down the receiver of the phone as I deal with the city

inspector coming by at the most inconvenient time. And just as I think about getting a bite, Eli knocks on the door to introduce his girlfriend to me.

She's a fucking tiny thing, and Rhodes is right. She looks really young. But knowing she's in college and that I tried to fuck a girl about her age at the club last weekend, I ignore it. If Eli's happy and looking into a more solid future, one without booze and drugs, I'll encourage this new relationship.

Her big blue eyes look up at me as if she's terrified as she peeks around my brother's body. Brushing off my palms, I stand and stretch out my hand. "Hey there. I'm Adon. You must be Essa?"

With a shy voice, she says, "Yes, sir." My heart warms to her already. So respectful and obviously kind.

Eli chuckles obnoxiously. "Essa, this is Adon, my brother. He used to try to light centipedes on fire with a magnifying glass. He's not a 'sir.'"

Clenching my jaw, I smirk as his girlfriend blushes fervently. "She can call me sir if she wants. It's good to meet you, sweetheart. Are you the one encouraging him to get back in school?"

"Um...I didn't know about that, uh..."

Her eyes dart to Eli, seeking his reaction, and he clears his throat, swallowing as he whispers to her, "It was just something I considered."

The door opens, and my heart stops. In fact, I think I'm having a fucking heart attack. If I could grab it to restart it, I would, but I'm frozen. My breathing comes to a complete halt.

Wild pink hair skirts past Essa and my brother, entering my office like she owns the place. Here. In my place of business. The rage rising in my blood is so hot, I think it'll boil over. She saunters over to the table and fingers one of the plastic plants that Emily put there years ago.

Like she's making fun of the place I built, with toil and late nights working here since I was a kid, she says, "Nice place you have here."

Does she know it's mine? Is she messing with me? And why the absolute fuck is the girl that left me with blue balls here now ? She has to know. Patchouli and vanilla explode up my nose like a bomb as she spins back to face the room. She has to be doing this on purpose.

"Oh, Adon, sorry. This is my friend, Piper," Essa interrupts my urge to grab the little girl by her shoulders and toss her out the window.

"Does she normally waltz in like she owns a place that isn't hers?"

Finally, her spring greens gaze up at me as she drops her jaw. The sight of it opening so wide makes my dick spring to life. I want to make her pay for that. "I'm standing right here."

My eyes narrow, waiting for her to give me some look of recognition. Barely inhaling, I pause. But it never comes. There's no way she just showed up here on her own...

Everything is closing in on me. The walls feel tight. I think about my mask sitting at home. No pussy for me tonight, and I have to look at this girl here in my place of business. Quick, think of something to get them all out of here. Clearing my throat, I walk back behind my desk and say, "Okay. Well, it's a bit crowded in here. I've got to get some work done. Go ahead and take off for the day, baby brother. See you."

Eli looks stunned and hurt, but the pink lady leaves with a parting sneer, and I can finally relax a bit. Did I come off as a complete ass? Yes. I can't leave things that way with Essa, though. Not if I want my brother on the right track.

"Essa," I say, stopping her from leaving the room. She pauses with her hand on the knob, and I continue. "You're taking good care of my brother. We'll take good care of your car. Glad to meet you."

She turns shy and smiles. "You, too."

Once the door is closed, I bang my head on the desk, rub my hands against the buzzed sides, then tug on the longer ends on top. What an absolute disaster.

I don't think she recognized me. At least, she didn't make eye contact as if she did. If that's the case, I'm at least getting coffee. I won't let her take that from me.

Yeah, I'll show up and take it back as my own territory.

I just have to try not to beat off to the images of her tight little ass in those bell-bottom jeans she was just wearing...

Fucking patchouli!

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Chapter

Six

PIPER

It feels like everyone is invading my space. That rude guy from the coffee shop is back in his spot. And, unfortunately, he happens to be my best friend's boyfriend's brother. The terrifying thing is, he's a gorgeous specimen of a man. Huge and dark. Adon Griffin. The sight of him is enough to turn me straight as an arrow. But his angry gaze and arrogant attitude make me want to give up men entirely. It's a perplexing phenomenon.

Instead of speaking to him, I roll my eyes and stare ahead in the ordering line at Rainy Day. A fierce glare burns into the back of my skull, but when I turn to face him, he looks away. His thick arms can barely cross his broad chest. There's something about his figure that seems familiar...

Worse than him being a few behind me in line is that my father is in the corner with some brunette woman. It looks as if he's having a business meeting here, of all places. They both talk rapidly with their hands flailing in the air and only pause to glance ahead of me in line, where my mother and sister are getting their hot mugs. Yeah. This is rearing up to be a global disaster. The climate is about to fucking change in here so rapidly, everyone better stand on the tables.

As I move forward, I grimace, watching the horror unfold. Maeve smiles at some middle-aged, distinguished-looking gentleman with salt-and-pepper hair, who entered

behind her as I approached the cafe. I stalled my steps for the appropriate amount of time so that I wouldn't be caught near them in line. Thus, avoiding forced awkward conversations. Brilliant, if I do say so.

She then ambles with my mother to the only available seats... at the same table as my father and the woman next to him.

Distraction settles the butterflies in my stomach when Maggie half smiles behind the counter. With a sweaty palm, I press out some wrinkles on my vintage floral mini babydoll dress. This girl is confusing me. Last week, it was all resentment. Now, she looks like she wants me to take her to the bathroom to do unspeakable acts. "What do you want, Piper?"

"You on my fingers again."

A bubbly giggle escapes her plush lips. Flirting, face flushed, sweet laughter hits my face. "Stop!" The way she says it sounds like she definitely doesn't want me to stop.

Holding out my phone, I wave her toward me. "Hey, get a picture with me."

Okay, yeah. I want to post it all on socials to show Tarin I'm totally over her. Maggie is so much hotter .

Surprisingly, Maggie complies and comes around to stand beside me. Holding up a peace sign, we snuggle close, cheek to cheek, and I grab a couple for the 'gram.

"Will you hurry the fuck up?"

"Lady! Come on!"

Despite the grumbles and complaints surging from the people waiting behind me, I

upload my photo to socials, then give the crowd my middle finger. Maggie blushes and hurries to make me a cup of autumn goodness and whispers, “It’s on your tab. You have to pay it next time, Piper. Bob’s seriously considering not allowing you back in here.”

Nodding, I know it’s not true. I’ve had this fucking tab for over a year. They love me here.

Bracing myself for what I’ll see when I turn around, the heat from the giant’s sharp stare hits me, and I narrow my eyes at him as I walk toward the door.

“Piper!” my mother calls me over, and my chest aches at the sight of my worst nightmare.

Along the back wall bench sits the silver-haired gentleman, the brunette woman, then my father. Directly across from him is Maeve, then my mother, and an empty chair that she points at for me. Maybe my parents will behave since they’re in front of others.

Who am I kidding? This is about to dissolve into a war.

Sliding into the seat, my eyes widen at the unspoken tension around the five people I’m sitting with. The table is cluttered from a busy morning with napkins, empty mugs, saucers, stir sticks, empty packets of sugar, and bits of pastries lying about. Sticky rings line the surface, and I hold my cup to my chest carefully, not wanting to get my hands dirty.

My sister addresses the distinguished man in a navy-blue suit who gives me a star-winning smile. He’s quite attractive in an academic sort of way. “Professor Harrison, how long did you say you and Meghan have been married?”

Oh. So he must be Maeve's latest boy toy's father. And that's his mother? She looks much too young to have a twenty-something son.

The brunette between my father and him looks down at the table. He nods at her, then answers. "Oh, only about five years. Since my first wife died."

"You must be so proud of Sean." Maeve continues gabbing to her professor.

Like a moth to a flame, my mother straightens in her seat and addresses Meghan. "So you work with my husband."

Meghan looks at my father, who sneers at my mom. "Cora, don't fucking start."

"I think it's good that you have a new family after such a loss." Maeve tries to interrupt and hold the conversation with the professor, who looks as uncomfortable as I feel.

"We're divorced. And that's for a reason!" my father yells.

My mom's elbows rest on the table as she leans forward over the cups. As I search them, I worry she may pick one up and throw it. "Yeah, because you couldn't keep your dick in your pants!"

"Oh, here we go... Jealous still? You weren't a good enough lay for me to stay, you old hag."

With a mocking gasp, my mother sits back in her seat and slides her hand into her purse, dropping something she'd held in her hand. The people around us gape at the fight, and I sink lower, trying to avoid their gazes.

"Fuck you, asshole." My mom stands and points a finger in his face.

Greg Hendricks lengthens his neck and grips the collar of his shirt with a hooked finger. Instead of snapping back at my mom again, he looks at his co-worker and says, “You finished? Let’s get back to work, Meghan. I’m sorry for this bitch’s rude behavior.”

Meghan looks completely flustered, but hurriedly grabs her mug and downs it. Maeve appears unfazed and sips her hot tea with a smile while the professor refuses to look at anyone, stunned into silence.

Just as I think about throwing down my cup and darting away, Meghan stands and makes a strange face, clutching her throat. Her skin changes from a deep olive to pale white, then bright red as she gasps for air, which doesn’t seem to be getting inside her. She makes the motion to breathe, but she clearly can’t.

“Oh my god!” Maeve screams.

I can only stare, frozen with panic.

Professor Harrison stands and grabs his wife, shaking her. “Megs? Meghan?!” Frantically, he glances around the busy cafe. “Help us!”

Meghan collapses across the table, smacking face first into the faux wood top. As I jump from my chair, my body is pushed out of the way as Adon Griffin comes from behind me and gathers the floppy woman in his arms.

He lays her on the floor, presses his ear to her barely parted lips while watching her chest rise. But it doesn’t. His deep chocolate eyes seek my face with a seriousness that makes me tremble all over. “Call nine-one-one. Now, Rosy.”

Rosy . Oh my god... Daddy Don. It’s him.

My heart stops for a full beat before hurrying to catch back up.

Still in a state of shock, I find my phone in my crochet purse and press the numbers on it, though they dart around. Or is it my finger that's shaking? Somehow, I convey the information to the dispatcher, but everything feels like it's in slow motion.

Professor Hendricks kneels next to his wife, gripping her hand and patting it. Her face turns an ugly shade of purple and blue, while Adon presses his palms on her sternum. He counts in a low tone under his breath as he gives her CPR.

All I can do is hug myself and watch the scene unfold, a sinking feeling of horror in my gut. Daddy Don, the man I wanted to ruin, is trying his best to save this poor woman's life.

And failing.

She looks dead. Like... dead dead. I haven't seen any corpses, but this looks like what one would look like. My mother and sister stare silently from the wall, neither making much of an expression. Dad's hands continuously run through his hair as he stares at Meghan with wide eyes.

Pencil-headed Sean pushes through the crowd of visitors, yelling something that I can't understand. My ears feel fuzzy, my vision clouded by confusion. "Dad? Dad! Oh my god. Is Meghan okay?" The way he says her name, though, makes me feel like he really doesn't give a shit if Meghan is okay or not.

"Oh, Sean!" Maeve throws on some waterworks and reaches for her boyfriend. He stands next to her and gives her a hug while watching Adon work.

He's tireless. Those massive muscles clenching and flexing as he presses directly into the body's chest, heaving breaths onto her face. Sweat pours from his forehead as he

mutters a rhythm to a beat. My heart feels like it jumps with a start with every downstroke Adon pushes into her. Like an obsessed worker who won't stop until he gets the job done.

By the time paramedics bust through the door, though, all hope is lost. Bob ushers the patrons out of the store and closes the shop, but police arrive behind them and ask Adon and the rest of us to stay and give witness accounts.

Adon doesn't look exhausted... He looks utterly defeated . It makes me remember the look he gave me at the club. The one that let me know he could be my hero. Even see things I never want anyone else to.

The way the officer speaks to him is like he's attacking him, or maybe I'm feeling a bit protective. Adon stares at the floor, then his shoulders raise as the man spits out a question that Adon hesitates to answer.

My family departs after giving statements, and I linger behind. For what, I'm not sure. Some part of me wants to comfort Adon. He looks so sad. And the other part wants to rub it in and irritate the fuck out of him.

The shop is nearly empty as I wait outside on the busy sidewalk. People still loiter, and I just now realize how very late I am for work. It's already past noon. Texting my boss, I let her know what's happened and why I'm missing my shift when Adon steps out of the door and glances both ways like he's lost.

His eyes fall onto me, and we behold each other for a long moment.

He knows that I know... A tiny ball in the back of his jaw bounces as he grinds his teeth.

Taking a few steps closer, I lift my chin and toss my short hair. I have to drop my

head back to even look at his face, which seems high in the clouds. As I approach, he scratches his beard and narrows his fierce gaze. It drops to my chest for a blink, which only makes heat flare across my cheeks. Like electricity sparking between our bodies, I almost don't want to touch him for fear I'll get shocked. So I stand about two feet back while people rush between us, getting to where they need to go.

"So...Daddy Don, huh?"

Adon's eyebrows shoot up as he erases the space between us. His finger and thumb grip my chin as he snaps at me, "Don't you ever call me that."

A gasp parts my lips as butterflies swarm my belly. Despite how nervous he's making me, I smirk and give him a shrug. "You wanted me to the other night."

"That was... That was not me."

Stumbling a step back, I say, "Sure, and I'm not?—"

My arm gets yanked, breath catching in my throat, as a hooded figure rushes past me, snaring my purse in their hands and running with it.

"What the—" I lunge and sprint toward him while screaming, "Hey! That's mine!"

The crowds surrounding me make it difficult to catch up with him, but Adon overtakes me and burrows through like he's a bulldozer. With barely a glance behind, the tall figure drops the bag and runs off, down into an alley. Adon continues to try to chase while I snatch my purse from the ground, stuffing wayward items back inside it with a racing heart.

Once I've cleaned it up, I head in the same direction, adrenaline pumping, but the alley is empty, other than Adon standing at the end behind a dumpster with his hands

on his hips. “Fuck!” His deep voice bounces off the bricks surrounding him as he spits out the curse.

Approaching him, I tap him on the shoulder, and he jumps. “I lost him!”

“Thank you... Daddy .” I can’t help the smirk crossing my lips from calling him by his true name.

His upper lip curls as he turns to me, walking me slowly until my back hits the building. Formidable arms cage my head in on either side. “Do not fucking say that again, unless you want your mouth stuffed so full, you can’t speak.”

The ribbed, harsh tone flowing out of his throat makes me wet and furious. “I’ll call you whatever I want to, Daddy Don .”

Nose flaring, his eyes scan my face as his olive skin turns pink with fury. The shadows that his large body cast over me cause me to shiver. And just as I think about squirming out from under him, he dips his face and breathes against my lips. Hot air smelling of coffee and spice waft by, scent steel and manly. Everything about him is impenetrable. If I move at all, we’ll kiss. I don’t think I’d push him away.

But instead of that, he suddenly grips my bare thighs underneath my dress and shoves me up against the bricks. Gasping, my hand naturally raises over my head to steady myself as my legs wrap around him. Pressing his forehead against mine to keep me in place, he grits out, “Then you’re gonna get fucked by him.”

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Chapter

Seven

ADON

Like she planned it all out, she's wearing some tiny flowery dress just to set my dick to rock-hard capacity. When I press her back against the building, she gasps so sweetly, panting heavily against my lips. That same intoxicating patchouli scent makes me want to lick the plush opening of her mouth, but with every ounce of self-control I possess, I refrain. Instead, I dig into my jeans and unzip them, letting my pulsing cock breathe.

The sigh that leaves my chest isn't just from setting it loose. It's also knowing that I'm about to get some relief. Once I'm inside her, that's it. No more tortured nights jerking off to this little pixie.

Checking with her widened spring green eyes, I hook a finger in her soaked panties and pull them aside. Of course she's wet. This girl needs what I'm about to give her. All fucking ten inches of it. Some of me waits to see if she'll remember her safe word and use it, but Rosy cheeks stays silent for once. As if reading my mind, she tucks that dusty, pouty, bratty lip neatly under her front teeth. So I line up and plunge in with a growl against her ear as she makes a high-pitched squeal in mine.

"God damn ! You're so—" I draw myself out as much as I can, but her cunt has a grip on my steel dick. "Fucking tight."

I'm pretty sure my dick has never felt this good before. It weeps inside of her in response to the vise grip she puts it under. The air runs ragged out of my chest as I glance at where we're joined, knowing if her skirt was out of the way, I'd probably see her pussy trying to stuff me back inside with all its strength.

With a breathy whine, her smooth hand pinches the base of my neck, pulling me back until our gazes meet with stunned expressions. Maybe she understands just how amazing this feels. Some spark of energy shooting between our connected bodies. Oddly, I don't just think it's from being inside her.

Little green eyes narrow as she spits out, "No. You're just too fucking big ." As if she can't breathe, her voice strains as it comes out of her clenched jaw while I rapidly thrust myself in to make her stop talking. It works. Her grunt escapes with a hiccup when I reach the hilt.

With an iron will, I focus on not kissing her. My dried lips hover just over hers, tingling from the closeness of our skin. She huffs heated breaths inside my mouth, and the scent brings back the memory of her on my lap at the club. My cock throbs and aches at the recollection of the utter need I've built up for this since I met her.

When I drag myself back out and shove in again, my eyes squeeze closed, trying to memorize the sensation for later. Each time I enter, I'm trying to capture the feeling and tuck it deep inside my brain.

The urge to join her body everywhere overwhelms me, especially when her big eyes grow wider and drop to my lips. They flame under her inspection. So I don't fuck this up, I latch my mouth onto the crook of her neck and suck her warm skin, then rake my teeth across in a playful bite that has a faint moan crawling up her throat. All the while, my hips work to cram inside her again. And again.

My pace picks up as her whimpers grow desperate. Plunging with rapidity, the sound

of our bodies smacking together echoes off the brick walls that surround us. Noises from the street don't even register in my ears. It's only us fucking. The melodic jazz is dirty and erotic.

My balls tingle with the need for release, if I could just fit more in. Her legs spread wider to accommodate me, but the girl is tiny .

An autumn breeze blows through the alley and carries her dress up with it. My palms grip the thick globes of her ass as I hitch her up higher. When I do, her nails cling to the front of my T-shirt, trying to hold on. "You want a daddy? You'll get one, you naughty brat." Shifting my weight, I set her fully on my length, now buried so deep inside her, we both gasp. I slap her ass hard as her jaw drops.

"Oh!" she squeaks once.

With another swat, her eyes tear up. "What do you say when I spank you, Rosy?"

As if she's lost in ecstasy, her eyes can't even focus on my face. "I-I don't know..."

"You say..." My cock pulses and my balls fill with an impending release. But she needs to hear me first. "Thank you, daddy, for punishing me. Let me hear it."

"Th-thank you, daddy! Oh my god!" As her neck stretches up to the gray sky, she loses control of her limbs, which shake violently. My grip on her waist and legs tightens as I pummel swiftly inside, chasing her orgasm with my own. The sight of her flushed face with mauve traveling down to her pert breasts is enough to make me explode.

With a final shove, I spurt everything I have within her wet cunt, so deep that I hope it's never coming out. Groaning roughly, my face buries in her neck as I catch my breath and pant out, "So proud of you. Good little Rosy girl."

It's only a few moments before she's shoving her shoulders into my chest. I drop her, taking a step back with my hands up. She slides down the bricks while gazing up at me with defiance, albeit on shaky legs and with a dazed look in her eyes. My jaw sets with just as much irritation. She thinks she can play with me the way she has, be such a fucking brat everywhere and not pay the toll?

While I contemplate exactly what to say and stuff myself back in my jeans, the little girl raises her palm and slaps the shit out of my cheek. The hit stuns more than hurts, and I lay my hand over the heated area as she grabs her bag and sprints down the alleyway, away from me without another word or glance. Part of me wants to follow, but the other half has no idea why.

I got what I came for. That's it. Just this once.

Some items spill from her purse, landing haphazardly in the blowing wind. Hurrying to the pile, I scan what has dropped, and my gut twists into a knot. My eyes squeeze shut as doom comes over my chest. An unopened condom lays abandoned on the ground.

Fuck.

What did I just do?

Running my hands over the sides of my head, I pace, trying to calm myself. I mean, if she's a member of the club, she's clean. I should be just fine.

I don't even want to think about birth control.

Bending over, I gather whatever was knocked loose from her stuff and shove it in my pocket. How did I lose control so easily?

I shuffle back to the parking lot slowly, taking deep breaths to rid the pain settling inside my heart.

I know how. Because I couldn't save the poor woman in the cafe. The one who died under my hands. Her face turned red, then blue. The one losing air that I couldn't give her.

Visions cloud my mind of the nights I'd have to revive Eli when he'd overdose. Terror makes my arteries buzz as I remember a teenaged Adon saving his brother. Trying to maintain a job to support Rhodes and get him to college like my parents wanted. Keeping the house clean while working a full-time and part-time job.

I stare up at the gray sky and wonder if Mama and Papa are looking at me now. I can't help but feel like I'd be an utter failure in their eyes despite having the mechanic shop.

Divorce, Eli in prison, and now, letting a strange woman die in my hands. Fucking some young woman in an alleyway without a condom.

Shit . What if she gets pregnant?

Tate rings my phone, probably worried about me not showing up for work. As I hop in my car, I play the call through the speakers.

"Hey, sorry. There was an accident at the coffee shop, and I had to stay behind to tell the police what happened."

A drill whizzes in the background, then stops as Tate hurries to interrupt. "What? What kind of accident?"

"Lady had some type of medical reaction or something. Not sure. I had to give her

CPR, but it didn't work." Clearing my throat, I swallow before speaking again. It's embarrassing to say out loud. "She died."

"Wow! That sucks. You taking the rest of the day off? We can manage here, man."

I've never taken a day off in my life. But if I'm making completely irrational decisions, like what I just did with Piper, maybe I need it. "I think I will. I'll see you tomorrow. But if you need anything, call me."

"You got it, Adon. We'll hold down the fort."

By the time I make it home, the kids are getting dropped off by their carpool. It's good because it will keep me out of my head. Already planning a board game night, I feel some of the day's tension leaving my shoulders. Alighting from my truck, Odin blazes past me with a quick hi and bye, slamming the door as he goes inside. I raise a hand to wave at Jayliah and her mom, but they just sit in the driveway and smile back.

Avery rushes out, and I widen my arms to give her a hug, but she brushes me off and scurries into the garage. "Dad, I'm spending the night with Jay. She and I are going to study for our Mesopotamian history test."

Following her in the door, I scratch my head as she walks with more speed than I've seen her move in years. "Wait, what? Who said you could go?"

With a toss of her backpack on her bed, she stuffs her overnight bag with clothes. She pauses at my question and raises her eyebrows, then scoffs. "Dad ! Come on! Can I go? Jay has an A in there!"

"That's because she failed a year."

Her face heats to red, and she slams her mouth closed into a tight line. Shoving a shoulder into my belly, she rolls her eyes and hurries into her bathroom, tossing more girl stuff into the open duffel. I know she's angry, but I try to get her to stay. "I can help you study. And I thought we'd get pizza and play a game tonight."

She throws a hand on her hip, just like Em used to do when we'd argue. "No. I want to study with my stupid friend."

She's been best friends with Jay since they were three years old. I know I've messed up by bringing up her academic failures to Avery, so I relent. Crossing my arms, I take a step back as she finishes packing up. "Fine."

As I make my way back to the garage, Odin rushes by me again with his new Lego set under his arm. "Dad, going to Cayden's house. I'll be back after dinner. Love you, bye!"

I blink rapidly as I watch him sprint three houses down and knock on the neighbor's door. Okay...

When I approach Jay's car, Debbie puts down her window and gives me a wry smile. "She didn't tell you, did she?"

I lean over the window and shake my head. "Nah, but it's fine. You okay with her coming over tonight? A school night?"

She pats my hand as it lies on the frame of the car. "Of course, Adon. Mike's out of town for the rest of the week on business, so it'll be nice to have her over. I'll make sure they get to sleep tonight for their test. Uh...I talked to Emily first about this." My neck stiffens. Doesn't Deb trust my opinion? As Avery's father? "Only because I thought Avery was staying with her this week. I'm still not used to you guys not being together, sorry."

Shrugging, I take a step back as Avery slides into the back of the car and looks away from me. “Avery, I love you. Behave and study hard. You, too, Jay.”

Jay gives me a shy smile that betrays her personality. “Thanks, Mr. Griffin!”

Back in the house, I sit on the sofa and crack open a beer. Something digs into my pockets, and I empty them on the table. Unopened condoms, regular, and dental dams flop out, as well as a credit card and an employee ID for the local library. Looking at the picture, I see a perky Piper Hendricks smiling brightly, wearing a yellow shirt with polka dots on it. She’s worked at the library for a few years, it seems. If she’s been frequenting Rainy Day and the library, she must love books...just like me.

The day’s events rush to me again, and I flip on the evening news to see if anything happened after we left.

I take a swig from the bottle, but Rosy’s picture keeps staring back at me. Obviously, I need to take her stuff back to her. I can’t just give it to Eli or Essa. Then I’d have to explain how I got it. If this girl exposes my identity as Daddy Don and I can’t go back to the club, maybe I should just use her instead of my standing Friday dates. Make some arrangement with her.

She said she wanted a daddy. It’s obvious she needs one. I could be that for her. Just that and nothing more. But I need to make sure she’s not going to get knocked up.

My heart skips a beat as the news anchor interrupts my thoughts. “A woman died today at the local coffee shop, Rainy Day Books. The victim had one cup of coffee and may have suffered from an unknown medical condition that caused her death. The city’s coroner is performing an autopsy, but police say they haven’t ruled out foul play. Further details have not been released. Meghan Martinez was forty-one and is survived by her husband, Professor Dennis Harrison, and his son, Sean.”

Foul play...

Was the woman murdered?

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Chapter

Eight

PIPER

So the break room coffee isn't so bad. It's hot. And sorta brown.

Oh, fucking hell. Who am I kidding? I miss Rainy Day lattes. But there's no way I'm venturing back to my worst nightmare of my family all together again, along with grumpy Daddy Don. Especially after he assaulted me in the alleyway.

It doesn't matter that I wanted it, or that I'm wet just thinking about how huge the man is, stretching my insides until I thought they would be outside. Damn it ! Now my panties are soaked.

I shove a borrowed mug that reads Please Do Not Confuse Your Google Search with My Library Science Degree back onto the dripping pot of black goo, then hustle to the staff bathroom and shimmy out of my thong. Tucking them into my belted corduroy mini-skirt pocket, I look at myself in the mirror. Could I pass for a pink-haired Twiggy with my turtleneck and knee boots? Probably. But after daddy left me a gifted hickey, I really had nothing else to wear that Shanna, our librarian, wouldn't complain about.

The spigot makes a sick groan when I turn it on to wash my hands, then run my fingers through my locks, straightening them. It's getting longer, falling just above my eyes. Almost time for a cut. I approve my outfit with a nod at my reflection, then

get back to work.

Shanna gives me a judgmental eyebrow raise behind the checkout counter when I emerge from the back, then flicks her eyes to the large clock on the wall. She monitors my break time with more scrutiny than guards over a bank vault. I give her a half curtsy and push the squeaky wheeled book trolley toward the children's section to put away returns.

Essa

Hey, can I come over and discuss something?

Me

Is it your costume for Halloween? Because I have some ideas.

Essa

Haha, just wanting to hang out with my friend.

Me

See you soon, then.

As I find my way to the dusty back reference section that no one goes to, except one person who checked out some crusty looking tome, I heave a sigh that the day is almost half done. A shadow lurks down the aisle, and I brace myself for Shanna's harsh whisper, telling me to do some inane task I don't want to do.

Dropping to a squat, I pretend to examine a National Geographic with the utmost care, turning it over in my hands. But soft footfalls squish toward me at a slow pace

until I give up and stand.

Large hands squeeze my waist, holding me in place as a deep voice whispers, “Don’t make a fucking sound, except to say ‘ Yes, daddy .’ Do you understand?”

The bass of his voice makes my blood sing in my veins, and I press back into him. No. No, Piper. Come on. Adon is a menace. A grouch. And he just took you in an alley like a common street whore.

When I don’t answer quickly enough, he grasps my hair and bends me over until my fingers claw at the metal shelf in front of me for some stability. His broad palm slides up my bare outer thigh, sending sparks down to my toes with his warm touch. The hem of my skirt slowly rises as his wrist reaches it. And then, he shoves it up until my entire naked ass is exposed. In my place of business. To anyone who may walk by.

A small gasp comes from the back of his throat as he spies my lack of underwear.

With a harsh tone cast over my shoulder, I whisper, “Someone could see!”

The breath is knocked out of my lungs as he swats my ass, the sound surely carrying to the front of the building and anyone sitting nearby. Darting my widened eyes to the ends of the aisle, I try to steady my pulse, but it races like I’ve just been on a roller coaster.

“Do you understand?”

Nodding, I refuse to say what he wants. Until I feel his hand leave my skin in preparation for another spanking. “Yes! Yes, daddy!” My voice is ragged and desperate. For him to fuck me again? If my pussy could answer, it would be a resounding yes.

One of his fingers trails through my opening with such tenderness, it almost tickles. My legs quiver as he teases my entrance. “Fuck , Rosy. You’re soaked.”

I whimper and press my hips back against his intrusion, but he won’t give me anything. The distinct sound of a zipper being lowered makes me swallow a breath. My core clenches in anticipation of the violation it’s about to receive. Especially when he grabs both of my hips, lines up behind me, and dips his tip just inside.

Instead of plunging in, he pulls my hair so hard, I have to stand up, my back hitting his chest with a wince. His teeth find my earlobe and he tugs on it to get my attention. It’s almost hesitant as he coughs words against my neck. “Are you clean?”

Blinking, I try to figure out why he’d be asking. Oh shit. We never used protection, did we? Turning my head toward him, he backs up quickly as our lips brush. “Are you ?”

His jaw clenches, and he snorts a breath through his widened nostrils. “Yes.”

“Me, too—” The word gets cut off as he shoves into me, and I naturally bend just to fit him in without straining. Ugh! Essa says her boyfriend has a porn star cock, and I’ve teased her about it, but his brother has to be bigger. At least he feels like it.

Not even hesitating, Adon rampages inside me as if he’s in a hurry. Part of me is glad. Anyone could come around the corner at any second. Hell, if someone passes the aisle in front of us and takes a book, I have no idea how to explain what’s happening behind the stack. Our skin melds with rhythmic slaps, the music of our sex slightly absorbed by the high-traffic orange carpet beneath my boots.

The shelf cuts into my fingers as I grip it, trying to wiggle away from the monster thrusting hard into me. As if Adon feels the resistance, he grips my thigh and lifts it, then sets it down in front of the letter W of an encyclopedia volume. “Need to get in

deeper,” he grits out, then shoves himself in until my ass hits the waistband of his jeans. My eyes roll back at the full sensation of him .

Glancing back, I whisper, “Essa’s on her way here now.”

Firm fingers latch around my throat, and he groans a response. “Then you better be quiet, filthy slut. Taking backshots like a dirty little girl.”

While I grimace at his gritty talk, he spanks me again, and my eyes widen, scanning the library. I slap my hand over his, so he won’t do it again and make more noise. He, in turn, covers my mouth with his available palm.

My eyes squeeze shut, tears leaking from the sides as pleasure overrides my utter terror that I’ll get caught, fired, and have to live with one of my family members. I sink my teeth into one of his large fingers that hooks into my cheek until he grunts, shoving deeper in and hurrying toward the finish line. His warm palm slides from around my ass to my front, then finds my soaked clit, pulsing with need, and rubs vigorously until I know I can’t hold back any longer.

Sucking the digit farther into my mouth to quiet the raging storm of ravishment, I go to that mental heaven, where every desire is fulfilled. There’s comfort. And safety. The place where I feel close to someone, even if only one neuron holds on to the knowledge that once I come down, bitterness and loneliness will replace the euphoria at a rapid pace. For this tiny moment, I can pretend I’m not alone.

Adon’s fingers grapple to keep hold of my wiggling hips as he comes while pressing an open-mouthed hot kiss on my shoulder. The clipped hairs of his groomed beard scratch at my skin until I shiver as his fingers slip into my skirt pocket and pull out my thong, just as his dick slips from between my legs. His come drizzles down my thighs as I hurriedly force my skirt back over my ass and press the back of a hand against my hot cheeks. Suppressing a growl, I snatch at the fabric he shoves in his

face, but he holds it out of my reach. With dazed chocolate eyes, he takes a big inhale, then stuffs them in his pocket.

The urge to slap him again overwhelms me. Because he used me like a cheap whore. But if I were honest, the truth is, I'm angry because...

I liked it.

When he leans forward to raise my chin with a crooked finger, I step back into the shelf. His rugged face and fierce expression lock me in place. "You be available for me whenever I need you. Got it?"

It's difficult to swallow, but I manage it, then spit out my simple retort. "No."

His eyebrow crooks with confusion. "No? I think the words you're looking for are 'Yes, Daddy Don.' And that's the only thing I need to hear from your smart mouth other than 'harder' and 'spank me.'"

"Sorry. I think twice with you was enough for me." Smacking his broad chest, I squeeze out from his formidable arms, push my cart two steps away, and whisper, "Thanks for playing."

I walk softly down the aisle, feeling him seethe at my backside. Predictably, a firm grip on my bicep spins me around to face him before I get too far. "I'm your daddy and you will behave."

A satisfied smile creeps over my lips. Oh, he's so mad. A little vein pops in his temple and throbs with his pulse. I raise a finger and stroke along his cheek and sigh. "I don't think I will, daddy. Now, if you don't leave, I'll call the cops and have you all over the news. I don't think it would look good for Griffin Motors if I told them how the owner of such a prominent city business has been stalking me."

Immediately, he drops his hand and steps away, his brow dipping until his eyes look murderous. Without another word, he leaves.

I roll my eyes. He can't even handle a little threat.

Is he the best dick I've ever had? Most assuredly. But that just means more trouble. A man like that, one who's so much older, is simply looking to control a young girl. He probably wants a nanny for his kids or a chef to cook him dinner at night. A cleaner for his house...

I would wreck his quiet life. He's not ready for me .

These types of guys always hang around me for that reason. They think they want a taste of danger and excitement. But really, they want to tame me. It's not going to happen. And I'll show him that.

No more Daddy Don dick, Piper. I mean it. You must stop him before you get addicted .

After cleaning myself up in the bathroom, I ignore Shanna's nasty stare and slide behind the counter. Her whisper sounds like a lecture. "I'm taking off. You're here tomorrow by yourself, remember?"

If she noticed the nasty thing I just did in the stacks, she's pretending she didn't. Relief floods my system as I flop into the squeaky wheeled chair and pick up my latest read, *Milking The Meter Maid* . "I'll be fine, Shanna. I know you're so worried about me, but I think I can manage."

She scoffs and slings her quilted tote bag over her shoulder while tucking her cardigan tighter around her middle. If the glass door with hydraulics could slam, she'd probably do it on her way out. As she leaves, a young girl with long brown hair

enters with another girl with a black bob of box braids.

My heart beats faster as I recognize Avery, Adon's daughter, from our brief meeting at Griffin Motors. We chatted about books. Of course, this was before I knew who her father was.

As she walks by, her eyes widen when she spots me. She whispers something to her friend, who ventures off toward the computers. Avery saunters to me like she's shy to approach but wants to.

"Avery, right?" I ask.

Her coloring and features look like Adon, but her eyes are bright green. Must be from her mother. "Yeah, you're Piper. Essa's friend?"

Nodding, I give her a smile. "What can I do for you? Come for those vampire book recommendations?"

She relaxes her shoulders and snorts. "Yeah. My mom will be here to pick us up in about an hour. Told me to do my homework, but I want a new book."

Oddly, at the mention of her mother, my stomach tightens. Looking at this girl, who I'm closer to in age than her dad, who I just fucked, makes me feel weird. Adon seems so much older than me. He was married and had children with someone. That means he's been in love and probably had some nasty divorce where they fought all the time, knowing him.

Anxiety makes sweat form on my forehead. "Oh. Sure. Your mom will be here?" What will I do if I see her? What if she's gorgeous? Or a total bitch? Why do I care? I'm not interested in Adon. I can't be. We don't mesh. And the guy just ran away after one itchy-bitsy no.

Avery shrugs one shoulder and nods. She seems shy. But I love introverts. It's my mission to make sure everyone feels comfortable. So, I stand up and skirt around the counter and point toward the young adult section. "Come on, I'll show you the good ones."

Somehow, an hour flies by with Avery and her friend sitting on the floor on either side of me as we whisper about the book series I handed them. Around us lay several other books, but they found the one they wanted to read.

Footsteps approach, and I glance up, almost wishing I hadn't. A beautiful woman with olive skin, dark hair, and bright green eyes smiles broadly, flashing perfect teeth. God, her body is incredible, too, with full tits and thick hips. Just fucking kill me.

Scrambling to our feet, I gather the books they wanted to take and smile at Avery's mom. "Uh, hi. I'm Piper, the library assistant. She just wanted some reading recommendations."

Her dark eyebrows stitch together, but there's still a mocking grin on her face. "Well, she was supposed to do homework. But I'll allow it." She holds her hand out for her daughter, who takes it and gets off the floor. "Let's check out and get you girls home for dinner."

She probably makes real food at home. Something like mashed potatoes from scratch with milk squeezed from a cow in her backyard. Grows her own wheat for cereal and harvests her own vegetables from a garden. She could own a farm with the fancy rain boots that cover her feet. And not a dirty one that smells like manure, where kids pet sad donkeys. No. The kind on social media that has a cloudy filter over everything to make it appear wistful and romantic.

When I scan the books, slowly and carefully, I refrain from staring at her. She's perfect. Her nails are short and strong, painted in a neutral beige. My chipped yellow

polish is so childish in comparison.

An urge to destroy her takes over inside me. Maybe I'll fill her fancy leather purse with dirty tissues. Or have Avery tell her dad that her mom had been cheating on him their whole marriage...

Instead, I smile and sigh. "Thanks for stopping by." The crew waves as they leave, and I slump back in my uncomfortable chair.

This is exactly why I need to stay away from Adon Griffin. He's someone's daddy. Just not mine.

Chapter

Nine

ADON

Short hairs prevent me from tugging on the ends of my fresh cut. I'm filled with pent-up frustration, with no way to get rid of it. Beating off doesn't help. Every ounce of ire is directed at the little pink haired library attendant I fucked a few days ago. Rosy couldn't be bothered to use her safe word, but she sure could use her mouth to make vile threats against me.

This is why I need to stay away. She's too young and immature. Trouble if I ever saw it. And the very reason why my rules exist. I just need to be strong and not think with my strangled dick.

"So are you coming?" Rhodes shifts his feet while slapping his lanyard keychain repeatedly in his hand. Dark stains coat his scrub pants, and I can't help the disgusted sneer on my upper lip as I look at them. My finger wags at his outfit.

"What is that and why haven't you changed?"

His head drops back as he sighs, giving me a glance at his neck muscles tightening on a swallow. "I just finished a rough shift at the hospital. Putting on new clothes is the least of my concerns. Celine wants to know how many guests we should expect for the Halloween party. Quit your bitching and just show up."

Friday night is going to be filled with nothingness. I already decided this after my last hurrah in the stacks. Jazz music, some Scotch, maybe a good book on World War I sound much better than a loud party. I'll be comfortable, cozy...and, sure, I'll probably end up jerking myself to sleep, thinking about being inside Piper at the library. That part of the evening is hidden away in some of my brain.

"I don't think so."

Eli kicks his feet up on the desk with a thud and leans back while the seat groans in response under his heavy weight. "Essa really needs family. I think she's pretty excited about tonight, and I want her to have a good time. Can we show her what it's like?"

The corners of his eyes wince as he says the words, and I wonder what it will be like for my younger brother to be around all the drinking while staying sober. Maybe I should go so I can watch over him.

"You're dressing up?" A partial chuckle escapes my lips as I picture him wearing some ridiculous costume.

Eli shrugs and nods. "Yeah. She got us some outfits. Something Piper cooked up, I think."

At the mention of Rosy girl, my stomach flips with anticipation, knuckles turning white as they grip the edge of the office chair. Clearing my throat, I manage to sound completely nonchalant. "Piper's going to be there?"

Neither of my brothers look at me, so I must have pulled off the casual tone. Eli sits up and leans across the desk. "Yeah, and we need more food, too." His eyes flash to Rhodes's for a moment, as if he's already regretting his next sentence. "Celine wants only vegan stuff, but not anything from a, uh, a root vegetable, I think."

Rhodes's shoulders stiffen at the mention of his on-again, off-again girlfriend. I gave up trying to get the bitch out of the picture. Rhodes is on his own with that one.

"Fine. I'll stop by and bring some pizzas or something." Already, my fingers find the store app to order some as I wonder what Rosy will wear...

"Thanks, big bro." Eli's grin spreads across his face. I haven't seen him this happy in a long while. Even Rhodes looks relieved. So glad I could help my family out and be there for them. Which is the only reason I'm going. That's it.

Unless Piper needs another fucking spanking.

My eyes catch on a newspaper headline covering the front page of Northview News : "Rainy Day Could Disguise Foul Play." With sweaty palms, I snag it and shake the pages open.

Under the bold words, the article explains that the victim, Meghan Martinez, had an autopsy performed after her sudden demise at the coffee shop. Cause of death was asphyxiation. She had a trace amount of cyanide in her system, but the pathologist explains this was not unusual or the likely reason for her suffocation.

The cafe is quarantined until further tests of their equipment and served items are performed by the health department. A pleading, yet professional, quote from the owner, states he is cooperating with guidelines and willing to do whatever it takes to re-open and gain the public's trust.

My pulse races at the image of the deceased woman standing with her husband on the steps of Northview University. As I rub my forehead, I try to will the guilt away. If only... Maybe if I'd tried harder, I could have saved her. She had a loving husband and a career as manager of the Northview Community Bank. No kids, but she had a stepson from her husband's former marriage.

I'd be nothing without Avery and Odin. God, tonight would be lonely without the party. Standing, I shake off the sadness still lingering from the woman's dark eyes. The same that stared up at me as I pounded her chest, trying to get her heart beating again. The ones that clouded over until they were devoid of life.

"I'll see you all tonight."

By the time evening rolls around, I regret the decision to attend. But ten cardboard boxes of pizza steam up my truck from the passenger seat, so I have to go inside. What would I do with all of them at home? Probably eat three and get sick.

Stepping out of the vehicle, I grab the stack and head to the front door. One of Rhodes's friend throws it open, and I greet him with a nod as he helps me carry some of the boxes. As we meander to the kitchen, my eyes immediately get caught on the pixie wearing a costume that makes my steps stutter. Unfortunately, the sight of her little body in her short corset dress makes my jeans tight around the crotch as my cock thickens in my boxer briefs. She's almost unrecognizable with a long, black wig and vampire teeth, but I'd know her figure anywhere. Probably could pick out the scent of her pussy in a lineup by now.

Muscles in the back of my jaw get tired of clenching as I try to think about anything other than the feel of her cunt all over me. Sliding the pizza onto the side counter, I turn around quickly. Eli's greeting smile lights up my world as he holds his girlfriend in front of him. The two sway in sync, looking cozy together.

"Hey, bro. Where are the kids?"

I shove the sleeves of my Henley up my forearms. The party is crowded and noisy. Definitely not my scene.

"Emily has them this weekend."

Little Rosy's spring green eyes peek around my brother and roll heavily, like she can't stand seeing me here. Involuntarily, my brow lowers with frustration. I can't let her know how much she's getting to me.

"Too good to dress up for Halloween?" She snorts a sarcastic laugh through her cute nose.

"Dressing up for Halloween is for children."

Eli laughs. "Hey! I'm dressed up!"

I snag a cold beer from the fridge and tip the top toward his outfit. "That's my point." With a smirk, I screw off the cap as Eli tosses a napkin in my face. As I chug back some of the suds, Piper grabs Essa's hand and flashes her eyes over at me.

"Come on. Us kids are going to dance and let the old men rest." Her hips sway as her black cape flutters with her hurry into the living room, where the music blares a deafening beat.

My brother leans his thick arms over the kitchen island and gives me a look. One I don't want to see. I can already feel my cheeks flaring with color. "You like her."

The ceiling seems especially interesting, and I study the patterns of plaster stamped in it, tipping back the rest of the beer. But even when I finish it, Eli's warm eyes still find me. Deadpan, I ask, "Who?"

Instead of answering, he smiles, shoves back off the counter, and wanders toward his girlfriend. After forced mingling with some of Rhodes's friends, I find Tate hanging out in the back talking to Heather, who he's tried to get for years. She gives him a pity laugh and walks away as he spots me.

“No luck?” I hand him another open beer and loosen the top of my own.

His eyes follow her as he shrugs. “Someday. Just gotta be patient.” I watch where he’s looking and catch Piper, who looks filled with joy, tossing her arms in the air. Something about the image makes my heart ache in a way I can’t understand. To feel that free and devoid of responsibility must be refreshing. It’s how I felt in the alley and in the library. In the club as Daddy Don. As him, I could create an image, be in control, and only worry about my sub’s needs alone.

Tate and I avoid talking about work for almost an entire hour before I’m too bored to stay at the party and my extroversion has been exhausted. I stretch my neck and glance around for a polite way to leave, but I can’t stop staring into the living room in front of me.

My balls ache at the sight of Piper dancing seductively on my brother’s girlfriend. She flips her torso forward and gyrates up while flashing her ass to a woman behind her, who’s definitely noticing her moves.

The tops of my ears flash with heat when the woman grips Piper by the waist and undulates with her. Biting my lower lip, I fight the urge to stomp in there and remind her of what I said in the library. That she should be available for me. Is she so irresponsible that she’d just have sex with anyone without protection?

I spin and face the counter to stop myself from doing something stupid. My arms spread wide on either side of the sink as I take a deep, steadying breath. Catching my reflection in the back window, I rub a hand over my face. “Adon, what the fuck were you thinking?” I ask myself aloud.

In the distorted image, I watch Eli hug his girlfriend and the love between them shows. They’re in their own world. Safe and comfortable together. Both of their faces are lit with happiness and serenity.

Something I'll probably never have.

A shrill scream interrupts my moment as Celine flings champagne against the wall. Sparkles of glass shatter in the low lamplight of the hallway as Rhodes stomps after his girlfriend, the two in an intense argument in the middle of the crowded area. People part like the two have an infectious disease, then slowly mill out of the house, the drama like a loud last call.

My eyes drift toward Piper, who grips the hand of the woman she'd been sidled up to earlier. Part of me thinks I should just let this go. Toss the weird feeling in my gut aside, then bury it, and let the young girl be.

But then, she glances at me.

Rosy's eyes lock onto mine, before she tosses a sly grin over her shoulder like she knows every fucking thing she's doing to my dick right now. Calling me over to her like a siren song.

This brat is asking for it.

Do I let the jealous monster win?

Sure as fuck I do.

When she follows the woman out the door, I wade through people leaving to try to catch up. If she thinks she's going home with someone else, she's sorely mistaken. Not after what we've done and what I plan to continue doing. She needs to take care of this growing situation in my jeans.

Outside, the two women hop into a small white electric car, and I scurry toward my vehicle to follow. Once I finally get to my truck, I jump in and throw on a baseball

hat sitting in my passenger seat as a cheap disguise. It's too dark for them to really see who it is anyway.

I tail them to a bad part of town as the car drives up to a shitty apartment complex. As soon as they pull into the parking lot, I follow close behind. Like a deranged stalker. There's no denying it. Is that what I am now? Look what she's made me do.

When they stop, I block in the car and jump out just as Piper opens the passenger door with a giggle that stops short as she spies me strolling toward her side. I flip the ball cap around so she can see my face. I don't want to scare her. Not completely.

“What in the actual fuck, Adon?!”

The woman who drove stands up on the other side of the car, her eyes wide and afraid. “Do you know him?”

Piper crosses her arms and sits back in the seat as I lay out my hand in front of her to take. “Let's go.”

“What? No way. You're crazy!”

Squatting to her level, my eyes pierce hers. “I told you to be ready for me any time. This isn't ready for me.”

The driver scoffs as she bends over to give me a death stare. She opens her mouth to protest, but I cut her off.

“And you're not going anywhere with someone else.”

Piper's dusky bottom lip juts out until I want to bite it. Her chest heaves in her black corset, pushing her tiny breasts up as high as they can go. I can practically see her

heart racing as she contemplates what to say. “You’re not my dad .”

It hits me then. Her desperation in the club, the vulnerability she showed me as a stranger...it’s all so real on her. That openness she tries to hide when she’s so desperate for someone to care for her. It’s there. And others will take advantage of it.

But not me.

“No, but I’m your daddy and you will obey me.” Snagging her tiny hand, I tug on it, but she doesn’t move.

She doesn’t drop my grip either.

So I reach in and gather her up in my arms as she flails while screaming. “Put me down now!” But with all her fight, her little legs snake around my waist willingly, until I know she feels what she’s done to me all night with her teasing.

“Tell the nice lady good night. You don’t want to miss your curfew.”

“Piper, you want me to call someone?” the woman calls out as I walk us toward my truck.

Part of me worries she’ll say yes, but Piper just yells over my shoulder, “I’ll talk to you soon!”

My palm rears back as I spank the shit out of her tiny ass. She yelps as I murmur in her ear, “No, you won’t.”

Chapter

Ten

PIPER

“Where the hell are you taking me?” With the utmost care, I force my voice to sound as irritated as I pretend to feel. Like I’m a sack of potatoes, he tosses me into the cabin of his truck until I squirm against his heated grip on my waist. He leans over my body to trap me in and buckles my seatbelt, his lips resting an inch from mine.

Adon’s never kissed me. That realization makes me wonder if there’s something to it, or if he’s just a man whore who doesn’t even think about such intimate things. Part of me makes it a goal to press my lips to his, so I strain my neck forward.

“Sit tight and don’t move.” He backs away quickly, his gruff words resonating around my insides until I melt into a puddle right on his leather seat. Cleanup will be a bitch. Serves him right for looking at me with those warm chocolate browns he’s got and the twitching muscles underneath his tight-ass navy Henley. And, god , he can fuck right off with those insanely veiny forearms.

I hate him.

The only reason I’ll jump his dick is because he just constructed a huge beaver dam with my prospect for the night. When he slides into the driver’s seat, he gives me a curt look, dark lashes lowering until his gaze catches on my bare legs. He starts toward town and asks, “Where do you live?”

“Main Street. Above the candle shop.” Mainly to myself, I murmur, “It smells good.” His only reply is a nod, and things grow silent between us. We’ve ever really had a conversation, so I wouldn’t have the first idea of what we’d have in common other than a sex club and both of us needing to get off.

My loose, dramatic sigh, along with an eye roll, breaks the quiet. “So. Are you jealous or something?”

His pecs bulge with the quick breath he inhales before he spits it out in an exasperated rumble. “I told you to be available for me. I didn’t know you were fucking other people, too. We have an arrangement.”

Turning to face him in the seat, I grasp at the seatbelt as it catches to pull it off my chest. “Adon, you never made an arrangement with me. You just told me to ‘be available.’ Can’t I be available to other people, too? You never even asked my permission.”

A muscle in the back of his jaw twitches, and he stays silent for a moment, as if he’s holding back an eruption of anger. The buildup is so loud, I can’t stand it. It’s like the weather just before a tornado hits, where all the wind is sucked from the earth before twirling into a cyclone of destruction. With a shrug, I reach for his radio to turn it on, but he slaps my hand away and glares at me.

“Do not touch my radio.”

I gasp at his rudeness. How dare he? Crossing my arms, I sit back in the seat and stare out the window, but at least he flips it on to something jazzy.

When he speaks again, his voice is softer, nearly gentle. “First of all, stop calling me ‘Adon.’ It’s daddy to you. You asked me to be your daddy, and I am. Secondly, you obviously have a high amount of need, and I’m fine with fulfilling it. But here’s the

deal: I'm not asking your permission. You ask me for things, little girl. Not the other way around."

At the tone of his voice and his words, I settle inside. It calms me. Not that I'm about to let him know that.

We roll to a stoplight, and he hooks a finger under my chin until I have to face him. That ever-serious brow looks menacing as he lowers his head. "Rosy, listen. If you're fucking with me, you're not with anyone else. Got me?"

The way his eyes stun me into submission is unexpected, but I feel my head nodding on its own, which I quickly aim toward the back parking lot as he gets close to my building.

As he pulls in, I loosen the tight grip my nails have on my arms and sigh. "Fine. For now. I have other interests, you know. I can't just wait around for daddy dick all the time."

He shuts off the engine with some finality, the leather squeaking as he turns his big body toward me. "You will, and you'll like it if you know what's good for you. Let's go, brat."

Part of me wonders how much I want his dick if he's going to be this rude. Contemplating this, I take my time sliding out of the car and slamming the door. His head whips around at the noise, his forehead lines deepening in response. Wow! The man can give the meanest mug. It's almost terrifying.

Crossing my arms, I point a finger toward the entryway, but when I skirt past him, he wallops my ass with a firm spank until I lurch forward. Pain makes the air rip from my lungs, and I grip my butt with a palm, rubbing the shock away. "Ouch! What was that for?"

“Don’t slam my doors, either.”

“Geez. It’s just a car...” I fumble in my cross-body bag for keys, but it must take too long. Adon shifts like he’s got ants in his pants and glances around the well-lit lot, like he’s worried someone may see us. “Hold your horses. They’re in here somewhere.”

The irritated twitches in his forearms become too enticing, so I hurry to get us inside. Up the back staircase, we make it to my front door, which is easier to open. As soon as I do, I flip on the main light and sigh. Freckles has knocked several kitchen items onto the floor and a plant.

“Guess you’re sick of your food again, huh?” He ignores me and jumps off the windowsill, strolling straight past and to Adon, who shuts and locks the door behind him.

Almost tripping over the orange fuzzy ball, he stumbles to get away, but Freckles keeps up by forming a figure eight between the tree trunks of his legs. “Oh. Hello.”

A giggle bubbles up from my gut at seeing him stare down at my cat, the giant and a tiny pumpkin eyeing each other for the first time with some scrutiny. Freckles immediately takes to him, I can tell.

I toss my bag onto the counter and flip down my bed, casting a snort over my shoulder. “That never happens. Maybe you’re not such an asshole. Or he’s just a terrible judge of character.” As if he doesn’t know what to do with his hands, Adon wafts it near Freckles’s head, but doesn’t touch it. “Never had a pet before?”

Adon straightens up and fills the entry. With him here, in my apartment, he looks even bigger than normal. Or everything looks tiny compared to him. His large arms land on his hips as he glances around, taking in my plants, posters, macrame art,

hanging baskets, pottery, and my stacks of baking dishes above the filled kitchen cabinets.

When he glances at the pull-out sofa mattress, I think we both realize the struggle it will be for him to fit. Silent judgment radiates from his chest as he crosses his arms and stares down every inch of my space. My tongue slides over my teeth, feeling less and less ready to go than I was only a few minutes before.

I hate that I'm waiting for his approval.

His imposing body lumbers to the row of shelves lining the wall opposite the bed and he bends enough to read some titles. Never before have I felt embarrassed about my place. It's homey, sure, a bit dirty and chaotic, but it's mine . Never in my life...until now.

Suddenly, I wonder what his ex-wife's house looks like. How they decorated. I bet it was always clean and had a place for everything. It probably smelled like Egyptian cotton instead of the patchouli incense on my side table.

“ My Brother, My Lover ? Tales from the Orphanage? When Daddy's Mad .” Adon reads some of my book titles aloud, and I cringe at hearing them coming from his mouth. Not sure why. It's the first time I've felt so very young in his presence.

The caverns of his deep brown eyes find me, but instead of exasperation, he arches one eyebrow, then smirks. “You need to clean your room, little girl. Crawl up on the bed and be good for your daddy.”

And just like that, I'm soaked again. Especially once I slowly edge toward the end of the bed and he stops me with a wave of his finger. “Ah, ah. Take off that dress first. Let me see all of you.”

My pulse pounds in my throat as I unlace the corset of my top. Gripping the bottom of my skirt, I tug the dress down until I'm bare for him, except for a pair of black boy shorts. His finger wags at those until I push them to my feet, hooking my thumbs in the tops of my hosiery and slipping the thigh-highs down, then kicking off my heels.

When I straighten back up, I'm completely exposed to his scrupulous eyes as they wander over every inch of my skin. I jut out a hip and ask, "What?"

"I just want to memorize what you look like before I wreck you." He pats the end of the bed and nods toward it. "On all fours right here."

Despite my heart racing with anticipation, I narrow one eye at his firm command. "I don't know that I want to. You didn't ask nicely."

He makes a swift step toward me, and my mouth drops open with a gasp. "I told you. I don't ask. Now, if you want your pussy eaten better than anyone ever has, get the fuck on all fours at the end of the bed and let your daddy get a taste of his little girl."

With that news, I scramble into position. Is he serious? Guys always talk a big game, but I've had good head. Usually from older lesbians. The college girls around here don't seem to take enough time. Besides, I end up doing more work than most of them.

So when he kneels behind me and darts his tongue through my wet labia, I'm not expecting anything.

Then, his big nose hits my asshole, and my arms drop from holding me up to stretching long in front of me until I'm pressing my core against his face. Adon doesn't hold back. "Bring that cunt back here. Let me feast."

He grips my thighs with his strong hands and lifts me up until I fit right against his

chin as he dips the tip of his sopping wet tongue through my pussy. His scruff tickles my cheeks and inner thighs, and I squirm until he lets a leg go to spank me. The gruff gasp that clears my throat is a sound I've never made before.

One of his huge biceps wraps around my waist and pulls me back again until he's practically controlling all parts of my body, his mouth working over my cunt in wild licks and flicks and presses. His lips suck on my clit as he uses the tip of his tongue to pulse right where I need it most before he backs away, then slides up to my entrance, pokes me there, then continues on to my ass. My toes curl so tight they strain the muscles of my feet.

With force, his tongue delves into my back hole, now loose and ready for whatever he wants to do to me. My hips undulate all over his beard with reckless abandon, trying to help him out with a rhythm until he finds it. Just as he figures it out, I'm flipped over and bounce off the squeaky mattress, landing on my back.

"Don't move." He points at me, then spreads my legs wide and dives right back in. This time, he sticks two large digits inside and one works into my asshole while his tongue flits against my clit. The darkness coating my closed eyes alights with stars as I squeeze them shut tighter at the pleasure of the sensation attacking my body.

My left hand works itself onto his shoulder, then skims the side of his shaved head, looking for anything to grip. The other finds the tangled sheet and fists it as I scrunch my abs at the insane amount of pleasure going on between my thighs. Thighs quivering around him as I arch against the bed, releasing a torrent of moaning wails.

When his lashes flutter, and he raises his eyes up my belly and to my face, I'm done for. "D-daddy!" Serenity ripples through my body in sharp waves, shooting out from all my nerves until I squeeze everything around his fingers, his tongue, his head.

I'm a mess on the mattress. Soaked, spent, in an undeniable state of bliss. The only

thing bothering me is knowing that Adon was right; he gave me the best head I've ever had.

A clank of a belt buckle makes my eye creep open as Adon looms over me, shedding his clothes. He rips the belt from his jeans and bends it in half, snapping the leather together a few times and jolting me to attention. Gathering my wrists, he glides the loop of belt over them until it's tight and then does it another time until there's no way I can loosen it myself. My heart pounds at the sensation.

Once he sheds the rest of his outfit, his enormous cock juts out toward me until I worry about how I'll fit it in. I've done it twice, but this is the first time I'm seeing it up close and personal. It's beyond intimidating.

He kneels on the bed, and it gives so much, I think it may break. The groans from the springs agree. As if I weigh nothing, he grabs me around the waist until my legs latch around his, and he scoots toward the head of the bed. When he sits, he places me right over the head of his cock and fits my bound wrists around his neck.

"Time to please your daddy. If I move, I'm going to break this little bed, just like I may break your pussy tonight."

If I thought I couldn't go another round, after his words, I'm ready again, and my clit tingles in response. He grips my chin with his finger and thumb and makes me look into his deep-set eyes. "Would you like that?"

My arousal coats the massive head of his cock as I slide over it to a better position, and I find myself nodding eagerly. "Yes, daddy."

Chapter

Eleven

ADON

My Rosy is so tiny, she squats over my lap with a look of terror on her flushed face. Sweat drips from my forehead and my cock throbs in anticipation of her tight cunt wrapping around it for a much-needed hug. “It’s not going to fit.”

With a palm on each of her little ass cheeks, I spread her wide to help, then press my forehead to hers. “Rosy, take a deep breath. You’ve taken me twice before, and you’ll do it again. So be a big girl and slide down on it. You can do it.”

She edges her knees out wider and slips on until the entire reddened crown is inside her soaked cunt. The comfort of her is such a relief that I let my head hang back and hit the wall. “Fuck, yes. Good girl. Take another breath, baby, and try again.”

Piper’s lips draw into her mouth as she sucks in air, her pulse visibly pounding in her neck. She seems to respond well to my praise, so I rub my thumb over her thigh and encourage her. “Good. See? You can do it. Keep going until you take it all. We’ll make it fit deep. Oh, fuck.” Her chest rises and falls as rapidly as mine, both of us panting as she slowly eases herself down until her ass hits my thighs.

She weighs nothing and feels like a doll ready for my use, especially when I grab her under each thigh and lift her off my cock, then slam her back down with a lift to my hips as she reaches the hilt.

“Oh my god, Adon!” she cries out for me.

As our skin slaps together, her breath surges from her lungs, her seductive scent from her lips hitting my mouth, making me feel so intoxicated, I almost kiss her. I refrain and narrow my eyes as I watch her expression transform with lust when I do the move again. And again. I vary up the rhythm with three long strokes, then two short ones.

On one downward push, she writhes against my hips until her clit slicks along my abs over and over. Our bodies melt together, and everywhere I touch her feels like fire. “Come for me again, little girl. Show daddy how much you need this big cock inside you.”

She doesn’t answer, only grunts and works herself into a frenzy, her bound arms digging into my shoulder muscles. My hand seeks her ass as I smack it, the skin bouncing back in a ripple against my palm. With a yelp, she leans forward, away from the pain, but this only plants her lips next to mine. Another close encounter. Murmuring against her skin, I tell her, “Filthy girl. You need a daddy’s thick dick inside you to come, don’t you? No more girls. No more boys. No one else, but Daddy Don. Do you understand me, Rosy?”

Her spring green eyes fill with tears and her plush lower lip quivers, a vulnerability there that I haven’t seen before. She releases a shaky exhale while gyrating all over me and the urge to comfort whatever is happening inside her makes my arms wrap around her so tightly that she comes with a scream muffled into the crook of my neck. The heat from her violent outburst makes me long to take away any hurt she has.

“Fuck, Rosy. That’s a good girl.” My hand weaves through her hair as I hold her firm to my chest and thrust inside her while she slumps against me, sobs wracking through her throat. Her body shivers repeatedly as I climb toward my pleasure. I allow my

lips to find her earlobe and suck there, whispering every good thing I can think of. “So beautiful. You’re so fucking beautiful. I’m so proud of you for coming on my dick. Are you good? You a good girl?”

She sniffs and nods, her face still buried in my neck.

“Baby, you want daddy’s cum?”

A mumbled sound like an affirmation vibrates my moistened skin, sending sparks down my spine. I’m so fucking close. She pulls back enough to press her lips over my ear and whispers, “Adon, I’m not on birth control.”

That’s it. My eyes roll into the back of my head at her words, and I release everything inside her. In that moment, I envision her round with my child, in my house, with her hairy cat, and all these stupid plants, while I rub her belly and suck on her engorged tits. “Oh, goddamn it! Fuck!”

My cock throbs, releasing so much cum it bursts from our connection, creating a puddle all over my lap. But as soon as my high wears off, fear overtakes me. I barely know this girl.

I move out from under her as she flops over onto her back, her eyes boring into my face. I can’t even look at her. My jaw works overtime as I gnaw on my inner cheeks.

“Are you mad ?”

Once I release her wrists, I kneel on the mattress, which gives its final groan and snaps under our weight. We slide down to the end, and I catch her in my arms, then drop her body on a nearby armchair.

“Adon. Are you upset? ” she asks accusingly. Like she had nothing to do with any of

this.

I find my jeans and boxer briefs, then pull them on. Reaching for a blanket, she covers herself, probably feeling more exposed now that I can't even form a sentence. This is a delicate matter; I have to pick my words carefully. "Piper, that's something you should have told me before."

"You never fucking asked ."

Snapping my fingers, everything flies from my mouth with angry spit. "You went to a fucking sex club without any birth control."

"I always use condoms..." Her expression turns suddenly shy, one of the few times I've seen her timid. This woman tries everything to pretend she's a force of power, but she's so naive, it makes me worry for her. When she mumbles, I almost don't hear her. "And I haven't been with a man in years."

Giving her my back, I rub the sides of my head and try to think. "Do you need the after pill? Whatever it's called. That after thing pill?"

"Plan B? I mean, I can take it, but I won't. I'm not ovulating. Don't worry, you won't have to pay child support right now."

That makes rage rise within me until I lunge at her. She scrambles back in her chair, and I press my face close to hers so she doesn't misunderstand. "There's no fucking way I would not take care of my kids. So if you end up pregnant, so be it. But don't think for one second, I wouldn't raise them, too."

I slap a hand over my face and rub it as I take a step back, giving us some space. "I-I'll be sure to use a condom." Part of me wonders if I never questioned it because I want more children. With Piper? That's a horrendous possibility.

She stands up and shoves me out of her way, but her little arms can barely do any damage. Heading toward the bathroom, she points to her front door. “Thanks for the ride. You can see yourself out.”

I open my mouth, but she slams the door shut behind her, and I gape at the wood wall she just between us. “Are you serious ?”

With a heaving sigh, I think about fixing her bed before I go and demanding that I stay over. But after her tantrum, I’m not sure this is a good idea. Any of it.

What the fuck am I doing? I’m a thirty-six-year-old man trying to impregnate a twenty-one-year-old with pink hair and an attitude problem. And a cat that won’t fucking stop rubbing on my legs.

Scooting around the little guy, I grab my shirt and head out the door, letting it slam just as loud as the spitfire behind it did.

By the time I’m home and taking a hot shower, I’ve calmed to the point that I can think more rationally. If Piper’s pregnant, I’ll be absolutely fine with that. Maybe we could even make things more official, if she’d let me. Maybe she’d call me old and old-fashioned, but I don’t care, as long as she’d be taken care of, as well as the baby.

But the problem is, I have a feeling she wouldn’t accept my help. She pushes me away so fast, my head spins. As soon as that innocence rears its head, allowing her to give in, she replaces it with an infuriating shield of daggers. Do I keep trying to break those barriers down? Is she worth it?

I’m not sure.

The way she felt tonight as she cried in my arms, a release of some sort of emotion after she climaxed, was a high I want again. I don’t know if she’d let me see that side

of her again, though. Regardless, I can't stop thinking about her.

And even on Monday, she's all that consumes my thoughts. I wonder if her bed is still broken, even going so far as to look up options to send her a new sofa bed to replace the one I broke. Is that too far? Am I a gross, old sugar daddy now?

I click on the "Add to Cart" button and do it anyway. I'd rather be weird than have her sleeping on a broken bed. Flipping the phone over and over in my hand, I think about texting or calling to make sure she's okay. To see if she did go get those pills. Perhaps check and see if her walls have a crack big enough for me to slip through.

Scanning the monitor, I add a cat toy and purchase the order, shipping it straight to her place. If she gets mad, she can reject them. Like she's rejected me.

She knows how I feel, that I asked her to be open for me and only me. I've been the one hunting her down in an alley, the library, on Halloween... I think I'm done reaching out for her to pull away.

If she wants me, she'll have to come find me.

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Chapter

Twelve

PIPER

Dread rolls in my stomach as the week passes, thinking about possible pregnancy. I mean, it's so very highly unlikely, but he never asked me. And I refuse to take hormones.

I just won't have sex with Adon again. It's that simple.

No pricks.

No dicks.

No fuss.

Only muff.

That could be my new motto.

A firm knock on my door startles me from the mess I've made organizing my record albums strewn about the living space. My broken mattress frame lays on the floor underneath me at a crooked angle. I tried to fix it, but it's hopeless. So I'll just have to set the thing out at some point.

The delicate sundress I'm wearing covers my ass, so I feel okay checking the door in it and my fuzzy slippers. My heart beats harder as I think about this being Adon showing up again for another round and how I'll tell him to get lost. I totally will. Won't even open the door.

Instead, it's a few men with a large couch, acting as if I'm wasting their time.

"Uh, hello?" I call through the door.

"Delivery for Piper Hendricks. Got your sofa sleeper."

Lowering my brow, I try to remember a wine drunk night of online shopping recently. It's definitely something I'd do, but I really don't think I did that this week.

"I didn't order a couch."

"Uh, Adon Griffin did. Lady, look. This is heavy. Can we place this or not?"

Adon ordered me a sleeper sofa ? Well, I guess that's right, considering he broke mine. I slip open the locks and throw the door open. "Yeah, but there's barely room with the old one."

The guy at the door shrugs and points to the broken pieces on the floor. One of the others drops his end of the new sofa and heaves the old one out of the way. In record time, the crew sets up my new couch and carries the old one downstairs. I hurry to my purse and give him some money as a tip before they leave.

It's very formal looking, the arms rolled and puffy. Definitely not my style. But I'll take it. Especially when I pull out the bed and flop onto the mattress. "Perfect!"

Freckles abounds from the bathroom and plops on my head with a stretch of his belly.

“You must like it, too. Maybe having a sugar daddy isn’t so bad. If I get knocked up, perhaps we’d get a bigger apartment out of him.”

The next week, nothing much happens, except for that building dread. Sometimes I think it’s nausea and get concerned enough to panic in the library bathroom on the gross floor tiles, hugging my legs to my chest and trying not to think about my box cutter at home.

When I’m not ill from anxiety, I’m raging with anger that Adon seems to have ghosted me. No work visits or alleyway rendezvous. Even when they opened the cafe back up, he hadn’t shown his face.

Have I reached out to him? No way.

No pricks, no dicks, no fuss. Unfortunately, no muff, either, but I haven’t been out much. The creepy crawlies in my guts keep me home to read more smut than ever before.

By the third weekend after Adon left, I’m consumed with worry enough to purchase a pregnancy test. As I pace with Freckles in my arms outside of the bathroom, the clock ticks on my phone, the screen just visible from the corner of the pedestal sink. I must squeeze him too tight because Freckles squirms out of my embrace and hides under the dining table.

A text notification sounds, and I jump while screaming like someone just broke inside my place. Taking a slow, deep breath, I meander over and glance at the screen as if the vision may scar me for life.

And it kind of does. My sister’s message reminds me to stop over tonight to plan Thanksgiving dinner with her and my mother. Groaning, I slip on some jeans and comb through my hair just as the timer goes off.

It's no big deal, Piper. You can do this. No matter what the answer is, you can handle it.

My mouth gets dry as I reach for the stick laying on the back of the sink. I close my eyes for only a moment, lifting the test up to face my future.

Negative.

"Oh, thank fuck!" With a resounding hoot, I leap and punch the air in a victory dance. "No babies!"

Freckles startles as I snatch my coat from the chair and say, "I live to fuck another day, Frecklepuss."

On the way to my mother's, my beater of a car rattles and groans, giving me another hint that it's on its last days. It's never sounded so loud before and the steering feels a bit off, as well. I guess that's what I get for being in the house for two days and not driving it anywhere.

Squeals and shudders emanate from the engine when I finally stop in the driveway of Cora Hendrick's brick colonial. I don't call it the house I was raised in because my parents never did any raising. I hate the place, and I haven't set foot in my old bedroom since I moved out. The place where everything happened.

Since the last time I was over, there are more shudders hanging on tilt and peeling paint clinging to the porch. My mother owns a spa and salon, and even though she pretends it's doing so well in her ads plastered on the bus stops, I know she's barely making ends meet. Hence, another reason she hates my father, whom she feels owes her for cheating on her repeatedly.

Perfumed air assaults my nose when I enter and head to the kitchen in the back,

where my sister and mother are talking over mugs of tea at the kitchen island.

“Finally. You’re late,” my sister says with an eye roll. She dressed as casually as I’ve seen her, in jeans and her pink ONE T-shirt with her hair in a slick ponytail. She wears her shoes in the house, and I don’t know why, but it really bothers me.

Sliding onto the barstool next to her, I grab a mug and pour myself a cup as my mother eyes me scrupulously. “Piper...please dye your hair back to your beautiful blonde. Please ? Do it for me?”

I try to think of anything to change the topic, anything so they don’t focus on how I look. The newspaper catches my eye with its headline article about Rainy Day’s grand re-opening. “Any word about that woman who died? Sean’s stepmom?”

My mother’s green eyes lock with my sister’s and the two exchange a meaningful look that I don’t understand. It’s like they’re careful to talk because I’m too young and dumb to know stuff.

“Sean hated her. He doesn’t even consider her a stepmom , you know?”

With a snorting laugh, my mother spits out, “That’s because she was cheating, the little hooker.”

“Cheating? Who was she cheating with?” The vision at the table that morning comes back to me. My father was there first with his co-worker. Employee? It seemed innocent enough, but they were talking pretty in depth to each other.

A dramatic sigh is the answer my sister gives as my mother snaps, “Your father, of course.”

Tilting my head, I try to reserve the irritation in my voice. “You always think he was

cheating with everyone.”

My sister sips the last of her drink and smiles around the rim of the mug. “Maybe she got what she deserved.”

I scoff. “Are you serious? You think the woman deserved to die because she may have been having an affair with someone?”

“Oh, you don’t believe me, Piper? I’m not the one who tells lies around here,” my mother says pointedly.

Maeve chimes in with a shake of her head. “For real. So dramatic.”

Vitriol, rage, and hate bubble in my stomach. “Fuck you. Fuck you both. I never lied.”

The stool rattles to the floor as I push away from the island, then sprint up the stairs to my old room. With a scream, I throw open the door. I can’t even see straight. The blood pounding through my arteries causes momentary blurs before my eyes. I grab the standing mirror and toss it with a primal roar. Rip the curtains from the windows. Pick up my dancing figurines and launch them against the wall one at a time as they shatter into a trillion pieces.

Then, I face the bed.

I lunge on top of it and kick and punch and cry until I’m worn out, heaving sobs crashing through my tight chest. But I slither to the floor, taking every piece of fabric with me, trying to shred it with my hands. Instead, I end up in a blubbing mess and wipe away the dripping tears on my cheeks with the horrific memories of my youth.

My mother and sister watch me with terror on their faces from the door. “How dare

you! Clean this mess up!”

“Piper, what did you do?”

Maeve acts shocked, but I brush past them as my mother yells, “Do you need to go back to the hospital?”

My sister mumbles, “She may hurt herself again.”

I fling open the front door with my shoes dangling from my fingers and wander to my piece of shit car. How many times have my mother or father asked to get me a new one? I don’t remember. But I won’t take anything from them. Screw them.

Tossing my purse and shoes into the passenger seat, I turn on the engine. The grinding of metal on metal is a foreboding sound, but I squeal away from the curb without issue.

My chest heaves with wails, leftover pain that I always avoid whenever I visit that place. But it lingers inside like a demon of discomfort, waiting to attack me with despair.

Am I slipping back into that place? The pit of darkness where there’s no escape?

As I wipe my nose with the back of my hand, I blink a few times to clear the tears so I can see enough to make it home. Home, where I can hide under my own patchouli-scented blanket with Freckles and escape in a book. Live in someone else’s problem for a few hours.

And not cut.

They want me to, I know. To show how they were right all along. To prove that all of

this is my problem and not theirs. But I won't let them win. I refuse.

“Oh my god!” I scream as I approach a red light and pump the brake, but nothing happens. Trying with all my might, I slam down the pedal, but the car keeps moving at a rapid pace. Cars whiz by the busy intersection as I careen straight for them.

Think, think !

My hand grabs at the emergency brake in the center, and I jerk it up until the car spins in a rapid circle, tires burning into the pavement as their dusty smoke fills the cabin inside. When I stop, my clunker faces the opposite traffic, but is enough to the side that people can get by me. I put my emergency lights on and do the only thing I know.

With a shaking hand, I text Essa, telling her it's a car emergency. Once she gives me the info, I swallow back my tears and call the person I need most at this moment. My hero.

“Adon? I need help.”

Chapter

Thirteen

ADON

Her voice is frail, filled with panic, which I didn't think a force like Piper could experience. It releases something inside of me until I'm tossing my wallet into my back pocket and racing through my garage to the truck.

"I'll be right back, guys! Aunt Maria is in charge!" My mother's sister is visiting for Thanksgiving, which is a godsend at this moment when I need to rush out the door. Avery barely acknowledges my call-out.

"Where are you, Rosy?"

"I-I'm on Main and facing the wrong way. The brake wouldn't work. I didn't know what to do—" Her sentence is cut off with a soft sob.

"Stay right there. I'm coming."

Will I get a ticket? Maybe. But I don't give a fuck. My focus is solely on getting to Piper and making sure she's okay. Have I been miffed that she hasn't said shit to me for weeks? Not even thanked me for the couch? Absolutely. But none of that matters right now.

By the time I reach her, she's wandering outside of her car on the sidewalk, arms

crossed, rubbing her hands up and down her arms repeatedly. The vision of her in one piece brings me some moment of relief. I reach out, grab her shoulders, then pull her tiny body into me.

Her rosy cheeks are flaming red in the streetlight from the tears falling down her face. She grips my shirt and pushes her nose into my chest until I hold her tighter. Tiny shakes rattle her body as she cries and clings to me like I'm her savior. One of my big palms cushions her hair and strokes its silky softness slowly until her sobs turn to sniffles.

When she pulls back and looks up at me, I almost fucking die right there. She's so beautiful and broken. I want to fix every piece of her.

"What happened?" I don't think I'm asking about the car. Maybe it's because when she shimmied in that silver dress the first time I saw her, I could peek behind the facade to the sadness hidden by sparkles. But I'll give her the option to answer whatever question she wants.

Her big green eyes bounce toward her vehicle before she glances back at me. "I think something happened to the brakes. It was acting funny."

I pull out a handkerchief from my back pocket and wipe her cheeks, then hand it to her to blow her nose. "Who carries these things?" she asks.

"My grandfather always taught me to keep one with me for women."

Her pert lips lift at the corners, but a loud wail of her nose into the cloth is the only reply. My arm wraps around her as I lead her back to my truck. Hopping in, she looks at me as if she has no idea what to say or do.

"I'll call the tow truck. Jim will bring your car to my shop. Sit tight." Her pink hair

falls into her face with a nod. Jim is half asleep when I call, but says he'll be right over to bring it to Griffin Motors.

When I slip back into the cab of my truck, she's shivering, so I blast the heat for her. I rummage around in my back seat for a sweatshirt from my gym bag and hand it to her. "Sorry. It probably stinks, but I forgot to bring a coat with me."

She takes it and, instead of balking, holds it to her nose, sniffs it in a long inhale, and seems to relax.

"Thank you." The navy fabric drowns her little frame, and she tucks her knees up under the front like it's a blanket, perching on the seat like a bird.

Making sure she's settled, I start the engine and head out onto Main Street. "Have you eaten? You need food?"

"I'm okay. I'm not very hungry. I just came from dinner..."

My jaw clenches at the thought of her being out with someone else, but I shouldn't be concerned with that. Did he break her heart? Is there someone she loves? Before I get too caught up in the raging green monster eager to tear out my insides, her eyes dart over to me with a shy glance. "At my mom's."

"Ah." I had seen her sitting with a group of people that looked like her the morning of that lady's death. Perhaps that was her family. A sister? Mother? Father? Not sure who everyone was. Things seemed tense, though. "You don't get along with her?"

Straightening in the seat, she flicks the vents toward her to get more heat. Her chest puffs up with air as she takes a deep inhale. "No."

I keep checking over the other side of the cab, but she's harder to read than Avery.

“Did something happen there?”

One tear rolls down her cheek as she stares straight ahead, ignoring me. Instead of forcing things, I flip on the radio, where Miles Davis sings “Blue in Green” through his trumpet. Bill Evans tries to keep the optimism of the moment with the melodic piano, but Paul Chambers reminds us where this tune is heading with the bass.

“What is this?” Piper asks, interrupting me from my reverie.

“This is jazz. Miles Davis, more specifically. You like?”

She’s quiet for a moment, staring out into the night as soft rain drops create tiny prisms on the windshield. “It’s like he put my soul into the sound.”

My fingers grip the steering wheel tight. Fuck . No, no, no.

I think I just fell in love.

Emotion grips my throat tight, but I clear it. “Yeah. He does that.”

Despite her saying she’s not hungry, I assume she must need some type of hot meal. So I pull over to the corner diner at the end of Main and Oak, one of the places near the north end of the campus. She glances at me with a wet droplet hanging from her bottom lashes. “Just hang tight. I’ll be right back.”

Once inside, I find Mandy in her blue-and-white checked frilly uniform and tap her on the shoulder. “Oh, Adon! Hey. You want your usual?”

“No, actually. Just wanted some of the chili and crackers to go. Cheese on top.”

She tucks her pen into her gray beehive hair. “You got it. Give me one minute,

darlin'."

It doesn't take her five minutes before she returns, and I pay at the register. By the time I get back to the car and hand the bag to Piper, she's swaying to Dave Brubeck's "Take Five." "What's this?"

"Chili and crackers. Just in case you need something."

When I pull my hand back, she snags it with both of hers and tugs me closer. "Adon, I can't thank you enough for coming to my rescue."

Her eyes are big, rounded, and needy. My lips itch to feel hers and, inwardly, I groan at the struggle I'm going through. Shit. The rumbling sound escapes, and she parts her mouth as if to accept me. It's beyond tempting how close she is, close enough for a simple taste. But I can't do this. She's too young, wild, carefree. And vulnerable right now.

So I pull back and steer the truck toward the shop. "You're welcome. You can call anytime."

"But you also sent me a new couch. You didn't need to."

I shrug and shake my head. "I broke it. I needed to replace it."

As we finish our drive, she peeks at the chili, and by the time we sit down in my office at the back of the shop, she downs half of it and rubs her belly beneath my sweatshirt. "Maybe I was hungry."

"Do you want to talk about tonight? What happened?"

Across the desk, she lifts her gaze up to my face, but her smile drops. "Something

bad?—”

Her words are cut off when Jim announces his arrival, and we both jump at his voice. “Put it in bay two, Jim.”

Once in the garage, he gives me a nod and lines it up perfectly for me. I open the hood of Piper’s car after paying Jim for his services. Then he’s heading out for the night with a tug on the brim of his baseball cap.

“Sit,” I command, snapping my fingers and pointing to the chair in the corner.

“Yes, boss.”

My lips tug up into a smirk at Piper’s rebellious lip, but I’ll let her get by tonight, considering what she’s been through. Though I wish she’d tell me more. Maybe that’s a problem. This need I already feel tugging at my insides to get to know her on a deeper level. I’m way past just wanting to fuck her for fun. I shouldn’t have gone back for seconds.

She curls up in the chair and swivels back and forth, her fingers catching on the side bench to propel her. “So, how long have you had this place?”

Thinking over the recent past, it seems time has slipped by too quickly. “About five years. Avery was around seven, and Odin was just a tiny guy at three. Or four.”

Almost mumbling, she glances down at her feet. “Your daughter’s nice. I like her.”

I meet her eyes with a furrowed brow, confused about when she would have spoken to my daughter.

“She came over to the library with...your wife.”

Is there jealousy behind her tone? I straighten up and tap on the block with a wrench.
“Ex-wife.”

“She’s beautiful.”

My cheeks hurt, trying to contain the smile tugging at my lips. That’s envy, most definitely. “You want to look in here with me?”

She shrugs and gets up, her flip-flops slapping against the concrete as she wanders nearby. I start pointing out stuff on the engine for her to learn and she seems surprisingly interested.

Behind us, a dark Buick crawls by the end of the drive, as if scanning the signs out front. I check the clock on the back wall. It’s nearly eleven now, so not sure why they’re pulling up this close. My neck muscles creep toward my ears, but Piper doesn’t seem to notice anything amiss.

Her little body leans over the engine as I cast another glance at the car. As soon as I see the window lower, instincts take over. I grip Piper by the waist and haul her in front of me, lying us on the ground just in time.

Shots ring over our heads, bullets striking her windshield and plinking off the garage bay. Shattered glass erupts like a torrent of snowflakes around us. Absolute wrath fills me to the brim until my face is flushed hot. With my heart thundering in my ears, I scramble off her and head toward the cabinet where my gun is, grabbing it as the car tires squeal on the pavement.

“Stay down,” I yell at her as I march down the street, aiming my sights on the back windshield. I fire off one shot, but the car is too far away for me to clip it. Piper screams and shuffles underneath the car before I hurry back and lower the bay door.

The shop isn't in a bad area, but it's not in a great one, either. Random drive-by? Was the bullet meant for me? And for what reason?

By the time I secure everything, I sit on the floor and pull Piper out by an ankle, then place her on my lap. She clings to me like a koala, her body shaking as she murmurs against my neck. "What the fuck?"

My hands stroke her short hair until she pulls back to gaze into my eyes.

"I don't know."

Her bottom lip quivers as her chest rises rapidly, and instead of being rational, my dick decides now is a fantastic time to harden. I can't contain myself any longer.

With all my strength, I gather her up and force my mouth onto hers. Our kiss is violent and brutal, teeth getting in the way as our tongues collide and battle. She tastes like honey, warm and sticky sweet. Just as addictive as I've imagined. The growls erupting from my chest pummel down my waist to my groin until my dick fills with all the blood rushing from my head. My hips buck up against her as she swivels hers against me.

Nipping her bottom lip, I grip her neck and press my forehead to hers. "Take my cock out and get on it. Now."

Her fingers hurriedly plunge between us as she undoes my jeans, then tugs my dick out of my boxers. Sliding my palms underneath her skirt, my finger hooks in her panties to push them aside. Little nails dig into my shoulders as she hovers over me, giving me the most sultry fucking look I've ever seen before she slowly eases down onto my length, her soaked and tiny cunt gripping the crown so tight, I lose a breath. "Shit, Rosy. You're so damn tight."

She bounces up on me once, then slides down again, trying to get comfortable. “No. You’re just so damn huge. God! My daddy’s cock is too big for my little pussy.”

I almost come right there. “Fuck, Piper.”

She giggles as I throb inside her comforting walls, my balls already primed to explode.

“Do I need to clean out your mouth, dirty girl?”

Her only reply is a smug smile, so I grip her hair and pull her head back while thrusting up inside her. She gasps until her lips part enough for me to gather some spit and launch it inside onto her tongue. I follow the action with another bruising kiss until we’re swapping everything between us, her moans fueling my savage movements. My hips force the air from her lungs every time she sits down on my lap, and I slap them up into her. The base of my cock is soaked with her arousal, my balls aching for relief.

To get her to come quickly before I do, I snake my palms up my sweatshirt and underneath her top, then pinch a nipple. Then the other until she squeals into my waiting mouth. Her patchouli scent coats my skin until it becomes a part of me. Until she is a part of me. There’s no backing out now. I’ve broken all my rules for her. All for this little spitfire who won’t behave.

“Adon...” she breathes heavily against my neck. My palm swats her ass hard over the generous fabric of her skirt until she changes her tone. “Daddy!”

“That’s right. Come for me, Rosy. Use me. Cream my cock and give me everything .”

This girl has driven me crazy since the moment I laid eyes on her. There’s something she hides away, and I can’t stand it. Now that my own walls have broken down, I

can't stop. I won't be able to take it if she goes into her hole and won't let me in again.

Spring green with a hint of rain catches my eyes until we hold each other's gaze while she comes with a cry. I open my mouth wide and press it over hers to capture her scream, then shove myself as deep as I can and release along with her.

Squirming away and out of breath, she sits back while I'm still inside her and gives me a shocked look. "I thought you said you'd wear a condom."

My jaw tightens as my cock leaks inside her with another pulse. "Shit."

Chapter

Fourteen

PIPER

Thanksgiving is the worst. Obnoxious and creepy, my father continually hits on my eighteen-year-old best friend, trying to impress her with his conquests and asking for her number after. My mother, half drunk, goes on and on about my father's love affairs with anyone and everyone who will listen.

“Even dead women.” She laughs heartily between sips of her wine.

When I finally get home and collapse onto my comfortable sofa bed, I gaze at the cracked ceiling above me. None of those events come close to what's actually causing me anguish.

If I'm honest, the worst has been avoiding Adon for the last week. Not avoiding , just not seeing him. After our last hookup, he brought me home, and I told him that I'm not taking any hormones. No morning-after pill or anything. It almost brought me to tears when he stroked my cheek with his thumb, standing right over there at the doorway to my place and said, “No problem, Rosy. You know how I feel.”

But I don't. He said I couldn't hang with him because he had the kids and his aunt visiting from Greece. Not that I'd want to intrude.

We aren't a thing .

And the thought of having to take another morning-after pill after the last time makes me hurl my guts into the toilet. Or maybe it was my mother's cooking. I shouldn't be the one to have to do anything. Adon should have wrapped it up. Or gotten a vasectomy. Whatever.

In the passion of rescue and the bubble of his protection, I let him fuck me. And kiss me. That was wild. He'd never done that before, and it fucked with my head.

No pricks, Piper. Stop it.

Maybe I should go back to therapy.

Whenever he texts me over the next week, I send him back an "Ok" or a thumbs-up. The texts get more insistent, asking how I'm doing, if there's something wrong, then demanding to come over to see him. Once he said he's on his way over to my place, but I hurriedly told him I was out at the club, then grabbed my coat and darted out to the street, heading straight to The Warehouse for a drink.

Two weeks after we last saw each other, I get a call from a number in the city.
"Hello?"

"Piper?" I don't recognize the voice.

"Yeah?"

"Hey, it's Tate from Griffin Motors. I, uh... Well, I was the one taking a look at your car this past week, and I think you need to come down here to discuss the problem. Can you come by today?"

Swallowing, my eyebrows stitch together. Is this Adon's way of getting me to see him again? By using his best friend? Or is there something actually wrong?

“Sure. I get done at the library at three. Does that time work?”

“Oh, yeah. We don’t close until six.”

The tone of his voice makes me feel weird. Like...there’s something wrong . “Okay, I’ll be there before then. Thanks.”

Shanna is in full holiday spirits, humming her Christmas songs and wearing a puffy snowman sweater. Glancing at her bopping around the aisle makes my stomach twist with anxiety. I don’t know how I can stand being here for another hour, waiting to know what Tate wants to tell me about my car.

She startles when I gingerly step close to her and whisper her name. “Sorry. Um, I’m not feeling great. I was wondering if I can leave an hour early.”

Her jaw drops as sudden as her jovial outlook. “Only if you make up for it next week.”

Still my need to snap back at her, I smile. “Of course. I’ll stay an hour later next week. Thanks so much, Shanna.”

I grumble all the way to my locker, grab my things, then book a rideshare. Within twenty minutes, I’m standing in front of Griffin Motors’ big sign. Shoving my hands into my puffy coat, I stroll up to the open bay. Tate’s red hair waves in the winter breeze as I approach.

“Hey, Piper. Um... Why don’t you come with me to the back?”

My clunker is high up in the air on hydraulic lifts with a bunch of hoses hanging loose from underneath. It looks complicated. And expensive.

“Sure, okay.”

Maybe sleeping with Adon again will get me free car repairs.

When we enter the office, Adon is discussing something on the computer screen with Eli. My best friend’s boyfriend glances at me, then stands abruptly. “I’m going to lunch. Hi, Piper. Bye, Piper.”

He quickly snags his coat and heads out the door before Tate shuts it behind him.

Adon lounges in the desk chair and points to the one across from him. “Have a seat.”

Tate leans against the far table with his arms crossed and I shrug, then sit on the edge, waiting for them to tell me my car has cancer or something.

“So, Tate and I took a look at your brakes and, uh...I think someone tampered with your car. There were several sharp cuts in the brake lines, like someone wanted this to happen over time. Make it look like an accident.” Adon’s dark brown eyes cast over to his friend. “However, it’s anything but natural looking.”

I’m stiff. I only have one enemy. Well, other than my own mother and sister. Reeling from the news, I try to piece together who would have done it.

“Don’t worry. I can fix the car,” Tate says behind me, like that’s what I’m worried about most.

Adon waves him off with his hand. “Go get started.” My mouth opens to protest, not knowing how much it will be, but Adon interrupts, “Free of charge.”

I guess my pussy is just that good. Should I aim for a new apartment?

Once we're alone, Adon raises his eyebrows. "Any idea who could have done this?"

My body vibrates with anxiety as I lick my bottom lip, wondering if I should tell him. "I don't think so. I mean, there was a guy back in the day, but he's been gone a long time."

Adon stands and comes around the desk, then rests his ass against the edge. His big palm lifts my chin up so I face him. A warm, tender expression on his face makes me want to cry. "Who?"

With a shake of my head, I slide back in the chair. "His name was Noah. But he wouldn't come back. Not here."

His broad shoulders tense as he stares at the ceiling. "Okay, Noah. But do you think he'd have anything to do with your purse getting snatched?"

Tilting my head, I ponder what he's asking. "You mean..."

"After the coffee shop incident. Yeah, that's what I mean."

"You think they're connected."

Rubbing at his beard slowly, he tugs on the ends. "Maybe. Your family was sitting with the woman who died, right? How did you know her?"

"I didn't at all. She was my sister's boyfriend's stepmother. And her husband is my sister's professor." Trying to scramble how all of my family is somehow intertwined with the dead woman, I pause, staring at the faux wood grain on the laminate desk top. "She was my father's employee, too. Maybe more than that, knowing him."

Adon's big body seems even more formidable in his silence. And the longer he's

quiet, the more uncomfortable I get. His molten lava eyes light me up, even when I'm not looking at him.

“What happened to you, and how can I fix it?”

The words irritate me to the point of anger. He's just like every other older man in the clubs I go to, the ones at the bar, every man ever who finds me and wants me to stroke his ego while he plays white knight.

When I stand, the chair knocks back with a rattle on the concrete floor. “You can't fix me, Adon. I'm not a project for your middle-aged ass to mend.”

His cheeks darken with fury, eyes narrowing, but he doesn't say anything, only crosses his bulging arms.

I reach the door and fling it open, throwing over my shoulder, “Thanks for repairing my car. I'll see you around.”

Storming to the edge of the shop, I book another ride to pick me up. This could get expensive, if I'm not careful.

Should I have become more compliant, given Daddy Don his compliments, let him fuck me more with his huge cock so that he could give me a new car? Maybe. Maybe I'm stupid for not playing along.

Guilt overtakes me thinking about using him that way. I don't think Adon's that simple. He's not like the old guys at the sex clubs or the businessmen at the local dive bars. The man actually cares. I've seen how he operates with his brothers and me. His love for his children.

But he also wants me to be different . When I'm with him, it feels like he needs

someone older, more mature. Someone who is healthy and hasn't been through what I have. He wants me to be like her . His ex-wife. Probably still attached to her, too.

And maybe it's good that the holidays are here, and I don't have to buy him a gift or worry that he's going to redecorate my apartment because he feels sorry for me, when really, he's doing it because he doesn't like the place.

By the time I feed Freckles and try to brush him as he slithers by me in erratic patterns, change the litter box, and stare at my empty cabinets, I've decided what I need is to get back to who I am. Me, Piper Hendricks. Lover of smut books and wine. And fun parties.

It's a shame Essa is too young for the clubs, because I'm getting the urge to head out to one. Be with people my own age. Instead, I pop open a new bottle of red and download a fresh taboo book. Curled up under my blanket with a nutritious dinner of crackers and cheese, Freckles suddenly becomes my best friend, swiping a paw at every bite I take.

Once I've finished all the wine, I pass out and stumble through the weekend, chasing the lull of deadened thoughts with another bottle. Well, two more. But my old therapist would be happy to know I didn't cut. Not once.

Progress, not perfection. One day at a time. Baby steps. One percent better every day.

I've done the sticky notes on my mirror, the motivational affirmations every morning, prayer, meditation, Yoga, and Pilates. I read self-help books and numbed myself with anything around me.

Basically, it's so much easier to not feel when I'm alone. Because if I do, I go to the bad place. The one where I think maybe I did make up the incident in my head. That I'm so far gone, the pain and humiliation, guilt, and self-loathing was just a delusion I

created.

For what purpose, though? Why would I do that to myself?

My sister thinks it's for attention. They don't understand that I hate the attention. It's like a spotlight on the dirtiest parts of me, the ones that shouldn't see the light or they'll become morphed into melanomas.

I can't be with Adon because he deserves someone pure, someone who hasn't been tainted the way I have. I can't be fixed. All I can be is me, a damaged product of no use to anyone.

So that's when I wallow in a desperate pile under my blanket and call in sick three days in a row, don't shower, eat a package of saltines, almost lose my job, and hope that the world stops existing by the time I grapple out of the mire.

It never does.

The good news is, this time I must have pushed Adon so far away that he hasn't tried to call or text. My car may be ready, but I haven't heard a word. I think I'll just have to walk everywhere from now on. Maybe find a new person to drive me around town when I need it.

I've been trudging through the dumps enough to know how to mask the scent of garbage. So the week before Christmas, I've cleaned up, made amends with Shanna, and even got a doctor's note to say how sick I was. While I was there, I grabbed a prescription for the dreaded birth control, was handed a benign bill of health, and a joyous negative pregnancy test.

Maeve

Dinner tonight with Dad. Be at The Vine at 6.

My eyes flutter with annoyance. Part of me wishes the bullet would have hit me, only so I could avoid this pre-Christmas meal. Christmas will be even worse.

Nevertheless, to avoid the incessant phone calls and the predictable visits if I were to no show, I'm at the restaurant at 6:30 p.m. sharp. Wearing a puffy-sleeved red satin gown from the 80s, that I picked up at one of the local secondhand shops, worn with the goal to piss off my sister.

Maeve scoffs when I take a seat, and my father pretends not to see my outfit. "'Bout time you showed up," my sister grumbles.

"I thought you said six-thirty."

Her green eyes narrow at me, letting me know she doesn't accept my rebuttal.

A hand brushes against my exposed back, and I glance up. Adon looms over me with a serious look on his face, sending a riot of butterflies flapping wings in my belly. The sight of him soothes me, but also sets me on edge. He can't be here with these people. If he sees my family, he'll know for sure that I'm useless.

"Sorry to interrupt. Piper, your car is done and at the shop whenever you need it."

My eyes grow wide at his presence here with my family. "Oh, um. Thanks."

"Adon Griffin, right? From Griffin Motors? I'm Greg Hendricks." Dad's hand juts out to greet Adon, who shakes it once, then stands back. "You here alone?"

Adon nods. "Yeah, just getting seated and enjoying a good meal before the weekend."

“Please, join us. I’m with Northview Community Bank. We’ve been vying for your business for a while now.” My dad makes this weird laugh that makes me cringe, but shockingly, Adon sits down next to me while giving me a leery glance. Like he’s afraid I’ll bite him if he gets too comfortable. Oddly, he leaves his arm around the back of my seat, like he’s protecting me.

“Thanks. I think I will.”

The waiter presents our dinner options, and everyone places their orders while I secretly hope this dinner is over faster than normal. Although, having Adon here, sitting across from my two enemies, is comforting in a way. I just hope he doesn’t say something to make my life worse. And he definitely could.

After a sip of his wine, my father taps the table with his thumb to gain Adon’s attention. “You helped Meghan when she had her accident that day. A true hero.”

Adon’s lips form a tight line, and his eyes reflect the memory of what he tried to do. I can tell it’s the last thing he wanted to think about. “I tried.”

My father adjusts his glasses on his nose and leans closer, lowering his voice. “You don’t have any female employees, do you, Mr. Griffin?”

Startled, Adon sits back in his chair and shakes his head slightly. My tummy twists in a knot, watching the chaos about to unfold. “Uh, just our front desk staff.”

A slight, knowing nod comes from my dad. “Be careful. You know how the workforce is nowadays. Women sue for literally anything. You break it off with them, and here comes the lawsuits claiming sexual harassment.”

Maeve pats my father’s hand on the table. “She was a slut anyway, Dad.”

It's difficult to swallow, my mouth is so dry. If I thought that Adon wouldn't want me before, given how broken I am, surely, he'll flee now after seeing what I come from.

"Um, I'll take that into consideration." Adon takes a large drink of his water and eyes me while he does so, like he's checking with me to see if this is normal. Unfortunately, it is.

"Wait," I interrupt the loving father-daughter moment between my sister and dad. "Are you talking about the woman that died ? You two were together ?"

As if he's bored, my father brushes some unseen crumbs off his suit jacket. "The woman hit on me . And it was brief. I rejected her, and then here she comes with threats from lawyers once I ended things."

Ended things...which means there was something there to begin with.

"This is why it's so important to keep families together. Divorce does no one any good." Maeve glances around the table, like she's giving a speech at a beauty pageant. "Mr. Griffin, you aren't divorced, are you?"

Adon's broad chest expands, almost popping the buttons off his black button-down shirt as he strokes his bottom lip with his tongue before responding. "Uh, yeah. Yes, I am."

"Oh. Well, that's a shame. My boyfriend always says divorce ruins children, especially daughters. Do you have a daughter? Do you hate your ex-wife?"

My body shrinks into my chair, wanting to disappear completely. It's like I'm watching a horror movie and can't stop the outcome. The worst part, though, is that I want to hear his answers, too.

“I do have a daughter. And I get along with my ex very well. We’re good friends and parents to our kids.”

Maeve’s eyes flash to my face, as if she’s speaking to me, but her words are directed at the man next to me. “You should work on reconciling with her, then.”

My lips part with a gasp as I glance at Adon, who steals a look at me. He swallows and replies, “I?—”

“Here’re your dishes!” With spectacular flourish, the waiter sets our plates in front of us and the rest of the meal is eaten in uncomfortable silence. Other than my father awkwardly pitching to Adon ways to garner his business for the bank. But he won’t look at me. Not that I want him to see the utter mortification painting my face. The lack of eye contact makes it clear. Adon is finished with me after this. As he should be.

When the misery ends, I don’t even wait for Adon to stand before I scurry outside, tears heating my eyes.

It’s not just the way my family is that makes my cheeks flame with embarrassment. They’re a reflection of how wrong I am for anyone. I’ll never be normal. I can’t be like Adon’s ex-wife and why I even feel the need to try to fit myself into that role is beyond me.

I’m halfway to my apartment, the cold wind striking like daggers on my bare ears. As I reach the building before it, large arms grab my body and hoist me back.

Chapter

Fifteen

ADON

“Rosy, it’s me.”

The little pixie tries to fly away, but I snag her waist. She spins around and glares at me, her coat flipping open in the wintry wind.

I pull it closed for her and tug her body closer to mine. “Fuck! You were walking too damn fast for me and I’m, like, twice your height.”

Her hands brush mine off, where I’ve got hold of her, with such brusqueness, I’m left annoyed and angry. I thought we were past her pushing me away.

She glares at me. “What do you want?”

“I want to talk with you.” Holding my palms out to my sides, I try to shake off the ire threatening to make me rage at her insolence.

Despite the puffiness of her coat, she crosses her arms and looks around the space I occupy, but won’t give me a glance. “What about?”

My jaw drops. How could she not know? “Uh, about your family. Seems like it’s a pretty intense situation you have.”

Unexpectedly, her chin trembles when her green eyes finally greet me. “Why didn’t you tell them we were together?”

What in the absolute fuck? The lines across my forehead deepen with bewilderment. “I’m confused. I thought you... I didn’t know we were together.”

One of her purple Converse kicks at the gravel repeatedly as she shakes her head. “We aren’t. I just thought that you thought we were.”

Her intense vulnerability makes me want to tuck her inside my pea coat and take her home with me. Knowledge that her words don’t match what she’s feeling inside makes me question her motives. Why is she like this? What happened to her? Reaching across the cold void between us, my palm grips her arm, but she shrugs me off.

“But we definitely aren’t.” Softer, she mutters, “We aren’t together.”

The silence lingers so long that it becomes louder than the words she’s speaking. Maybe she’s too young to say exactly what’s on her mind or to ask for what she wants. I’m not sure I’m willing to wait around for this push-and-pull game she plays any longer.

As I take in the night sky and a deep, cleansing breath, I wonder if it’s time to head back to the club on Friday nights with reinforced rules. Breaking them seems to have caused us both unnecessary headaches. I should have stuck with them and avoided whatever this drama is.

However, I’m worried about what her father and sister said in the restaurant about the dead woman, Meghan Martinez. Something is happening in the background, and it seems Piper is the center of the trouble, which is fitting for her. The rosy-cheeked girl needs someone looking out for her, because I fear that no one else will. Certainly not

herself.

If she can't ask me for help, then I don't know how to.

She takes a step back while holding my gaze, and I let my hands drop to my sides in defeat. With a swallow, I manage to say, "I guess we're not."

Not even granting me a goodbye, she spins around and heads toward her red-bricked apartment building while I stand in the drizzling rain that's quickly turning to sleet. The sparkles of ice catch the dimmed streetlamps and hit my cheeks like tears. It hurts to watch her slip away, especially thinking there may have been something between us. Perhaps we could have worked, if she'd only let me in.

Sex seems like a way to keep me from getting to know the real her. Instead of connecting, she's using it like a weapon against me. It's her way to keep me strung along, to keep me interested, but not completely satisfied. I hate that.

Piper is the first woman I've had some irrational sense of longing for. I think I've lost my mind if I'm still thinking we could try to make this work. She's too young and impulsive. Obviously unstable.

After I see the light flick on in her apartment through the second-story window, I pull my coat up around my ears and start back toward Main Street, skirting through the nearby alley. If she doesn't want me, that's fine, but I still feel a need to look out for her while she's in danger. I'm not buying that the purse incident and shooting were random. I think she's being targeted, and I need to find out why and by whom .

There's a war going on inside of me as I slide inside the frigid cabin of my truck, waiting for her father to exit the restaurant. I should walk away from this mission. From her. Piper has pushed me away at every turn. She's obviously struggling with something internally, and I don't know if I'll be able to break down her walls. Or

even if I should.

The problem is, the heater blows as hot as the warmth in my soul when I'm in her presence, and my mind won't let me stop thinking about her. Analyzing her. Hoping she'll reach for me or call me.

One thing is clear. The reason she seemed so lost and begged me to be her daddy that first night is because hers is a complete piece of shit.

Piper's father emerges from the entrance with her sister next to him, walking toward the street I'm parked near. The two hug before he gets in his sedan and takes off while I follow, trying to keep three car lengths behind.

He eventually drives to a suburban neighborhood and stops at a small one-story house, then gets out of his car and heads inside. The windows are dark, but in a few seconds, the first lamp glows yellow, the streams illuminating the snowflakes floating onto the sidewalk. Through the large Palladian window in the front, I have a clear view of him shirking off his suit coat, then grabbing some amber liquid in a double glass, and settling in a chair with a tablet. In a few minutes, he laughs at something on the screen.

Would Piper's own father order a hit on her? He seems ruthless, but a murderer? I'm not sure.

By Christmas, I've figured out his patterns. Fortunately, shop business is slow, then we close for a week after the holiday. Avery and Odin mainly want to play with their friends and not hang with Dad. So I cruise around town and follow Greg Hendricks to learn about his routines.

I'm not proud of it, but I attached a GPS tracker to Piper's car before she picked it up. Just in the name of safety. That's it.

If I can't be near her all the time, I can observe where she's traveling and make sure she gets home at night before I fall asleep in my own bed. That little blip staying in her parking lot provides me more comfort than I care to admit.

Part of me wonders what I'll do if she drives to someone's house or shows up at one of the club's locations, but it hasn't happened yet.

When the kids aren't with me, I keep an eye on her from my truck. Her apartment window faces the parking lot at the back, and I have a clear view from the neighboring lot straight into the second story and up to her place. It's only to make sure she's alone and safe. That's all I'm doing.

Okay, once I sent her soup from the Thai place downtown when she seemed to have a cold. She stayed in bed all day, didn't even go to work, and sneezed when she got up once. But that was it.

And I sent her a Christmas present of Miles Davis's "Kind of Blue" album on vinyl. With a record player. Left those in her car and she didn't even say anything when she picked it up, which Tate informed me of later. Nothing more, though.

Other than a cat toy that I left at her door last night. Two. Two cat toys. Freckles seemed lonely.

Though...I did check on ways to break into her phone, but it seems impossible. That would be a crazy thing to do, right? Even if I were trying to keep her safe?

I wish I was tech savvy.

Am I dressed to the nines, hiding in the back of some young person's club while watching her dance alone on New Year's Eve? Yes. But this would be the perfect place for someone to try something with her.

“That one’s mine. She’s hot,” one of the university kids in front of me yells to his friend standing near the bar as they wait for their drinks. He’s wearing some paisley patterned dress shirt like he couldn’t find something classy to wear.

I sip my watered-down Scotch and eye the two men as they point at Piper, who’s shimmying in a flapper dress, each string of fabric vibrating out from her body like laser beams as she does.

His friend brushes through his brown curls with a hand and replies, “She’d make a good spit-roast, honestly. Petite like that? I’m sure she could fit us both.” They chuckle loudly, and my neck heats until I lean my head from side to side to stretch it.

A blond asshole turns around from the bartender to join in with them. It’s difficult to tell, but he looks like the stepson of the woman who died in the coffee shop. “That girl’s a complete slut. Would avoid unless you dirty assholes want syphilis. Not to mention, I don’t even think she likes dick. Her family’s a mess, but I’m trying to fix it.”

“Oh shit,” the paisley kid says. “That’s Maeve’s sister?”

Yep. Definitely Sean Harrison. He sips his beer and nods at his friend while glancing toward the end of the bar. My eyes follow and spot Maeve talking to a group of girls who look almost identical to her in their short dresses and curled blonde hair.

“Yeah. If her parents get back together, then there’s a chance I can stay with her. But I’m not tainting my future presidential bid with a child of divorce as my wife.” He nods at the two men, enraptured by his words, as if he’s some cult leader. “You know that shit runs through family lines like bad blood.”

The curly-haired kid huffs a laugh. He must be the bold one of the group, because he addresses the leader with a sneer. “Didn’t your stepmom file for divorce?”

Sean's eyes travel to the center of the room and fall on Piper, who's now swaying her hips seductively. "Doesn't matter now, does it?"

Maeve's hand slips over his shoulder and the sudden change in his demeanor to doting boyfriend is impressive. Good acting skills. But I don't like how he looked at my Rosy. My guts churn with trepidation.

No one approaches her the rest of the night, though.

I make sure of it.

The next week, on a cold January morning, I stop by Rainy Day to grab a coffee. Piper's not there. In fact, I think she gave up coming in after the incident, which may be a good thing.

As I scan the store, I recognize Dennis Harrison entering behind me, and my neck tightens, wondering what he'll say to me. I just don't want to have an awkward conversation of, "Thanks for trying to save my dead wife." What do you say to that?

Oddly, when his brown eyes pass over my figure, there's no recognition behind them. After a few minutes, I shuffle forward to order my drink and meet his gaze again, but there's still nothing. Part of me is disappointed. The other...is suspicious. How does one not remember that event in every detail? Know the guy who worked on your wife's chest for several minutes?

When I get my order, I stand back and pull out my phone. "Hey, Tate? Yeah. I'm going to be a bit late today. Can you hold down things there?"

Tate's heavy sigh makes me pause. "Yeah, of course. But, uh... Eli didn't show up this morning."

I grimace, thinking about my younger brother. I've been trying to ignore the patterns, but he seems to be slipping back into his old ways. That's something for another day.

Right now, I need to tail Professor Harrison.

"Okay. Just let me know when he gets there."

Me

Get your ass to work. Now.

You want to be fired? Want me to call your PO?

The reply is almost immediate.

Eli

fuck im up im up omw

For the next week, I map out Professor Harrison's routines. He lives a boring life, though. Nothing seems out of the ordinary. There're no hidden girlfriends or weird habits. But I also can't get close enough to watch him during his office hours when his young students visit behind his solid wood door.

The following week, I have the kids, but I still make time to follow Piper's blip religiously. She hasn't varied her patterns, and it doesn't seem she's taken anyone else home.

Damn . I have it bad.

I've resorted to stalking her everywhere. Online. In her home. Checking on her

family. All of her acquaintances. Visited the library a few times when I thought she wouldn't see me. The low point was asking Avery if she was becoming friends with the library assistant and what she found out about her.

I have to stop this, break this off and walk away...

Or toss her over my shoulder and take her for myself, like a fucking caveman.

One of those is definitely going to happen.

Chapter

Sixteen

PIPER

Weeks pass while I'm stuck in the mind-numbing rift of depression. It's been a while since I've been that low for that long, but I think the fog is lifting. I'm not going back on the meds. Nor back to therapy. If I have to discuss what happened to me one more time with a new person, I'd rather stay blitzed by the lack of serotonin. And lose my sex drive or vomit so much I can't eat for weeks? Nah. I'll pass.

I know I've made progress when I've showered and enjoyed it. Not just did it because I finally couldn't stand my own stink. At least this time, I made it to work every day. Despite Shanna's incessant criticisms of my performance, I knew it was a feat of strength to get dressed and show up on time. Hell, I even talked to people. Essa doesn't seem to notice anything off.

And now that I'm feeling better, it's time to celebrate.

After the library, I head to the liquor store to restock my wine cache. While surfing the aisles for exactly what I need, a group of stacked guys with Greek letters on their hoodies push a cart filled with bottles of beer. One punches another in the fully tattooed arm and his eyes dance over my figure while the first licks his bottom lip. I didn't think frat boys had tattoos like they just got out of prison, but these guys seem more like bikers than university students.

Speaking of prison... My best friend and her boyfriend broke up. Maybe this is exactly what Essa needs to try out the market. Instead of shirking from their gazes, I bat my lashes and take my time to bend over for the bottle I want on the bottom shelf.

As they pass, they all quiet, except for the one with dark hair and eyes. "Hey. You looking to party?"

I let my pink-stained lips slide into a grin and nod. "Yeah. Sure, what kind of party?"

The other frat boy tosses his arm around the front guy's shoulder and throws out, "A classy one." His palm waves to their cart. "We got bottled beer. And kegs coming, too, of course. It's on Saturday, and we'd love to fill the house with beautiful women."

"Can I bring my friend?"

One of the guys in the back steps forward. "Is she as hot as you?"

I cross my arms and stick out a hip as I stare each of them down until I can practically hear the blood rushing to their cocks. "Hotter."

"Yes. Most definitely. Bring whoever you want," the first guy says. "Even the wine bottle."

The four of them have red flags practically painted on their faces. They look like eager, dumb wolves ready to tear me apart. I shrug and give them an, "Okay, sure. Where is it?"

"Delta house on Fraternity Row near campus. Can't miss it."

Letting them check out my backside, I cast a casual, "See you there," over my

shoulder and saunter to the front of the store. Hurriedly, I text Essa that we're heading out this weekend. Though she needs something new to wear.

New year, new me. One that fucks frat guys at classy bottled beer parties and forgets about the daddy dick stalking me everywhere I go.

I don't even know what to do with Adon anymore. His presence is like a constant reminder that I'm broken and not good enough for a man like him, one with a whole life and no big issues blaring to send him into a mental health crisis. Someone who looks out for my well-being better than I can. He's got good kids, for fuck's sake. I'm pretty sure that Avery is more mature than me. What would I bring to the table other than a tragedy?

Every gift he's sent, every moment he sat in the parking lot checking on me, only made me feel worse. Unworthy. And ungrateful.

It's awful to admit that I have to be a bitch in order to save him from me. While at the same time, if he leaves, my heart will break. Dare I admit how deep my feelings for him are going? No. I can't or I'll shatter.

I was hoping that he'd just get bored and go away. But one day when he didn't show, I had a full-blown panic attack and slept in my bathtub. The fear that he'd actually left me was too overwhelming to think about.

He's like my Daddy Don guardian angel, always watching out for me wherever I go. I need him, and I hate to admit that, but there he is. He should leave if he knows what's good for him. Instead of encouraging that, as I leave the store, my eyes find his truck near the back of the parking lot as he waits for me.

Adon probably thinks I don't know he's there, but somehow, he always is. It's comforting, albeit creepy and obsessive, but I'll take it for now. As I place the bottle

of wine in my passenger seat and glance back to the loud calls and laughs of the guys behind me, I wonder what he'll do if he catches me at a college party.

Maybe it's time to draw him out of the shadows.

Saturday night, I don my lime green sequined jumpsuit and spike up my hair a bit. Essa finally listened to me and wears a cherry-printed dress I helped pick out for her. She even let me do her makeup after my own for the night.

Once we arrive and manage to squeak inside, she resists me pulling her arm through the crowd of Deltas as we snake toward the kitchen where the booze is, but I give her an excited grin to encourage her forward.

The bass resounds through my chest, making talking almost impossible, but as soon as we get to the line, a familiar curvy ass stands right in front of where I want to go. Tarin's dark brown hair waves as she swivels her hips in time to the music, her tiny red skirt barely containing the bottoms of her plump cheeks.

"What's a girl like you doing at a party like this?" I ask, sliding my arms around her waist and pressing my lips against her ear.

She jumps and turns her head until her ruby red lips almost graze mine. "Piper! What are you doing here?"

"I was invited. Seems like fun. Want to have some fun?"

The heaving breaths of alcohol she wafts at me with a giggle let me know she's ready for a good time. Her eyelids look heavy, and the whites of her eyes are a crispy pink. Oh, yeah. She started a long time ago.

She bends forward, pressing her generous rump into my waist and fills a second red

Solo cup with spiked punch, then refills her own. After handing me the sweating plastic cup, she taps mine with hers and says, “Bottoms up!”

We eye each other as we tip our cups and empty them, but I’m only pretending. It’s like I’m supposed to flirt with her, so that’s what I’m doing. Maybe another drink will make me feel it. Feel something , anything other than numb.

I can’t take another day of not being real.

So, I smile and flutter my lashes, and slip my hand into hers, then grab another drink. Essa seems preoccupied with a cute guy, so I lead Tarin into the dining room where the music is louder. It’s what Piper would do. By the time we get there, the buzz from overly sugary punch is already taking effect.

With the closeness of the bodies surrounding us and loud music, my vision blurs in time with beats playing through speakers nearby. We try to make room to dance, but it’s so packed, we can barely move. “Hang on! I got an idea!” I mouth over her ear so she can hear me better.

Shoving the last game of flip cup out of the way, I jump onto the dining room table and kick beers off as I do while the crowd around us cheers me on. I hold out my hand for Tarin, who shakes her head, but gives me a broad smile, then takes it. Once I’ve pulled her up so we’re both on top of the table, I lift my cup in victory as the music rises to a crescendo. The frat boys around us holler louder, and we dance for them seductively, all eyes on the two of us.

Tarin downs her cup and I mine, then we’re handed two more. And maybe another after that, I’m not entirely sure. All I know is I’m feeling good and free. Piper is here, and she loves to party, enjoys the attention and all the lights sparkling off my sequins.

“Piper!” Essa snags the bottom of my pants, and I lean down to kiss her cheek.

“Hey, girl!”

“Have you been drinking? How are we getting home?”

Fuck. I forgot. The boy behind her is standing close and this innocent woman needs to expand her horizons to more than Eli, despite the porn star cocks the Griffin brothers seem to have. “Oops! Sorry, Essa! I think I’ll be here longer than I thought. Are you not having fun?”

I spin on a heel and grab Tarin by the waist to pull her close. Calling out to the crowd, I yell, “Who wants to see us kiss?”

The boys hoot louder as I grip her ass with one hand and hold my cup high in the other. Leaning forward, I catch a glimpse of a formidable figure just entering the front door and freeze.

My heart stops for a full beat.

Everyone must think we’re kissing already because of how close we are and how riotously they cheer, but I’m stuck in one position as Tarin pulls back and gives me a weird grin. “What’s wrong?”

Penetrating deep chocolate eyes glare at me as Adon makes his way through the shorter partygoers surrounding us.

Panic grips my chest until I can’t breathe. “M-my daddy’s here.”

Tarin’s eyes widen as she glances around the room, and students part like the sea as the grumpy, oversized man skirts through everyone, then promptly grabs my thighs and tosses me over his shoulder. I hold in a smirk. My little plan worked.

“Hey, man...” one brave kid tries to protest, but Adon literally growls at him and keeps moving through the crowd of university students.

I give them a wave and smile behind Adon’s back. “Bye! Thanks for the party! See y’all!” A scream is forced from my belly when Adon smacks my ass hard.

“No, you won’t.”

His demanding tone makes me giddy.

When he thrusts me into his truck and slams the door behind me, I’m raring for a good fight. He jumps in and turns to me with a look that demands an answer.

I cross my arms, quirking an eyebrow. “What? I can’t party now? We’re not together, remember? Why are you here? What are you doing?—”

He grips my cheeks and shoves his mouth over mine in a searing kiss of passion. There’s no chance I can win the battle of his tongue against mine. He’s so forceful, formidable, especially when he drags me across the space and plops me on his lap. Heat flares across my body as he settles me on the firm thickness poking through his pants.

My fingers delve toward his jeans and undo his belt as his hips jerk up to meet my spread thighs. Hurriedly, I work to undo the zipper and groan down his throat. The short hairs of his mustache tickle my nose in a way I hadn’t realized how much I missed until just now. His manly scent causes a flood between my legs.

One of his palms crawls up my bare back and grips my neck and our lips are broken with a pop. “What I should have said to you is that, yes, we fucking are, Rosy. We are together. You understand?”

Rolling my bottom lip under my teeth, I nod rapidly, his declaration making my stomach twist in a knot. Does he mean it?

His fingers grip my hair tighter, and I wail, my head falling back as he grits out, “Say it. Say the words out loud.”

“We’re together?”

He spans the side of my thigh, but it’s not hard, just a warning. “No more of this shit. No playing around or being with other people. You got that?” As if he’s been thinking seriously about this for a long time, his eyes harden as he continues. “I won’t stand for it, Piper. I don’t deserve it. You’re my little girl now, and I’m your daddy. Say it. Say that you’re mine.”

“I’m yours, daddy.”

His chest rumbles with a song of satisfaction as he captures my lips again with his. “Fuck yes you are.”

It hits me. All at once. Do I really belong with him? Adon’s never really let me go, but will he when he finds out just how broken I am?

I writhe against his full length as I pull it out and his hands rub against my sequined outfit. “What the fuck is this thing? I’m ripping it.”

“Wait, no! It’s vintage.”

His head hits the back of his seat as he tries to calm himself down, but I take the opportunity to slip between his open knees under the steering wheel. “What are you doing?” Even though he asks the question, his thumb strokes my cheek like he knows exactly what I’m doing.

I give him a wink and lick the tip of his reddened crown.

“Baby...” He breathes heavily, as if he’s going to protest, but then grips the base of his dick with his forefinger and thumb. “Put your mouth around me.”

With a smirk, I do, and he responds with a high-pitched whimper. I guess he hasn’t had this done in a while.

Through gritted teeth, he gazes at me as I try to give him sultry eyes. “Fuck! I’m not going to last long.”

That confirms it. Something about him waiting for me, not being with anyone else, stokes the embers of desire I have for him to a raging fire. My tongue swivels the divot beneath the tip of his thick cock, and I plunge down as far as I can to take him, but his dick is so wide, I can barely fit a few inches in without straining.

“Relax your jaw, there, Rosy. Let me help.” I drop my mouth wide open, and he grips my cheeks before fucking my face. The trail of black hair on his lower abs scratches the tip of my nose with every scoop of his hips into me, but I hold still for him to use.

“Look at me.”

My eyes crawl up his broad body to greet his hungry eyes.

“How does it feel to suck your daddy’s big dick, little girl?”

I moan something around his granite length, and he shoves in deep and holds himself there as I choke around him.

“What was that? Hum it. It makes my balls want to explode.”

With as much as he can fit in my little mouth, he throbs against my tongue while I mutter all the nasty things I want to say to him. His head kicks back again as his chest is pulled forward. “Fuck, Rosy! Here it comes. You gonna swallow me down?”

Nodding, tears weep from my eyes as he releases with a strangled roar, filling my mouth, the taste of him an aphrodisiac on its own. “Let me see. Open wide and stick out your tongue.”

I do just as he says until he seems high and satisfied at the sight of his thick cum painting the inside of me. “Good. Now close and swallow it all.”

While I obey, he strokes my face with his thumb and gazes at me with a look of reverence and follows it with a husky, “Good girl.”

My ass wiggles at the compliment.

“Sit in your seat and put on your seatbelt.”

I manage to slide out from under him and climb over the center console, but the alcohol has really taken effect, so it’s more like falling over onto the cushiony interior. “Where are we going?”

“First to your place to feed Freckles and get you a bag. Then you’re coming home with me.” He starts the truck, and I think I would feel more uneasy about his proposal if I weren’t so dizzy, but I nod as he pulls out from the street. “Tomorrow, when you’re sober, I’m fucking you until you come three times. Once on my fingers, once on my face, and once on my cock.”

My eyebrows raise as I settle back with a small smile coating my lips. But he’s not finished. His hand slides across the space to grab mine, and he squeezes it until I drift into a swirly slumber of contentment.

“Then, I’m taking you on our first date.”

Chapter

Seventeen

ADON

Pink hair cloaks the pillow next to me in a twisted pile of rubble, and my fingers delicately straighten each lock back into place. Not because I don't enjoy her mess. In fact, I'm wondering if some part of me likes that the most about her, the fact she needs someone to care for her. Not that I'd ever admit it.

I do it so she doesn't have to be in pain later when she brushes it out.

Piper doesn't consider the consequences, and that's all I think about, usually. With her, though, it seems I can be somewhat of a mess, too. Give in to my baser instincts. It's acceptable to bend the rules while still using some to discipline her with.

She's so young, though. Sleeping soundly next to me with a slight snore from her alcohol induced haze. Probably won't even have a hangover.

Unlike my brother.

I pull the warm blanket up higher over her shoulders, then slip out of the bed as carefully as I can to not disturb her. Despite wanting to be inside her last night, I refrained and slept with her nuzzled against my bare chest instead. It's something I hadn't realized I missed, having someone there and present with me.

Grabbing some shorts, I slip them on, then pick up my phone.

Rhodes

Eli's in trouble

there's empty bottles under his bed

My jaw clenches, thinking about this pattern he's developed. I just knew something would go wrong. And now I gotta fix it. Except, once again, I feel powerless.

Me

Make sure he gets to work on Monday. If he's drunk or high, I'll deal with it.

Rhodes

k

Why is it as soon as I'm feeling some peace, life has to rip it away? Can't I be happy, too? Just enjoy this time?

I'm less quiet as I use the bathroom, then head downstairs in my empty house. As I stand barefoot in the cold kitchen, I rub the back of my head. What does Piper even like to eat? Thai noodles when she's sick, yeah. That salad place down on Main on Wednesdays. She seemed to like the diner's chili. But for breakfast? Muffins from Rainy Day are all I know.

So, that's where I head after getting dressed in clean clothes that have been sitting in the dryer. I toss my winter coat over my jeans, slip on some boots, and hope the garage door humming open doesn't wake her before I get back.

The barista she's always flirting with is behind the counter, and I probably sound like an ass when I say it, but I don't care. "You know Piper?"

"Uh...yeah. I know Piper."

"Can you make her favorite? With a muffin, too? I'll take them to her where she's lying in my bed right now. Oh, and a large black coffee to go for me."

Her eyes widen at the order, but she gives me a slight nod and sets to work. If I have to scare off every lover she's had, I'll do it. My haunches are raised as I pay for the order, maintaining a fierce gaze at the barista. I know the poor girl has nothing to do with this, but I can't help it.

Piper seems to need protection all the time. Sure, mainly from herself, but I want to provide it for her.

By the time I get home, I'm worried the coffees are going to be too chill, but when I walk in, the air is filled with a scent of cinnamon and fresh baked bread.

Clouds of white flour dust the butcher block island, along with various baking materials, and Piper stands in the middle, slapping some off her hands as she bounces on her toes. She only wears one of my black T-shirts that's so large on her, it could be a gown. The sight of it sends my cock into a raging fury of need.

This tiny girl is wearing my clothes in my kitchen and baking something in my oven...like she's truly mine. Fuck, yes.

A broad smile lights up her beautiful face as she spots me. "Hi! Oh my god, I wondered where you went! Did you check your phone?" She hustles to my side and grabs the coffee tray and bag from me while I stand, stunned, trying to keep myself from impaling her on the counter.

“I thought you’d want your favorite after last night.” I shuffle to a stool and wave a hand around at the pans she has laid out. “Not feeling bad, then?”

A deep moan escapes her lips as she sips her latte, and it makes my dick jump against the zipper. Slyly, I reach down to adjust myself. “Nope. Thought I’d make you all cinnamon rolls, but the kids aren’t here, are they?”

With a shake of my head, I’m almost silenced by her admission. She wanted to make breakfast for my kids . “No, they’re with Em this week.”

She dips her hand into the paper bag and won’t look at me. Her voice gives some false confidence as she says, “Oh, yeah. That makes sense. It’s better they weren’t here to see me last night, right?” A laugh escapes her chest with a forced halt.

I stand and sidle up behind her, then grip her shoulders while she pries apart her bakery muffin. My lips nestle against the column of her neck, and she shivers in my hold. “Let’s do this slow, but it will happen. They’ll love you with or without cinnamon rolls.”

My arms drop to her waist as I sway with her held against my chest. She meets my gaze with a shy smile and relaxes back into me as if I just told her exactly what she needed to hear. “Okay.”

I work to help her clean up the disaster she left around us while her creation bakes in the oven, the smell making my tongue water with anticipation. Her phone constantly buzzes with text messages and with every vibration of it, my irritation rises. After the sixth or seventh, I finally snap.

“Who the fuck is texting you so much?”

She scrolls through her screen and hands it to me. “Some spam messages. I’ve been

getting them so much lately and don't know what to do about them. I report them as junk, but they just keep coming."

My eyes scan over them and she's right. All of them have links they want her to click and various urgent messages, making it seem like she needs to deal with them or else. She continues to wash the dishes while I sneakily glance over her other text threads.

A lead balloon fills my stomach as I see the blond kid's face. Sean's picture fills me with a bout of jealousy. Piper continues bopping to some unheard music, and I quickly look over their messages to one another.

Except there are only a couple of benign ones. The last is from a few days ago.

Sean

So this is the band I thought you'd be into. Here's their info.

Piper

Thanks I'll check them out

Sean sent a link to a website, but the URL looks long and complicated. My eyebrow raises as I hold the phone up to her. "Did you look at this website?"

Her green eyes flick to my face for a moment, then focus on the screen. "No. Not yet." She lifts a finger to press on it, but I take a step back.

"Don't. I'm worried this is a virus or scam."

Confusion paints her expression. "Why would my sister's boyfriend send me a virus?"

The timer goes off on the oven, and she hurries over to pull the tray out, setting it on the cold stove burners.

When she catches my gaze this time, we match each other's confused expressions. Tapping on the phone, I point to his picture. "I seen this kid at the club..." I suck in my cheeks, not knowing how much of my night to expose. "He didn't seem very trustworthy. Made some remarks about your family not being, uh, good enough for him and that he was working to fix it."

Piper's blush lips pinch tight, and she takes the phone back from me, then plops onto a bar stool. "He's an asshole. But he's never bothered me. Not really . Not enough to do something like send me a phone virus. Or..."

"Shoot at you? Steal your purse?"

She shrugs. "No. No way. I can't see that. Though..."

Sipping my coffee, I wait for her to work through whatever has come to her mind.

"Though he could probably get away with a lot, knowing who his father is in the community. But I wouldn't think he even owns a gun or would know how to use it. Not like my dad, who goes shooting all the time." The whites of her eyes flash as she rolls them, then she freezes. My heart pounds harder, too.

"Your dad owns a gun?"

Her throat bobs as she swallows. "Yeah. And he was having an affair with that woman. But I really don't understand what I have to do with anything, let alone why my own father would..." she trails off, and it makes me think she's come up with a reason her own family would want her dead. Instead of dread, there's fear behind her expression as her shoulders stiffen.

I slide behind her and wrap my arms around her, but she jumps suddenly. “Sorry. What is it that he has against you?”

“It’s not him. It’s mainly my mother and sister. They just—” Her chest rises as she straightens up. With a deep inhale, she lowers her voice. “Something bad happened to me and they don’t believe me. They blame me, or whatever.”

“What happened, Piper?”

She squirms out of my hold and darts away. “I want to eat my cinnamon roll. Want one?”

I let a small smile greet my lips and nod. “Yeah, definitely. But, hey. I’m not bothered by you keeping this to yourself. For now. I hope to make you feel safe enough to tell me one day.”

She bites into one of the rolls and hands me one.

“Damn , Rosy. This is the best cinnamon roll I’ve ever had.”

Pausing her bite, she licks her bottom lip of some icing and blinks at me. “Really?”

“Fuck yes. I wouldn’t lie.”

A cute flush covers her cheeks, and she bounces again like she’s happy at the compliment. I just hope she stays here and makes more stuff like this.

“I put some chai spices in the dough. I like the exotic flavor.”

I polish off another one, involuntarily moaning and grunting with every bite. “It’s amazing! You love to bake, huh?”

The force of nature turns a bit shy as she cleans up some flour. “Yeah. Sometimes, while I’m creating things in the kitchen, I pretend I own my own bakery.”

The confession makes me want to thank her for sharing a piece of herself with me. I can’t get enough of these revelations. But these pieces of information aren’t enough. I need more. I think I’ll always need more.

“Tonight, I want to take you to a fancy place. Some place nice like you deserve.”

“Deserve? Was my blow job that good? ’Cause I was sort of out of practice.”

My thumb brushes some flour off her pink cheek, and I chuckle. “Nah, just for being you. But yeah. The blow job was an excellent bonus.”

“I need to go home to take care of Freckles. And shower and stuff...”

I slap my palms together to clean them and eye a roll longingly. “That’s fine. Ugh... One more and I’ll take you.”

She heads upstairs to get dressed while I tidy up and store the rest of my newest addiction in some plastic wrap while patting my full belly. When she returns, I plant a kiss on her cheek and lead her to the truck.

It’s a sunny winter’s day as we head toward her place, warm rays streaming into the cabin. I grab her hand, placing it on the console between us. When she glances at me with a grin, the ice surrounding my resolve melts as much as the weather. I needed this. I can’t lose it. Not now.

We stay silent on the drive, relaxed as we listen to some jazz. It feels like she’s always been here, or maybe I was just waiting for the right moment when my heart could grow enough to love her.

Love?

Where did that word come from?

As I pull into her building's parking lot, I give her a sidelong glance. Yeah. I think I could love this girl. Maybe I already do.

She grows especially quiet with her hand on the door handle. When I think she'll give me a kiss and a goodbye, she pauses. Slowly, she turns to me and tears coat the bottom rim of her lashes. "Adon?"

"Yeah, Rosy?"

"Do you think my family wants to kill me?"

That does it. The vulnerability in her fragile brow, the shaking lips, the rapid rise and fall of her chest... I'm going to love the shit out of her until she knows her worth.

No matter what it takes. I'm in this.

I let my hands grip her tiny face and pull her close. "If they try, I'll fucking end them."

Chapter

Eighteen

PIPER

I've never been this nervous about a date before. But, honestly, I haven't really had a date before. Sure, there have been times I've gone to clubs or maybe hung out at a party or someone's house. Being picked up, dressed up, taken to a fancy place for an expensive dinner by a man in a full three-piece suit? Yeah...never.

It feels like I have nothing to wear that doesn't make me look like a child next to Adon. He'll probably look like he did at the club the first time I saw him, and I'll be on his arm like a sparkly toy. A deranged animal. Maybe a common hooker.

As I flip through my vintage dresses, my lip finds its way under my teeth, my anxiety growing. Finally, I give up. There's not enough time to buy something black and normal. So I go with a bright green cocktail dress that has a sequined halter top and ends with organza flowers on the short, poofy skirt. Once I pair it with hot pink stilettos and ruffle my hair into place, I feel like me, especially when I add some dangling peacock earrings.

If he's really into me, he won't mind, right? I don't want to pretend anymore. And Adon makes me feel like I'm okay; he gives me space to become Piper.

When the knock comes on the door, I'm actually ready for once. Other than putting on some lipstick. And filling Freckles's water bowl. And watering the houseplants.

Adon stands by in his fitted black suit and watches me buzz around him and even offers to help.

“No, I’ve got it.” With a half step, I skirt around him with the watering can, but he grabs it from me and heads to the living area to water plants.

Snapping his fingers, he points to Freckles’s stuff. “You take care of the cat. I’ve got this. Then we can make our reservations.”

Stunned by his commanding voice, I smirk and say, “Yes, boss.”

He spins and arches one eyebrow. “That’s yes, daddy .”

Well, now I’m soaked again. Great.

In the truck, I can’t stop fidgeting with things. It’s still chilly for being early spring and I forgot my jacket. Sensing this, Adon blares the heat and twists out of his suit coat at a red light. “Put this on.”

It’s toasty inside and smells like him, all manly and comforting. “Thanks,” I say, wrapping it around me.

“You look amazing, by the way.”

“Really? Not too, um, sparkly? Or young?”

The corner of his lip raises in a sly grin. “I like you sparkly and young. It’s how I met you and how I’ll always see you.”

Now my heart is as warm as my body. My smile matches his as I settle back in the seat.

We pull into the parking lot of a restaurant I've only heard of, but never dared to enter. Adon gets out and rushes to my side of the truck, then opens my door, offering me his hand. Like we're on a real date. He even makes me feel like we are when he ushers me inside the restaurant and tells the host his name for the reservation.

"I've never been here before," I tell him.

"Me, neither." He pulls out my chair, and I place his coat on the back before he sits down across from me.

"Really? That surprises me."

"Why?" Crystal goblets of water are placed in front of us, and when he takes a sip from his, I mimic him.

"I just assume you and your ex-wife would have been here."

"Nah, we didn't do stuff like this."

While I open the menu and look at the selection of foods I don't recognize, my eyes glance up at him. He's watching me carefully. "Piper, I haven't felt this way about anyone. I need you to understand that."

I've heard lines before. Usually from married men. My shield goes up to protect myself, despite the serious look in his deep chocolate eyes. "That sounds sweet, Adon. Thanks for saying it. I'll have lobster."

A flush spreads up his neck and across his cheeks. "I'm not just saying it, Rosy. You're my girl and we established it. I-I know it's fast, but I think for your safety you should stay with me. Things aren't right out there, and I don't want you to get hurt."

My mouth drops open as my breathing falters. “You want me to move in with you?”

It all just seems like a bad idea. He’ll probably have me get rid of my furniture first, then my clothes, then my cat and plants... I can just imagine living with Adon and the rules he’d set up for me.

“Yeah. I liked last night, and I want more.” He grows quiet for a moment, then says, “I want that every day.”

As I choke on a reply, the waiter comes over to take our orders. “She’ll have the lobster and steak with an apple martini. I’d like the same, but with a double of bourbon. Best you’ve got.”

“Hey! I didn’t actually want lobster!” Scrambling, I look at the menu while the server looks between us both.

“Okay, what will you have then, miss?”

“Um, can I have a few more minutes?”

“Of course, madam.”

Adon releases a heavy sigh that almost blows out the candle sitting between us. “I thought you’d want me to order for you when you said?—”

“I don’t.”

“Piper... You’re on thin fucking ice right now with me.”

My phone dings with a text from Essa, and I ignore his threat to respond.

Essa

Are you busy? I need a chaperone...

Me

I'm sorry, babe. I can't. On a terrible date with some asshole.

Essa

No worries! Tell me about it later!

"Who was that?" Adon cranes his neck to see what I'm doing under the table.

"So now you need to know who I'm messaging? It's none of your business, daddy."

He tosses his napkin down and stands as the server hurries over as if he'd just called him. Adon taps two fingers on the table, impatiently waiting.

"Miss?"

"Oh, I'll have the steak and lobster with an apple martini, thank you."

Adon's grimace grows tighter, but the waiter only nods once, then scurries off.

"Up. Let's go."

"What? No. I'm on a date."

"Yeah, you are. Get your ass out of that chair now before I create a scene you won't like."

Some patrons turn their heads toward us, and I slowly get to my feet and brush off my dress like nothing is happening. With gingerly steps across the plush gold carpet, I walk toward the back hall where the restroom sign is located, but Adon hurries to my side and grips my arm to lead me firmly toward the women's room.

He tosses open the door and scans the area, seeing it's empty, then he shuts and locks it behind us. "Over this counter, now."

"What do you mean?" I tilt my head, eyes widening as I take in his expression.

Like a bull, his nostrils flare as he turns toward me with his hands on his hips. "Little girl, come and bend over this fucking counter before I make you. You've earned a spanking. Daddy's going to punish you so hard."

With a glance at his trousers, I can tell he's so hard, and I smirk, then saunter toward the sink, but he grabs my arms and shoves me into it before I can position myself. His broad palm flattens against my back at the same time as his other hand lifts my dress. "Thank me for every swat I'm about to give you."

Just as I think of something nasty to say, the words are changed into a scream as he spanks me harshly on one ass cheek. "Adon!"

Another one lands in the same spot. "That's not my name. You know that."

His hand works up to my neck to hold me down as he delivers another two slaps. "Oh, fuck, daddy. That hurts."

"I know it hurts, baby, but this is your punishment. Thank daddy for it."

Through a tiny whimper, I do. "T-thank you, daddy."

Without another moment's hesitation, he rips my panties straight off, unzips, and shoves his full cock inside me. The cold glass of the mirror gives nothing back as my hand tries to claw at it from the force of the intrusion. Adon shifts his grip from the back of my neck to the front as he pulls me up to look at our reflection.

“Look at you, taking daddy's big cock like a dirty whore in the bathroom.” He shoves inside me until the breath is knocked from my lungs. The thickness stretches me wide as I try to spread my legs to accommodate his size. Realizing it, he grabs one of my thighs and lifts my bent knee up onto the counter. “Now I can get in there deep. You see me, Rosy? You see us in the mirror? Look at us and how we fit together.”

My eyes roll into the back of my head when he hits a spot that makes me quiver all over. The hand encircling my neck squeezes until I pop my lids open and only see him. Adon's face is full of intensity, half angry and half something else.

He turns my face to see where we're joined, his balls slapping against my bare pussy, hitting my clit rhythmically, torturously. I can't even pretend to be quiet anymore. The wails seeping from my throat are erotic, while the sounds our bodies make as they join are pornographic.

The hand he uses to grip my waist swivels around to my belly and presses in, the tip of his cock protruding through my lower abdomen.

“I'm not going to hold back anymore. No condoms. I fucking hope you get knocked up. Then you'll know you're mine. Can't escape me if you carry our child, can you?”

My protest is cut off with his tongue inside my mouth, and I melt as he works himself harshly inside me. “Say that's what you want... Tell me.”

I can't even think. The pleasures rippling through my nerves are saturated with bliss.

“Say it,” he whispers against my lips. “Tell me you want my baby, and I’ll let you come.”

All I want to do is fall over the edge into that heavenly territory only he can push me to, and I’m going to anyway without saying a word. So I shove my ass back against him, grabbing every inch of his cock to use, but he stops. He drops his hands and freezes while still inside me, then leans back away from me until only his dick is touching me. A frustrated growl erupts from my throat as I try to hump him, and he guides me slightly with a hand on my lower back. “You’re not going to come that way, Rosy. Need help?”

“Yes! Asshole.”

He spanks me so hard tears form in my eyes.

“Y-yes, daddy!”

Gripping my jaw, he pulls my face to his, our lips grazing. “Then what do you say?”

“I-I want your baby. Fill me up and put it inside.” One tear relinquishes its hold on my lid as it spills over onto my cheek, and he sticks out his tongue to lick it up. There’s something released within me as I admit that. As I confess that maybe I do want Adon in that way. There’s a hidden fantasy I have that I could have a family with him, that he could be my husband, and we could raise children together. His kids would be like mine, too.

When his fingers work to grip the back of my neck and pull me into his deep, penetrating kiss, I accept it. I know I want it, and I scream into his mouth with the fulfillment his cock gives me as he pulses inside of me, close to my bare womb.

My inner muscles clench rapidly to gather up every drop of his cum, holding it in

where I want it most.

Breaking the seal of our kiss, he presses his forehead against mine and whispers, “Good fucking girl. Such a good girl. Now, straighten yourself up, and let’s go have a good dinner date.”

Chapter

Nineteen

ADON

Somehow, I've turned into a complete fucking sap. Spring is here, and in the midst of rainy days, flowers blooming, and warm winds, I find myself smiling more than I have in years.

"No, like this." Piper giggles as she trims some of my beard while I lean over the sink, straddling her little legs with my thighs and pinning her in with my arms on either side. She lifts her neck to show me how she wants me to turn my face for her.

"Not too short."

"Stop moving! Oh my god, I'll cut too much if you don't shut up."

Despite closing my mouth, I can't help but grin. I just want to kiss her all the fucking time. And she's pretty much moved in, despite her reservations. Though she insists on staying at her place when the kids are here, which is fine. We'll slowly introduce them more and more.

Eli's doing well on his own. He and Essa worked things through, and he's been focused ever since. Rhodes has decided to change directions in his career and become a professor of nursing instead, teaching at Northview University. He finally dumped his awful girl who we couldn't stand. Let's just hope he doesn't go back to her.

For the first time, things seem right . Piper still doesn't trust me fully, but every day we're together, I sense that she's opening up.

I'm so in love with this girl. Though I haven't told her yet, the words are always on the tip of my tongue. If only she loved me back...

"Rosy, you look faint. What's going on?"

"I cut you a little, I'm sorry..." Her face pales as her pupils shrink.

A snorted laugh escapes my nose. "Tough as nails, but passes out with blood. Did you take a pregnancy test?"

That seems to bring her back to reality as I take the scissors from her and clean up the tiny spot of red with a piece of tissue.

"Huh?" She attempts to slide off the vanity, but I hold her in place, then press my lips against her forehead.

"Fainting? You could be pregnant. Take a test, let's see."

"I-I don't think so." Her nails dig into my bare chest as she shoves me away, then heads toward my bedroom.

Hurriedly, I follow behind. "Wait, stop. Do not move. Turn around and look at me."

As if giving up the fight, her shoulders slump and she does as I say, but crosses her arms. She's protecting herself from something. "Talk to me. What is it?"

"You're going to be mad..."

My gut churns. Did she cheat on me? “Just tell me.”

“I couldn’t take those awful pills, so I went and got a copper IUD placed a couple of weeks ago.”

Confusion coats my brow. “And...” Still waiting for her to tell me some horrific news, I brace myself for the worst.

She waves her hands to her sides dramatically. “And that’s it! You wanted babies with me, and I’m not having them... At least not right now.”

Her green eyes flash like she’s expecting a fight. “So you think I’m going to be mad because you got birth control and don’t want kids. Or at least not right now.”

“Yes, Adon. You keep telling me you’re going to pump me full of kids and?—”

I laugh, slapping the back of my neck with my heated palm. “I’m sorry, Rosy. I just fucking lose my mind when I’m about to come inside you. Things fly out of my mouth. I mean, obviously, I’d love to have children with you. If you don’t, that’s fine. I got two awesome ones already. No reason to think I’ll be mad. Come here.”

With a panting breath, she eyes me suspiciously, then takes a few steps forward until I gather her tiny body in my arms and squeeze her hard. Kissing the top of her head, I inhale deeply, saturating myself with her scent. She hugs me back, then rests her chin on my chest.

“You’re not upset?”

“Can we just pretend I don’t know? Let’s just pretend I’ll be getting you pregnant every time and we can play that game.”

The freckles disappear on her nose as she scrunches it with a giggle. “Absolutely.” Her face turns serious for a moment, and she blinks rapidly. “Adon?”

“Hmm?”

“I’ve never felt safe until I’m like this with you. You make me feel so secure.”

If there was any ice left around my heart, it’s all gone now. With a steadying breath, I gaze into her eyes and say, “I love you, Piper.”

She gives me a small smile, one tear falling over her cheek as she does. “I love you, too, Adon.”

The words send heat waves through my chest and heal things I didn’t realize were broken. I can’t help the emotion that warms my face until I have to clear my tight throat.

My palms grip her ass and lift her up until her legs surround my waist as I press my lips against hers. Her flavor fills my mouth, along with her tongue, and I groan in response, wanting more of her. Walking us to my bed, I plop her down on her back, then kneel between her legs as she spreads them for me.

“A-Adon...” she huffs out as I pull her panties down and toss them aside. “We have to get ready to go.”

“Give me a minute.”

Her hand presses the back of my head to her pussy, and I lick it up, sucking on her clit. She rides my nose while protesting. “We can’t. We-we-we can’t... The party.”

“Give me two minutes.” My lips hum against her labia, and she squeals while

continuing to hump my face. Delving one finger inside her, I plunge in repeatedly while flicking on her clit just the way she likes. “Ten minutes,” I mumble as I pull down my sweatpants and grip my hard cock.

“They’re coming.”

Downstairs, the voices rise with a question, and I’m sure everyone wants to know where the birthday girl is.

“They-they-they’re coming... ” she moans until I can’t take the sounds anymore; she’s got me so worked up.

Standing, I grip her hips and tug her ass toward me, then plunder her body, forcing my cock all the way inside.

“I’m coming!” Her scream rattles the mirror over my dresser, and I smile as she raises her chest to the ceiling. One of her peaked buds fits perfectly between my lips as I suck, thrust, then come with her, filling her pussy as if I’d get her knocked up.

Am I disappointed she can’t get pregnant right now? Nah... Hopefully, she wants to someday. I think she’s it for me.

“Will you two quit whatever you’re doing and get downstairs? We’re waiting, and it’s awkward now!” Rhodes yells through the door, and I give my girl a smirk, her cheeks flaming bright red as her eyes widen.

“Oh my god, they heard me.”

“Most definitely,” I say, slipping out of her slowly.

She slaps my bicep. “Avery and Odin are in the kitchen!”

“I think this is the first time I’ve ever seen you embarrassed.”

Her eyes fall closed as she cringes. “I guess I just don’t want them to think bad about me. Honestly, I don’t give a fuck about Rhodes and Eli and Essa. Just your kids.”

“They love you,” I assure her.

She slinks by me and runs her hands through her short, pink locks, then pulls on her dress. Giving me her back, I know she’s trying to hide from me like she does. So I stand behind her and wrap my arms around her little body, pressing my lips to her bare shoulder. “They do. And so do I.”

As she flips around, there’s a bit of panic in her eyes. “I feel like I’m not good enough for them... For, you know.”

My big palms brush back her hair, and I can’t help a smile that comes over my face. It’s almost as if she’s considered being a permanent part of our lives. Just where I want her.

“You are. You’re perfect the way you are, Piper. No one can do you better. We miss you when you’re not around, you know that?” I tap the end of her nose, and she smiles again, but throws her hands on her hips and gives me a scolding brow.

“I’m not moving in.”

Wandering away from her, I tug on some boxers and jeans. “Not yet...”

When we get downstairs, my family gathers around the kitchen table and sings “Happy Birthday” to my girl. Her eyes light up as I join in, and her best friend grabs her in a hug. Avery even bops on her toes excitedly before shoving a hastily wrapped present at her.

“I bought this for you!”

“Me? Oh my god, Avery. You didn’t have to!” Piper’s shaky fingers dig into the gift with reckless abandon.

Avery snorts. “I wanted to!”

I toss an arm around my daughter’s shoulders and give her a kiss on her head. “Love you.”

She gives me a side hug and looks up at me with those big eyes. “I love you, too, Dad.”

“This is amazing! Thank you so much! From the library of Piper Hendricks...” She reads off on the embosser. I know that Emily helped the kids pick it out, and for that, I’m even more grateful. Just seeing the joy on my girl’s face, and knowing that my family helped put it there, makes my heart warm.

“Where’s your present to her, Adon?” Eli asks, shoving a huge bite of pizza in his mouth.

Piper’s cheeks flame pink to match her hair.

“Don’t worry about that,” I say, then kiss the top of her head. “I’ve got something for her. It’s private.”

Essa’s eyes sparkle as she gives me an approving nod, but Piper seems to pull away. Like she feels uncomfortable with the attention, which is so not like her.

I keep my observations to myself as we finish up the party, but by the time everyone leaves and the kids head out with Emily, Piper’s attitude is dark and gloomy.

Scooping up a piece of birthday cake, I hold the fork out for her to take a bite. “Talk to me. What’s going on? You seem like you just had the worst birthday ever.”

She takes the bite with a sigh, but then grabs her denim coat. “No. It was amazing, really.”

“Well, I still need to give you your gift.”

“Adon...you don’t need to get me anything.”

“I want to.”

Shrugging on her coat, she grabs her crochet purse. Since she’s been staying with me all week, most of her stuff is up in the bedroom and bathroom. “I should go home.”

I reach over the kitchen island and stroke her cheek. “Rosy, what’s going on?”

“It’s just a lot. We’re moving fast, and I...”

My jaw sets. Not this again. I thought she was with me. “You’re scared. You’re trying to hide from me. You had a great day with my family and saw how your life could be and think you don’t deserve it. That you’re, what, damaged?”

With a toss of her pink hair, she faces me and narrows her eyes. “I am , Adon. You’re just too horny to see it.”

“Is that what you think this is? That I’m just pussy whipped?”

She doesn’t say anything, just crosses her arms, but her attitude makes me angry.

“Maybe it’s best you head home tonight, then, if that’s what you think. You think so

little of me. I'm in love with you, Piper. I want you to move in with me and share a life with me. But you're still hiding parts of yourself. I want all of you."

Heated emotion clouds my face as I realize... Now I understand exactly what Emily was talking about all those years. Piper is me. I was this way in my first marriage, and now I'm begging my love to talk with me, open up, just communicate what she's feeling. I guess she's as confused about her soup of thoughts as I was all those years. Everything seems so clear to me now.

Piper doesn't say goodbye, just spins on her heel and heads out the door. I let her go to cool off, hoping we can talk again later. I could explain that I understand how difficult it can be to talk about something you can't figure out.

I did want to give her present to her, but I guess that will have to wait for another day.

An unfamiliar ache pulses in my chest. I don't like arguing with her, or even being away from her. I get panicky. Things seemed to have settled since the last time something happened, but it's always in the back of my mind that someone could try to harm her.

To distract myself, I clean up the kitchen from the party and then take my time getting ready for bed. I stare at my bookshelves far too long trying to decide something to read, then pull out an old sci-fi novel, hoping I can get lost in a different world.

Just as I think about texting her, my phone rings. It's Piper.

"Rosy? You okay?" I'm already on high alert. The last time she called me, she'd been in a car accident.

"Adon, no." Her voice shakes with a cry that has my stomach dropping to my feet.

“Someone followed me all the way here. I think he’s outside. Please come over. Hurry!”

“I’m on my way.”

Chapter

Twenty

PIPER

I hate how he can read me so well. Everything he said was spot on.

With a bat in my hand, I wait on the other side of my apartment door, worried the hooded figure will get clever and bust in.

I can't make out anything other than his height and build, which is tall and lanky. Broad in the shoulders. But he hovers just outside of my peephole view finder until Adon's truck pulls into the parking lot. As soon as the loud muffler roars, the guy takes off down the stairs.

I fling my door open and chase after him screaming, "Stay away from me!" With a wild swing of the bat, I try to find him, but he's nowhere to be seen when I run out the back door of the building.

Adon rushes toward me and grabs my shoulders. "Rosy. I told you to stay inside, little girl. Upstairs, now ."

Hustling back to my place, Adon lingers to grab his overnight bag from the bed of his truck and scours the tree line behind us. His hand brushes against my lower back as I open the door. Freckles pounces on him like an attack kitty, but Adon bends down to scoop him up and gives him a few love strokes.

After relaying a detailed recount of everything that happened, I yawn heavily. “I have to work in the morning, and I know you hate it here. If you want to go back home?—”

“Absolutely not. I love being wherever you are.”

We settle into my sofa bed, and I turn off the lamp, then press my cheek against his bare chest. “You were absolutely right, Adon. I’m scared. And feel unworthy.”

His deep bass rattles in his chest as he murmurs, “I love you. Just the way you are. Perfect for me.”

He’s like jazz. Smooth, comfortable, and makes me feel safe . When I think about him and what he’s done for me, who he has been for me, such a patient man by my side, I get tears in my eyes. The chaotic storm in my head grows silent when I’m with him.

“I love you, Adon.”

Voice deepening with sleep, he tugs me tighter. “I love you, Rosy.”

The next morning, he leaves early, but tells me to meet him at an address I don’t recognize after my shift. I dress in an orange paisley short button-up dress with a wide belt and white mod boots, then head to Rainy Day for a much-needed latte.

Maggie eyes me suspiciously as I give her a bright smile. “Why do you look like that?” she asks.

“I’m just happy. And tell Bob I’m paying.” It’s not much, but I’ve saved up about thirty dollars to cover my enormous tab. Bob’s head pokes out from behind the kitchen door, and his jaw drops as he sees me flash the cash at the register.

Grabbing my hot cup to go, I head toward the exit, but am halted when my mother pipes up from an empty seat. “Piper!”

A grimace forms across my lips, but I can make an excuse that I don’t have much time before work. “Hello, Mother.”

“Hello to you, too. Don’t act like that. Sit down and drink coffee with your mother.”

“My shift starts soon and?—”

“Oh, yes. Your little job. Well, you can spare five minutes.”

Slumping into the chair across from her, I wait for some negative comment to spew from her mouth.

“Always so dramatic.” She reaches across the table to grab a few sugar packets and pours them into her coffee, then sticks some in her purse. The motion triggers my memories from that day Meghan was murdered.

“Mom?”

Her green eyes flash to mine. I rarely call her that. “Yes?”

“Did you know Meghan Martinez? Like, before that day?”

She snorts a laugh. “The day before she choked, you mean? I’d seen her around with your father. But I heard he got himself into hot water with that one. Threatening to sue him for sexual harassment. Serves him right.”

My eyebrows meet, and I get a nauseating feeling deep in my belly. I lean across the table, whispering harshly, “Did you put something in her drink?”

A haughty expression coats her made-up face. “Oh, nothing serious , Piper.” She giggles. Actually giggles , as if recalling what she had done.

“Mother, what did you do?”

“Bitch had it coming to her. I put a little liquid stool softener in her coffee, that’s it.”

It feels like I’m having a heart attack. “What if she was allergic to that? What if you...” My voice drops even lower. “Mom? What if you killed her?”

With a dismissive wave of her hand, she laughs. “You’ve always been so dramatic. Embellishing everything. It was nothing . A prank. It’s not like I murdered her. I didn’t.” Instead of a jovial expression, her face changes into something darker. “Would I have?”

I can hardly swallow the anxious lump forming in my throat as I await her answer to her own question.

Green eyes meet mine with a solid seriousness that steals my breath.

“ Yes . And would be quite happy about it.”

I’ve been furious with my family. Grown to hate them, even. Embarrassed and avoidant, sure. But afraid ?

Not until this moment.

I’m not even sure I tell her goodbye before I stand and leave, wandering toward the library in a rushed haze.

What do normal people do in this situation? Ones without sick fucks for parents.

People that can hold more than one feeling at once and be okay with all of them. Perhaps even name them all. I'm sure there are fully productive members of society who have a tangled mess of thoughts like this and know exactly what to do about each one.

Instead, I feel fragmented. Like my body is split into hundreds of shards of who I used to be. There's a memory of her...but she doesn't exist any longer.

Are my parents murderers ? My hands slap at my cheeks. What if they were in this together?

I believe my feet make it into the library. My hands hang my jacket up on the coat hook. Thighs help me sit on a chair.

But I'm not here .

Do I call the police?

Just thinking about that makes me want to vomit. Sure, my parents have been horrid, but they are still the ones who raised me. So I shouldn't turn them in, right?

"Piper!"

My attention snaps back to reality as Shanna barks at me.

"What?"

"You remember you're staying late today, right? I'm heading out."

"Um, yes. Closing," I hear myself say absently.

Visitors bring books to the front. The machine beeps. Hushed whispers float through the air. Book covers crinkle. My phone buzzes repeatedly. Somehow, it ends up being quitting time. I put on my jacket and step outside.

Am I falling into another hole? Go back to my place and hide?

Another vibration in my pocket makes me shake off the doldrums for a moment, but my heart sinks when I read how many missed calls from Adon I have. Oh...no.

Hurriedly, I press his number.

“Rosy...seriously. I stayed there for an hour. You never answered my calls or my texts.”

“Please don’t be mad. I forgot.”

He stays silent and guilt slams into my guts like a pallet of bricks.

“I-I’ll meet you at the address now! I swear!”

“Fine.”

It’s only two blocks over to the address Adon gave me, but by the time I arrive, I worry I’m at the wrong place. The glass front store has brown paper covering the windows and looks abandoned. Parts of the old sign are visible, but not readable, broken. Possibly, it was shattered at one time.

Just like me.

I don’t even hear him approach, but his irritation is palpable. “Why were you late?”

Tears line my lower lids as I glance up at him. “Oh, you know me.”

“Rosy...I wanted to give you a gift. And it doesn’t seem like you’re very into it.” One of his hands rubs against the side of his head as he sighs deeply. “Very into me.”

That just makes me burst out in pain. Sobs wrack my chest as I shake violently. He’s so wrong about that. But maybe it’s for the best.

Huge arms collapse around my chest as he carries me toward the annex that holds the front door, away from the people mulling along the street. He sets me on my feet to face him and lifts my chin up with a crooked finger underneath.

“You have to tell me. What’s going on? And I don’t want to hear about your day; I mean, who did this to you? ”

My wails don’t stop, even as I huff out some explanation. “My parents. My sister. No one. Me. I did it to myself.”

From his back pocket, he produces his soft handkerchief and presses it to the flowing tears over my cheeks. His gesture gives me time to take a deep breath, but I can’t look into his eyes.

“What is this place?” I ask, hiccupping air.

“Let me show you,” he says, reaching around me to open the glass door. “Realtor left it open for us.”

Instantly, I sneeze at the dust that blows out to the street and the scent of mildew lurking inside. The dank and dark interior hasn’t seen a soul for years, I’d imagine. But it’s a little store. One with two glass counters, a space for a table or two, and a swinging door to a back area.

Adon looks around the walls, then finds a light switch and flips it on, then holds my hand and leads me to the back.

I gasp, inhaling more of the cloud of old air. “It’s a bakery.”

Stainless-steel industrial looking ovens and a large refrigerator line the back wall. On the side is an oversized sink for dishwashing. Pastry racks on rollers are strewn about the small area. In the center is a large table for rolling dough. Pink tiles cover the floors. It’s quaint and cute. The kind of place where I’d love to bake some cookies—well, after a good cleaning.

“You wanted to show me a bakery?” I ask as Adon kneads his thumb into my palm.

“I wanted to buy you a bakery.”

I clutch my chest. “What? Adon, I can’t accept this from you!”

Large hands grip my shoulders as he turns me to look him in the eyes. “Do you want to be with me forever?”

The sadness from outside strikes me once again. It’s now or never. And I can’t lose him over this, over keeping this locked inside. “I have to tell you something,” I tell him shakily.

“Anything.”

“Maeve had a boyfriend in high school named Noah. She was so in love with him. One day after school, he was waiting for her to come home from student council and I let him in. He wanted to hang out and get to know ‘Maeve’s little sister’ better, he said. Being older and one of the cool guys in school, I saw him as really cute, and I liked him, but I was only thirteen at the time and didn’t really know any better.

“After trying to impress him with my punk rock knowledge, he said he didn’t believe that I had as many records as I did. And I fell for it, even invited him up to my room. We were sitting on my bed, and he said that he felt terrible because he had a bigger crush on me than my sister. I hate that it made me feel like I’d just won something over her. That I’d one upped her in some way.”

It’s hard for me to continue, so I take a pause and swallow. Adon remains still for a moment, waiting. Then he grabs my waist and hoists me onto the stainless-steel table until my legs wrap around to his back. We’re face to face, like I can’t escape the words that are about to come from my mouth. But if he wants to be with me forever, he needs to know this. To understand me completely.

Or maybe I just need to tell someone.

“Anyway, he started kissing me, and I thought it was amazing. In fact, all the things he did seemed great... Until they weren’t. I didn’t want to have sex with him.” My fingernails rake against my chest where he ripped off my shirt. It’s harder to breathe as I get to this part. “I just sort of fought , you know. But he was so much bigger. And...”

Wiping away the tingles in my forehead, I say the words as if they happened to someone else. Not me. “And he raped me. He held me down while I screamed. To silence me, he slapped my face. None of it was the way I wanted it. It hurt.”

Saying what happened aloud makes me feel like I’m on a roller coaster. And now that I’ve started, it’s impossible to stop. I keep talking in a stream of consciousness while Adon maintains his fierce gaze on my face. “After, he sat up and made me feel good about what happened, or just more confused. Somehow, he convinced me that I wanted it. That we were covertly together or something.”

My hands swipe at my cheeks to gather some tears there. “But I didn’t want it to

happen again...or maybe I did. I'm not sure. There was blood everywhere." I look at the counter beneath me, but all I see are my blue and red sheets coated with russet stains. "For a week, I didn't say anything. He didn't come back for a few days, and when he did, he'd wink at me over Maeve's head, like we had some secret. That's...that's how it started. He'd tell me not to say anything or Maeve would break up with him, and I didn't want to cause a fight. But I never enjoyed myself."

I try to steady my voice. "Finally, a few weeks later, I was sick of it. The guilt was tearing me up inside, and I didn't like the smell of him on my body anymore. No matter how many showers I'd take, I couldn't wash it away. And those fucking stains on my sheets... So, I told Maeve and my mother. Told them what he had done to me."

I lift my eyes up to my boyfriend, who holds his breath in his broad chest. "And?" he grits out, like he wants to say more.

"And they didn't believe me. Noah already told Maeve that I was flirting with him too much. And that I had a little crush on him. He was even telling them I made him uncomfortable."

Adon's hands ball into fists on either side of my hips. "What about your father?"

I shrug. "He said to stop being so dramatic. My mom had already told him that I was delusional. That I made up stories and tried to ruin the family. It got to the point that I was questioning myself, wondering if it truly happened. To feel something real, I would take a box cutter and slice pieces of my skin just to watch it bleed, then place the drops against my sheets. It was the same. Like some genuine piece of evidence that I hadn't imagined it. So was the pain."

Shaking my head, I relax into my body. It's heavy, tired. "I didn't even trust my own memories at that point. Maybe I was lying and didn't realize it. If my thoughts

weren't real, if I wasn't real, if my own family knew I lived in a dream state, then what was the point of living? It's not like I'd be giving up anything... So I tried to cut deeper and deeper. Until I cut deep enough that I woke up in a hospital."

Adon's hand moves to my back as he caresses me slowly, gently, almost hovering with his warmth to encourage me to finish my story. "And then a psychiatric ward. I went to therapy for years after. But I convinced myself that even she didn't believe me. Maybe because I didn't believe myself. No one did."

His forehead rests against mine as he speaks against my mouth, allowing me to breathe in his validation. "I believe you. And it wasn't your fault."

"It was... I should have never?—"

"Piper. Stop." He grabs the back of my neck. "It wasn't your fucking fault."

I don't think I've seen him this angry, and the fact that he believes me, the intensity of his stare, makes me melt against his chest. His arms encircle me tightly as he clings to me as much as I do to him.

"Rosy, if you think that changes shit about how I feel, you're sorely mistaken. I'm so glad you felt okay to tell me. But this doesn't break you. It's just more evidence of how broken everyone around you is. You were a child, and people should have been there to take care of you. They let you down."

He gives me a little space, leaning on his hands resting on either side of me, and says, "Piper, you survived . Look at you. You're here. You made it."

Glancing around the room, I don't see a dusty old kitchen.

I see a life I never allowed myself to dream about because those were always

slaughtered in my brain.

I see the man who loves me enough to take all my past and fight for me.

“I love you, Adon. I do. Thank you.”

My nose is so swollen, and I can't breathe when he places his lips to my heated ones briefly. “I love you, my rosy girl. And you deserve this.” His hand waves around the room as he stands, but I grab his shirt and tug him back toward me.

“You really want to buy me this place?”

“Okay, well. I'm buying it under the Griffin Family Motors company, but I do need an employee. So, I'd be your boss, but yes. I need a baker.” I'm stunned into silence for once, and he smiles. “Good thing my girlfriend is an amazing one.”

Latching onto him like a koala, I squeeze his huge body while envisioning something I haven't ever allowed myself to imagine.

A future.

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Chapter

Twenty-One

ADON

Something changes in that moment. It's huge, and the shift is palpable between the two of us.

"I can't wait to see what you do with this place," I tell her as she sniffles against my neck. My handkerchief has gotten a good workout from her tears, but I dab at her cheeks with it again, then hand it over to her. "I gotta get home for Avery and Odin soon."

She glances up at me under her wet eyelashes and looks hesitant.

"Ask for what you want, Piper."

"Can we stop by my place first, then go over to yours for dinner? I want to make them something."

God, my heart swells, filling up with even more love for this woman than I had before. "You want to make my kids dinner?"

"Yes. Well, all of us."

"Fuck, yeah. Let's go."

I hold out my arm to help her off the counter, and she hops down, then we walk out of the dusty building hand-in-hand. With my free one, I pull out my phone and call the realtor to let him know we've finished seeing the place. "Yep. I want to officially place that offer."

"Fantastic! I'll email you the documents to sign this evening."

"Thanks, Tim."

Piper practically skips next to me, her pink hair waving in the spring breeze. "What?" she asks.

"What do you mean 'what'?"

She laughs, making the freckles on her nose bounce. "You have a huge, goofy smile on your face."

"I'm fucking happy, Piper. Real fucking happy."

Her cheeks get even pinker as she takes a deep breath and clings to my arm. "Me, too."

"Happy enough to move in with me?"

With a slow blink, she gives me another warm smile. "What about Freckles? He may hate it there and piss on everything."

"Then we'll eat him for dinner."

She mocks a gasp and slaps my chest, then unlocks her apartment building door for us when we reach it. "He wouldn't be very tasty. All he eats is smelly cat food."

“True, but I’ll start slipping him some fish or something.”

Piper’s joyous chuckle bounces off the empty walls before she races ahead of me up the steps. But I take them two at a time and almost beat her, pulling her back into my body. Both of us almost trip over each other until we get to her door, and I pause.

“Piper, stop.”

She’s still smiling up at me, but my heart races. With a swift movement, I toss her behind my back and slowly approach the open doorway.

“Oh my god!” she whispers. “Someone’s been here!”

“Shh! They may still be here.” Placing her against the wall in the hallway, I hold up a finger to let her know to be quiet, then creep inside.

Freckles mewls, then runs out the open door, but Piper grabs him before he takes off. Everything is a mess inside. Her kitchen drawers have been overturned, the sofa torn apart, all her records thrown onto the floor. Potted plants have been smashed, the soil spread over her rugs.

No one is in the bathroom when I check, but it was mainly left untouched. That’s weird. When I get back into the main room, Piper’s happiness is gone, and her tears return as she strokes her cat dejectedly. I hustle to her and grab her in my arms. “It’s okay. Stuff can be replaced. We’ll get it taken care of.”

Freckles hugs me just as much as she does, and I hold the two of them in a tight squeeze. She lifts her chin and says, “Adon?”

“Yeah?”

“Can I move in with you?”

I snort a laugh. “Of course, Rosy.”

By the time the police arrive and take a report, it’s very late, and I have to call Rhodes to watch the kids until we can get there. Once they leave, she sets the cat down, then looks around with her hands on her hips.

“Anything missing?” I ask, though the police already tried to get an answer a few times from her.

“It’s hard to tell.” She wanders around, and then grabs an overnight bag, spreading it open on the sofa. As she stuffs it with clothes and toiletries, I try to sweep up some of the mess with her broom while Freckles keeps getting it out of the dustpan and marching through it, leaving paw prints behind.

“Oh! My laptop!”

I glance at where she’s pointing on the ground. There’s nothing there. “They took your laptop?”

“Yeah! I mean, it was an old clunker that barely worked, but yes. I only used it to watch streaming shows.”

Standing, I scratch my chin and contemplate the room. “Why would a thief break in for a shitty laptop?”

“Desperate for drug money?” she asks, gathering up Freckles’s things in a plastic bag.

“Maybe.” I’m not convinced, but I encourage her to let the detective know.

Despite them taking photographs of a boot mark in the dirt, there weren't any fingerprints or other clues. The work was sloppy, but obviously directed at Piper. No one else in the building had a break-in, according to the landlord.

After loading up all I can into the back of my truck, we head to our house, where Rhodes and the kids are eating pizza and playing Monopoly. Well, screaming at each other about Monopoly.

"No, you cheated !" Odin screams.

I scratch my head, trying to get rid of the headache setting in. "I thought I said we're never to play that game again."

"Piper!" Avery jumps up from her chair and rushes at my girlfriend, who's holding on to a squirming Freckles. "I've always wanted a cat! Who is this? Dad, can we keep him?"

"This is Freckles. How do you feel about cats, Odin?"

Odin runs at the cat like he just found a toy at the top of his wish list. "Can I hold him?"

"He's an asshole and probably won't want you to, but let's try." Piper kneels and hands the orange tabby to my son, and for some reason, the cat calms in his hold.

"Be gentle, Odin," I say.

"I am."

Avery and Odin battle over who can hold the little guy and he seems to enjoy the attention for once. "He never lets me do that," I tell Piper.

Rhodes points to the open boxes of pizza. “You all want some?”

“Yeah, we’re starving,” I say. “But can you help me unload the truck? Uh, Piper brought her stuff.”

“She did!” Avery jumps up excitedly.

“How would you two feel about her moving in with us?” I glance over at her, making sure she’s not about to back out of this. Her response is a solid head nod with a knowing smile.

The kids start hopping in circles around my girlfriend, yelling excitedly. “Yeah!”

Piper’s relieved smile is the best thing I’ve seen all day.

Rhodes slaps a hand on my back and squeezes my shoulder. “Well done, man.” Grabbing Piper, he pulls her in for a side hug. “Did you agree to this without seeing his tyrant Thursdays first?”

Odin groans loudly.

“What’s that?” she asks.

Avery rolls her eyes. “That’s where he makes us all do cleaning drills .”

Piper laughs. “Oh...that sounds super fun.”

“Better get used to it, young lady,” I tell her.

Rhodes helps me bring stuff in from the truck while Piper gets Freckles situated with the kids and shows him where his stuff will be. It’s difficult to get Avery and Odin to

go to sleep after they found out how spastic the cat gets with a laser pointer, but eventually they head to their rooms and Rhodes heads out to his car.

“Just a sec,” I tell him before he leaves, then turn to Piper. “I’ll be back inside in a minute.”

She gives me a nod and returns to the kitchen to heat our pizza.

Rushing over to Rhodes’s driver side window, I lean in and thank him for helping so much. “Can I ask one more favor of you?”

“What is it?” he asks wearily.

“I’m going to tell Piper I was with you a couple of nights from now. We’re going to the NU hockey game for the finals to grab a beer, and it’s just the two of us.”

One of his dark eyebrows raises. “You want to go to a hockey game?”

“No. But you go. Say I was there.”

“And you’ll be...”

“Not there.”

“Do I need to worry about you and Piper already?”

“Not at all.” I stand and slap the side of his car.

“Fine. Don’t tell me, but you better not be a cheating asshole.”

Smirking, I shake my head. “Never.”

“Okay, I’ll do it. Good luck.”

“Love you, bro. Thanks.”

“Love you, too, Adon!”

He drives off while I head back inside. Seeing Piper at home re-heating food in the oven makes me smile. She seems so relaxed here, even after tonight’s events, that it makes me feel that things are almost right in the world.

Except someone is coming after her...and I think I know who it is.

When I slip an arm around her waist, she jumps, but then quickly settles against me. “Oh, hey. Pizza’s ready. Stand back.”

She pulls it out of the oven and slides a few slices on a plate for us.

“Thanks. Want some wine?” I ask.

“No, I’ll just have some water,” she says, and I pause. I wonder if it’s something new she’s trying, and I keep quiet about it, grabbing her a glass of filtered water.

“How does it feel to be here?” I ask as we munch on our dinner.

“I think I’ll enjoy it. You have a better oven than mine, that’s for sure. But I need to pay you some rent. How will we handle that?”

“We’ll figure that out. Maybe tomorrow. Oh, speaking of this week, Rhodes and I are going to a Nighthawks hockey game on Thursday night. It’s the finals.”

“I didn’t know you liked hockey.”

“He wanted to go, so I said I’d go with him. I’ll see if I can cut out early to come back to you, though. I’ll have the kids stay at Em’s so you can have the house to yourself.”

She chews a bite. “That’s not necessary. They can stay with me.”

“Only if you want that. Otherwise, they can go to Em’s.”

The corners of her mouth tip up in a smile as she swallows. “We can play Monopoly.”

I chuckle. “Anything but that.”

After an evening routine where we both brush our teeth, eyeing each other in the mirror over the main bathroom sink, it feels so nice to have her resting on my chest as she falls asleep in our bed. But I’m wide awake.

Waiting until her breathing is fully evened out, I slip downstairs to my study. Maeve’s social media isn’t hard to find. In fact, she has multiple accounts on several platforms, and all are quite professional looking. Fake. Overly flashy. And pink.

When I finally get all the way back to her high school days, it’s not a surprise to me that she still has a picture of him. Her high school “sweetheart,” as she called him.

Noah Bradley.

The guy is obviously a fucking asshole. His face just screams it. Thinks he’s much more good looking than he actually is. Just the fact that he’s able to walk around makes acid pour into my belly.

His profiles are also as I had expected. He lives two hours away, attending medical

school at a moderate-sized university, paid for by his wealthy physician parents. Hopes to be a cardiothoracic surgeon. That's useful to know.

By three in the morning, I've done as much recon as I can do and formulated my plan. Sneaking back into bed, I slide my arms underneath my woman and fall into a deep and dreamless sleep.

Two nights later, I kiss Piper goodbye and jump in my truck, going to the "hockey game." Am I sorry for lying to her? A little, but not for protecting her. She doesn't need to know about this.

In two hours, I land in the parking lot I previously scoped out and wait with a hot coffee in hand behind the wheel of a deserted car from the shop, not my own.

That's when I see him.

The little twerp waves goodbye to some other students as they exit the library, then heads down a dark side path on campus. One where the lights are low and the bushes are thick. That's when I make my move.

I pull down my mask and jump out of the car, strolling straight for him. He doesn't even notice my approach, his earbuds firmly inserted in his head. Music is so loud even I can hear it as I grasp his backpack, then thrust my gun into his side. He freezes, then pops one of the little white buds from his ear.

"What?" he asks with a whiny, annoying voice. Obviously, he doesn't know what's pressing against him right now.

"Move with me. Let's go."

"Oh shit."

“Don’t speak or I’ll shoot you here, you waste of fucking life.” We spin, and I lead him toward the car, then open the passenger door. “Get in.”

“I don’t?—”

With a chopping motion, I hit the back of his head hard enough to knock him out, then shove him inside. In a few steps, I’m back behind the wheel and take off to my second spot, hoping it’s as abandoned as it looked from the satellite maps. His body slumps over toward me, but I shove him back into his seat and fix his seatbelt. The child lock is down on his door, so he shouldn’t be able to jump out. But I’ll just pistol whip him again if he so much as looks at me.

It’s about half an hour until we reach the destination, and he awakens enough that I slap some duct tape over his mouth and his eyes, then bind his hands with it, too. Then I force him out of the car as he wails, tears and snot streaming down his face.

“You seem scared to have someone force you to do something you don’t want to,” I say, holding him by the back of his collar. His backpack is still hanging on, so I use it to shove him toward the trunk of the car where I grab what I need.

He stumbles and whimpers as I shove a broomstick in his back, leading him to the collapsing barn over some old gravel driveway. The place is miles from anyone else, and it’ll take a long time before anyone finds him here.

When he finally trips across the concrete threshold that once must have held barn doors, I smile at my luck. Gripping his waist, I tug down his pants, then hoist up his hips and shove the end of the broomstick in his tight asshole. The gag muffles his horrific screams, but the sound brings me some pleasure. The dirt doesn’t help him gain any footing as he attempts to scramble away on his knees.

“I’ve probably torn something there by now,” I say, thrusting the stick in deeper. “Do

you think this is how Piper felt when you raped her?”

His sobs turn into words, and I rip the tape from his mouth to hear him. “This is about Piper? Piper Hendricks? She-she was a slut , man! She wanted it!”

“You were, what, nineteen when you did that to a thirteen-year-old girl?”

“I’m sorry, okay. I-I’m sorry! Want me to apologize to her? I’m sorry! Just, please , don’t kill me, man. Please...”

“She tried to kill herself because of what you did. You think an apology and begging for your life will save you?”

Through huffed breaths, he gives up, slumping onto the stone floor. “I didn’t know. I didn’t know. I’m sorry. I’m sorry.”

“Get up.”

“No. I-I won’t say anything. I’ll disappear. Please !”

Using the end of the stick, I shove in until he squirms away on his knees, gets up and runs forward, bashing his face into an old post. He screams from the pain. With a hand on his backpack, I hold him to the post as he shuffles his feet, still unaware of his surroundings.

“You don’t get a choice on what you see or hear. You don’t get any autonomy here.” I take more duct tape and bind his arms and legs to the post as he tries to kick and squirm out of my hold, but I’m overwhelmingly much stronger. “The only thing you’ll know is the smell of your flesh burning as you die.”

“No! Please! No!” His shrieks are the last thing I hear before I slap another piece of

tape over his mouth.

I grab the can of gasoline and spread it around.

As I walk out of the old shed, I take a deep inhale of the crisp night air.

Then, I light the match.

Chapter

Twenty-Two

PIPER

Being alone in the house is weird. It still doesn't feel like mine or that I belong, but Adon says it will just take time and to put my belongings wherever I want. Maybe once I start paying him rent, it will feel more like a home.

Freckles makes it feel more that way, and as I arrange plants around the living room, it looks pleasantly Piper-ified.

Avery and Odin ended up going back to Emily's before Adon left for some family dinner thing she had planned. As awkward as I thought the exchange would go, it was nothing like the horror movie in my mind. Far from it.

Emily didn't come inside the house, but greeted me on the stoop with a warm smile, saying she was glad to see I had moved in.

Glancing over her shoulder to make sure Avery and Odin were in the car, she lowered her voice. "It's not my place to say, but I'm really happy Adon has someone. Especially a person as free as you are."

She gave me her cell number in case I needed anything, but I was still a bit stunned at her words.

Am I free?

Heat filled my eyes as I thought about it.

Yeah. Now I am.

Maybe all that insight I learned in therapy actually did help. I had been trying to hold myself back because I felt broken. I'd purposefully do things to make myself undesirable, just so I could blame it on my damage. But, really, it was my own doing. Having someone to accept me completely has changed that mindset.

It mended the shattered pieces, but like a broken bone, I'm stronger in the spots that were fractured now.

With that in mind, I return to the house with a comfortable grin coating my face and set to work in the kitchen, rearranging things the way I like. Making lists of items Adon doesn't have so I can stock it with baking supplies. Maybe I'll even be an organized person here. Likely not, but there's always hope.

Once I'm arranging the bed pillows with some of my more colorful ones, I decide to spend the rest of the evening snuggled up, watching a movie on Adon's big TV attached to the wall above the dresser. Well, I guess it's mine, now, too! Weird.

My phone bings with a text message, and I hurriedly check to see if he's messaging me from the game.

Unknown

Meet me.

Furrowing my brow, I text back.

Me

Who is this?

Unknown

You know who this is.

Part of me wonders if this is a wrong number, and I decide to ignore it. Just as I set the phone down, it bings again.

Unknown

Rosy

With wide eyes, I grab it again and text back. No one really knows that's what Adon calls me. Maybe Essa, but no one else, I don't think.

Me

Adon?

Unknown

This is a secure line, baby. Meet me. I'm with Tarin.

She wants to have some fun.

What? We hadn't discussed this, but maybe he's trying to be adventurous? My heart races, thinking about sharing Adon with her. I don't like it. Why wouldn't he talk with me about that? It seems... not like Adon to share.

Unknown

I need you.

See you in twenty?

If he's sitting at the club bar with Tarin and talking about me, I definitely want to go to tell them both what's up. They can't just think I'll participate with both of them. It's like worlds colliding. I don't like it.

Unknown

She took your laptop, Rosy.

Me

She did?

Unknown

Yes. I got it back for you.

Me

Okay I'll be there. At the warehouse?

Unknown

No. At the old hotel this time.

Me

See you then.

Unknown

Goodbye my love.

While getting dressed in whatever I had grabbed from my closet at the apartment, I scratch at my shoulder. I'm so uncomfortable. Something just feels off .

In my panic, I call Adon's regular phone, but it goes straight to voicemail. Flipping through my numbers, I find Rhodes's number and call him.

"Hey, Piper! Sorry, can barely hear you. They just scored!"

"Can I talk to Adon?" I ask, pacing in my tiny sparkly lilac club dress while pulling on some clear base high heels.

"Uh, he went to get popcorn just now or the bathroom."

The way his words come out lets me know he's covering. "He's not there, is he?"

"Um, I... He... He was just here, Piper! He's enjoying the game."

I can't help the laugh that jumps from my belly. Rhodes is a horrible liar. "He sneaked away, huh?"

"Well, yes. But nothing bad. He just wouldn't tell me where he was going."

"Thanks, Rhodes. Enjoy your game."

"Sorry, Piper."

He probably wouldn't tell his brother where he was going because he was too embarrassed. Is this a game he's playing as Daddy Don? He misses the club days?

A smile crosses my lips. That must be what this is. Had Emily pick up the kids so we could enjoy each other in that way.

With that in mind, I spend a bit more time on my makeup and hair, then head out to my car in the driveway. I've only been to the hotel location once, but it's my favorite. At least it has private rooms, though they don't have door locks. Before meeting Adon, I didn't mind the open curtains, but now that it's just us, I secretly appreciate it being only him and I.

The Rosebud was a highlight of Main Street in Northview back in the 20s. Now, its windows have been spray painted black to hide what happens inside every other week or so. The first two floors have been kept up, toned in olive green and dark wood with marble floors and an iron hand-crank elevator. Rooms are outfitted with a simple bed, latex sheets, and a chair. I've only been in one briefly, just to see what it was like, but was impressed with the setup.

The bouncer is the same who had chased me last year, and my stomach knots with worry that I can't get in. He eyes me suspiciously when I show my ID. "Tarin said I could come," I say.

He scratches his bald head, then nods and opens the door for me.

When I enter, the soft jazz music puts my nerves at ease. A soft smile creeps over my lips, thinking about the love of my life and his love of jazz.

Tarin is working behind the mahogany bar, mixing glowing green drinks. She doesn't see me as she heads to a table in the back filled with men in tuxedos, a tray balanced on her hand. Scanning the room, I try to find my large boyfriend, Daddy Don, but

he's not here.

Slipping onto a barstool, I wait.

A tall man wearing a mask like the Phantom of the Opera takes the seat next to mine and taps on the bar, waiting for Tarin's return. He glances down at me for a moment and gives me a greeting grin. "Hello."

"Hi. I'm waiting for someone."

"For me?" he asks with a sly smirk.

"No. For my boyfriend."

"Well, that's a shame. Pretty thing like you should be more open to exploration."

I shrug and pick up a straw, tearing off bits of the paper and making a pile on the counter. The man's presence seems too overwhelming, especially when he swivels to stare at me full on.

With a heavy sigh, I protest his advances. "Look?—"

"In fact, you seem like you're a fucking whore. A slut who likes to spread her pussy to whoever will take it."

My jaw drops at his audacity, face heating with irritation. "You don't know me! How dare you!" I think, if I had a drink, I'd throw it in his face, like in one of those old movies. Instead, I stand, but he grips my arm and slides off his stool. The way he pulls me into him must make it seem as if we're together.

An odd flicking sound cuts the tense air, and something sharp pokes into my side. "I

have a knife pointed at your spleen. If you scream, one slice will put you in the ICU, taking pills for the rest of your life, if you even have one after. Do you understand?"

I hold my breath, terror suddenly swallowing me whole. A tear drops from my eye as I nod. "What do you want?"

"March to the back with me and act like you want to."

My eyes dart around the room, but most of the attention is focused on some women entertaining the group of men in the seating area. One woman has started giving blow jobs to everyone in a row, and the loud yells of encouragement would drown out my screams, though I'm too afraid to say anything for fear that the sharp blade will slice between my ribs.

With careful steps, I head toward the hall at the end of which is the elevator. The Phantom enters with me and points to the crank. "Take us to the second floor."

As I slide the elevator into motion, he moves the weapon to my lower back. Sweat pours from my forehead as we exit into the hallway, and he points us toward one of the closed doors. "Open it. Get inside."

I stumble and consider dashing forward, but he grabs my arm as soon as the thought enters my mind and shoves me into a room. It's dimly lit and smells of potent cleaners. Slamming the door behind us, he grabs the nearby chair and shoves it under the doorknob, but it doesn't fit very well. Still, it will be an annoying deterrent if I can find an opportunity to escape.

"You want a blow job or...?" I size him up, keeping my voice from shaking. Why would he even go to this length to get a woman? Is this his kink? To force someone? Maybe I can just get by with getting him off quickly and surviving.

He scoffs and shakes his head. “No. I don’t want your whore mouth anywhere near me.”

My brow furrows. “Then why?—”

“Where’s your purse? Your phone?”

“My-my phone?”

“Yes, your phone, you dumb girl. Hand it over.” His palm wags in the air with impatience. I reach into my bra and produce it, then hold it out. “No, open it for me. Go to your pictures.”

Pulse racing, I do exactly as he says. “Here,” I say, flashing the screen at him.

“Scroll up to a few months ago.” He comes to stand behind me, the knife pressing against my ribs again. “Further. There! Delete that and then empty your trash folder.”

The picture is just of me and Maggie at Rainy Day. We’re smiling as I toss an arm around her.

Then, I see it.

My gut fills with lead. There’s a tall man standing behind us at the creamer station, filling a cup of coffee with almond milk. He’s simply pouring it in and mixing it with a wooden stick. But I recognize the man...

It’s Dennis Harrington, the dead woman’s husband.

And when I lift my eyes to his, chills coat every inch of my body. He’s standing directly in front of me.

“Sure, I’ll delete it.”

“Then your trash folder.”

“And my trash folder,” I assure him, wondering if he took my laptop to get the cloud backups. The problem is, I haven’t been able to access it online since I lost my password over a year ago. But he doesn’t need to know that. If he thinks I’ve just deleted a picture and it’s done with, maybe I can walk out of here. “Is that it?”

“No.”

My heart sinks.

“I can’t have you knowing what happened. Lay on the bed like the fucking slut you are.”

With a careful step back, I try anything I can think of to stall. “Why are you doing this?”

He chuckles. “Ridding the world of one more dirty whore is my duty to mankind.”

One more... So he did murder his wife. By putting creamer in her coffee?

“I don’t understand.”

“You don’t need to. Just lay back, and I’ll be done here in a moment.”

It dawns on me how desperate my situation is. Adon has no idea where I am. If he’s not at the hockey game, where is he? No one saw me come up here, and the cameras probably would only catch a couple going to use a room willingly.

The shine of the yellow light off the blade makes me tremble uncontrollably, my pulse pounding in my ears.

Is this it? I finally find love, envision my future, only to have it taken away from me?

Chapter

Twenty-Three

ADON

It's pitch black outside when I get home, my body rigid from what I had to do. In the laundry room, I shed everything I was wearing and toss it into the washer immediately, then grab a clean pair of shorts from the dryer and pull them on before heading upstairs.

Will Piper notice if I take a shower in the middle of the night? Hopefully, she won't wake up. She's not easily startled, so I think I can do it without drawing suspicion.

Fortunately, I don't have any blood on my hands and all the evidence was burned in the barn that collapsed on top of the creature that stole my girlfriend's peace. Buried along with her past.

My brow furrows when I reach the bedroom, hand clutching the metal doorknob.

She's gone. The bed doesn't look slept in. Clothes are strewn about like she was trying to find something to wear—and she was definitely going for a high-end look. All her high heels are out, as well as costume jewelry spilled over the bathroom sink. Makeup. Perfume. The kind she wore on our date and...at the sex club.

I pull out my phone and call her, but it goes straight to voicemail.

Rhodes said she had called him earlier, asking where I was, but that was about an hour ago. My heart beats harder as I toss on some clothes and call my brother.

“Adon, I’m already fucking asleep. What?”

“Piper’s gone. What exactly did you say on the phone?”

He snorts awake and there’s a change in his voice. “Uh, she knew you weren’t with me. I’m sorry, you know I’m a shit liar.”

“Fuck.”

“She didn’t seem upset. In fact, she laughed when I confessed. It was more like she knew where you were already. I thought you were meeting her somewhere, and this was part of a game.”

Part of a game...

Yeah, I think it is someone’s game, but whose? I’m not quite sure.

“I think I need you. This could be bad.”

“Of course. Want me to come over?”

“No, I’ll pick you up.”

I throw on a baseball cap backward and grab a hoodie to go over it, too. Then I make sure I’ve got my gun tucked in my waistband before heading to the truck and darting over to Rhodes’s house. He’s waiting in the driveway for me when I pull up.

Out of breath, he hops in and checks behind us. “Where are we going? Piper’s

apartment?”

“No, her keys were still on the kitchen counter when I got home. Just her phone and wallet were gone. And not in her regular crochet bag thing she wears every day, which means she was dressed up for somewhere.” Swallowing, I turn onto Eastland Boulevard and head toward the fraternity houses on Northview’s campus.

“Okay, so then where would she be? You think she’s with one of these frat guys?”

“No. But I think I know one who may know exactly where she is.”

When we get to the Beta house, I pull up right in front of the fancy door and jump out. Rhodes puffs up his chest and follows. We probably look like we’re about to murder a house filled with scrawny college boys, and that’s precisely what I’ll do if I can’t find Piper.

Rapping a fist against the door repeatedly, I finally am greeted by a middle-aged woman in a bathrobe. “Yes? Are you lost?”

“I need to see Sean Harrison now. He’s in big trouble with security.”

“Oh! Wait right here.” She shuts the door, but I slam my foot in it before she can and push inside.

“No. You’ll show me his room.”

“Help!” she yells, but I hurry up to the second floor of the house, scanning the names on the doors.

Several guys pop their heads out, then slam the doors closed, but a few gawk at us walking by. “Sean Harrison. Where is he?” I ask one who I’d seen at the club on New

Year's Eve.

"What do you want with Sean, assholes?" He crosses his arms and darts a glance over to Rhodes, then back to me.

"I want to know where my girlfriend is."

The guy smirks like I'm some schmuck who lost his girlfriend to pencil-neck Sean Harrison. "Well, she's not here."

In one second, I grab the guy by the neck and shove him against the wall outside his room. "Listen, you piece of shit. She's in trouble. And I think your friend knows where she is. You can either tell me where his room is, or I'll just break your neck and ask the next guy in line. What will it be?"

"He's at the end of the hall. Two-thirty." His voice is strangled under my grip, and I release him. He slumps to the ground, gasping for air.

"Thanks."

Rhodes gives me a solid head nod, like he's got our six, then we march to the appointed room. When I turn the knob and push the door, it's blocked by something. So I stand back and shove it in with my boot. The flimsy fake wood snaps enough so I can hoist it open.

Sean stands against the far wall with a large wooden paddle in his hand. "What the fuck do you want?"

"Where's Piper Hendricks?"

"What?"

Hustling over to him, I thrust my forearm into his chest and pin him against his window. “Where is Piper? Your girlfriend’s sister. I think you know where she is.”

“Why should I know?”

“Because you’ve been following her. Trying to steal her purse. Sending virus links to her phone. Probably broke into her apartment. And I think you killed your stepmother.”

He scoffs, spit flying from his mouth. “That’s absurd!”

I unlock the window and shove it open. “If you don’t tell me now, then I think you’ll take a tumble from this window. It won’t kill you, but it’ll hopefully break a few pieces off. That is, until I load your broken body into my truck. Then, we’ll have a great time. My brother back there knows exactly which internal organs to remove to keep you alive and talking.”

“Shit. I-I didn’t kill anyone. Your girlfriend’s a whore. Met someone at a sex club tonight. Maeve said she goes there a lot.” With some effort, he tries to sell me a casual smirk, but his lips tremble. “You didn’t know? Thought you were the only one? No. She’s a skank, man. Sorry to break it to you.”

“Who did she meet there?”

“Hell if I know. I doubt you’re the only old guy dick she rides.”

I pull him back from the window and shove him at Rhodes, who grabs him by the collar of his T-shirt. “He’s going to be useful for us. Let’s take him,” I say.

With a heavy foot on the gas, I motor straight downtown to The Rosebud after checking my app on where the club is located tonight. That’s where she went, I know

it. I have a feeling this douchebag tied up in the backseat lured her there. Him or his father.

Glancing in the rearview mirror, I ask, “Why did you do it?”

He murmurs against the duct tape over his mouth until Rhodes rips it off, and the kid gasps. “Do what? I didn’t do shit, assholes. You all are in so much fucking trouble! Do you know who my father is? Who I am?”

“Yeah. You’re the kid who killed his stepmom. Maeve’s boyfriend.”

Even in the pale light, I can see his skin growing red. “I didn’t kill anyone. Meghan just died . No one killed her. You dumb fucks can’t even get your facts straight.”

“You poisoned her, didn’t you?”

But he just shakes his head and stays silent. Rhodes eyes me from the passenger seat, but his body is turned, ready to pounce on the kid at any moment.

As soon as we pull up to the entrance, I grab Sean from the back and shove him toward the bouncer. Flashing my entry card on my phone, the bouncer stops and eyes Sean.

“Don... You’re looking different tonight. Trouble with this one?”

“Yeah. He or his father kidnapped my girlfriend.”

“Who’s your girlfriend?”

“Piper. Pink hair.”

He nods at me. “Yep. She arrived about an hour ago. Alone, though. Haven’t seen her leave yet. Go on in.”

Once we get inside, I scan the room. A few regulars are posted at various tables and Tarin is working the bar. As I head that way, Sean shuffles his steps, trying to slow our progress, but I punch his kidney until he hurries forward.

“Don?”

“Yeah. I know I look different without the mask and get-up. I’m looking for Piper. And in a hurry.”

“Piper... I haven’t seen her.”

“Mind checking the footage to see if she’s in a room?”

She leaves through a door in the back and returns. “Um, I hate to break it to you, but she’s here. But with someone. In the bondage room.”

“She’s not here willingly.”

“Don, please don’t make us call security. We haven’t had problems with you before.”

“Call them. Tell them to meet me up in the bondage room. Call the police while you’re at it.”

Her pale skin grows sheet white as she grabs a phone and holds it up. “You’re serious.”

As I shove Sean forward, I place my gun into his back and nod. “Deadly.”

Once we get to the second floor, I make him open the door and stand back.

“It won’t open,” he whines. So I shove a boot through it, just as I did his own.

Something heavy blocks it, though. It only cracks a few inches until I thrust my shoulder into it.

As soon as I bust through, I freeze.

Strapped to four bed rails, with a ball gag stuck in her mouth, Piper’s naked figure shakes. The terror in her eyes is almost unbearable. My legs start toward her, but the man next to her flashes a warning grin.

Dennis Harrison kneels at her head in a full suit, holding a giant blade to her throat. As I scan her body, tiny slashes of red ooze on her abdomen, thighs, and wrists.

He smirks at me, relishing the dread written all over my face. “I wouldn’t take another step forward if I were you.”

Rhodes shoves his kid in front of me, and I place my gun to his temple. “I would let her go, if I were you. The police will be here shortly.”

“Good. They need to know you broke into this room of this establishment, for which I am a paying member. Interrupted mine and my friend’s alone time.”

I huff a sarcastic laugh. “That only works if it’s consensual .”

Dennis looks down at Piper with adoration, and I want to shoot his face off. “Believe me, it was completely consensual, wasn’t it?”

Piper bites down on her gag, which makes tears fall over her pink cheeks. She meets

my eyes and nods reluctantly.

Dennis spreads his hands wide, as if this proves his point. “You see, women like this love to play the game. As soon as they get the dick, they start making all kinds of wild claims, but the video proves she came upstairs willingly. Ask her... None of them can be faithful.”

“Is that why you killed your wife?” I ask pointedly.

Dennis’s eyes dart to his son standing in front of me, the barrel of my gun still pressed to his head. “I did no such thing.”

Rhodes shuffles a step behind me, but maintains his distance.

“How did you do it?” I decide to keep him talking, to see how I can find a way to get him far from Piper. “Poison?”

With a slight shake of his head, he snorts a derisive breath. “My wife died. It was a tragic accident, and you’re trying to make it, what, something more for some hero points? To prove you could save someone ?”

Rhodes creeps closer and stands behind my shoulder. His hand lays over mine to take the gun, and I snap my eyes to his steady gaze. He nods encouragingly, and I give up the weapon. Slyly, he presses it to Sean’s back, out of the professor’s notice. With care, I keep my forehead from wrinkling, understanding I’m now free to pounce on the bed whenever I see an opportunity.

Inching a step near Piper, I keep talking. “Kind of hard to save your wife when you murdered her in cold blood. Let me guess, she was cheating on you with Piper’s father. So you decided to end her life. Make a pristine image for your son’s future candidacy.”

“Father...” Sean murmurs, and his dad considers him for a moment. “Don’t let these two miscreants confuse you. The police will be here soon, and then we can explain everything. They have a prisoner in their family. And Chief Turner will want to hear what we have to say about all of this.”

“Yes, Son. I’m aware.” Dennis presses the knife deeper against Piper’s windpipe, and I freeze.

That’s their play. Pay off the dirty cops and get away with murder. Sucking on my tongue, I consider my next strategy.

If I’m not careful, I could lose Piper.

Chapter

Twenty-Four

PIPER

My arms and legs hurt from how tight my binds are, but terror surges through my body so viciously I can barely feel the tug. The blade of the knife presses to my throat. If I take too deep of a breath, it will cut me.

“Keep your eyes on me, Rosy. Don’t look away,” Adon says. When I glance over, his serious brown eyes narrow, and I latch onto them like an anchor in a violent storm.

In his hurry, Dennis didn’t attach my gag as well as he should have, and I manage to slip my jaw beneath it, responding, “Okay, boss.”

The professor’s alarmed expression takes me in, but he just grips my hair and holds the sharpened edge more firmly against my skin.

Rhodes clears his throat. “Maybe if you could just put the knife down, then we’ll all wait for the police in peace. Doesn’t have to be like this.”

“Sure, it does,” Mr. Harrison says, and I yelp as the cold steel digs in until it burns. “You barged in on my fun time.”

“I’m not having a good time,” I say through clenched teeth, hoping he doesn’t cut my throat.

My boyfriend's gaze doesn't falter from my face. As soon as Dennis's muscles twitch, however, Adon makes his move. With speed like I've only seen the night we were shot at, he shoves Sean at Rhodes, then makes a leap onto the bed, covering my body while knocking Dennis to the floor, the blade clattering on the wood floor behind him.

Adon kneels over my waist while Rhodes moves his aim, pointing the gun at Dennis's head. "Don't even think of reaching for that knife," he says.

Adon's fingers work frantically to untie my arms and legs. Dennis rests against the wall, huffing a few breaths while glaring at my boyfriend and his brother.

"She was a whore. Just like yours. Not worth it, Mr. Griffin. Women aren't worth it."

I rub where the bindings made my skin raw and irritated, then squat behind Adon as he sits on the edge of the bed. "So you killed her," I say.

The professor's face lights up with a laugh. "No. I just served her coffee, like usual."

My eyes squeeze closed as I recall the details in the photograph he thought he had me delete. He was pouring almond milk into her cup...

"She was allergic to almonds," I whisper, and the man twitches with a startle.

"What?" he asks, like he knows very well what I just said.

"What was that, Rosy?"

"He poured almond milk into her coffee and served it to her, knowing she was allergic to almonds... That's how he did it."

Both of us look at the man who scrambles back against the wall as if he can escape. His complexion grows wan as sweat pours from his forehead.

“Hands up! Police!” A group of officers rushes in with weapons drawn and immediately leaps onto Adon, despite his arms behind held high in the air. One throws me to the ground and all of us get handcuffed.

When they stand us up, Adon starts yelling at a few milling around. “Cover her up, for fuck’s sake!”

A sob cuts through my chest. Adon’s fierce eyes won’t leave my face, even as they wrestle him away. He calls to me, “Don’t worry, baby. It’ll be okay.”

One of the men obliges and uncuffs me for long enough for me to dress. After reading my rights, the officer in front of me asks what happened, and I relay everything from arriving to getting assaulted with the knife.

He releases my hands, and I stretch through the pain, then shiver with a chill and from residual nerves.

“I have proof of what Mr. Harrison did to his wife. It’s on my social media. He got my phone, but he never checked online where I posted the picture on Pixtagram.”

The officer looks at his screen and has me point to the one I’d posted with Maggie and me. “There he is! In the background, just over our shoulders. He’s pouring almond milk into his wife’s cup... The same she drank from and then died.”

“Thank you, ma’am. I’ll pass this along.”

“Am I free to go?” I ask.

“You are, but we may be in touch for more questions.”

“What about my boyfriend?”

“I’m not sure. Best if you call a friend to pick you up.”

When I wander down the hall, an open door reveals Adon still in cuffs, talking to another uniformed police officer. His eyes soften as he sees me, and I wait at the threshold of the room.

“Ma’am, you need to move along,” the officer says with a bite to his tone.

Adon gives me a small nod. “It’s okay, Rosy. I’ll see you at home.” But my heart thuds harder. What if they keep him? What if he’s getting arrested?

Rhodes waits for me downstairs and tosses his jacket over my shoulders. We walk in silence to the parking lot, where Adon’s truck sits. “It’ll be okay. I explained everything, and you did, too.”

“They can’t take him, can they? He didn’t do anything!” I think I may lose it.

Rhodes must realize I’m on my last thread of sanity and grabs me into a tight hug. “Come on. I’ll get you home. Essa and Eli are at the house now, too.”

When we arrive, Essa rushes over to me, and I bury my face in her neck.

“Are you okay?” she asks, but it’s more just something to say than an actual question.

“If he comes home to me, I will be.”

“Well, we have a good family lawyer,” Eli says. “If we need him.” I know he’s

talking about himself and just getting out of his own murder charges. Despite him trying to make things better, anxiety spreads in my chest.

“I think I need a shower. My skin feels gross everywhere that man touched me,” I say, and they all nod in agreement.

By the time I’m clean and in sweatpants with one of Adon’s T-shirts on, the crew has ordered late-night pizza and has some beers cracked open, with soda for Eli, waiting around the kitchen table for any word.

Eli paces around, then rubs Essa’s shoulders with his large hands. She presses her cheeks to his fingers and tries to calm him. Rhodes keeps checking his phone.

“Shit! He’s out!” Rhodes practically shoves his chair over as he stands, and we all jolt at his outburst.

“I’m coming with you!” I say, scrambling to find my purse and hurrying to the door.

Neither of us speaks on the ride back to the club. Adon stands on the sidewalk as we pull up, and I jump out and climb him like a tree. His lips press into my neck as he heaves a sigh. “I’m never letting you go. I love you.”

Tears heat my eyes as I soak in his words. “I love you so much, Adon. I never thought my heart could be this full, but you healed it and made it whole again.”

He pulls back and presses his forehead to mine. “And you did the same to mine.”

Briefly, our lips graze, but he opens the back door and places me carefully inside, then buckles my seatbelt. “I’m sorry, I have to put you down so I can drive.”

Rhodes grips him into a tight embrace, then jumps in the passenger side before Adon

gets behind the wheel and takes off. My hands slip around his shoulders, and he holds one as he steers.

“Sean was behind the shooting. Hired a couple of goons to fire at us in the shop. He admitted it to the police. Apparently, they want to offer him a plea deal. I heard everything while waiting for them to let me go in the next room.”

My eyes squeeze shut with relief. “So you’re not in any trouble?”

“No. My gun is legal, registered to me. Can’t even get me on assault or anything. The only thing is, if the club owner wants to press charges for me carrying inside, but he told Tarin no. That I did a good thing to keep the club clean.”

Rhodes smiles broadly, relaxing back in his seat. “Fuck, yes.”

“And Sean was the one who tried to steal your purse, tried to get your phone hacked to take care of the picture. But he admitted it because he threw his father under the bus, telling them all about his father’s premeditated plans to poison her with almond milk in the coffee shop. Apparently, Professor Harrison was onto your father and Meghan’s affair for a while. They only came after you because of that picture.”

“I didn’t even know I had it!”

Adon pats my hand and says, “I’m just glad you’re okay.”

Rhodes scans both of us with trepidatious eyes. “Do we think the professor will talk the police out of everything? Make them cover it all up?”

A sinking feeling fills my gut.

Neither of us can give him an answer.

Chapter

Twenty-Five

ADON

She stirs in my arms, and I grip her tight to my chest. “Don’t go anywhere.”

“But I have to pee.”

“Just go.”

One of her spring green eyes peers up at me with a question pinching her brow. I let my own eyes crack open and can’t help the smile that spreads across my face.

She laughs, then slaps at my bare chest. “I’ll be right back.” With a graceful move, she leaps toward the bathroom, then reemerges and gets right back into place. The spot she belongs. Warm and right at my side.

I stretch and pull her up as I situate my back against the headboard, then grab my phone. “Oh shit.”

“What?” she asks.

“They got him!”

“Let me see!”

I hold the screen for her, and she reads the headline of the front page of Northview News aloud. “Professor poisons wife as a perverse lesson. It says he did it! They aren’t covering it up! Hmm, no mention of Sean, though. Do you think he agreed to the plea so his son could get away with everything?”

“I don’t know. But I do know that he’ll never get near you again. I’ll make sure of it.”

She practically jumps on the bed and snatches my phone from my hand. “Oh my god, Adon! Breaking news. Sean Harrison, son of prominent local professor, has been found dead in his family home. Police suspect self-inflicted injuries, which were corroborated by the deceased’s note. Mr. Harrison had just received word of his father’s arrest for suspected murder.”

Together, we slump against the mattress and stare at one another. “Hate to say it, but I guess that problem took care of itself,” I say.

“Yeah...I wonder how Maeve is going to take the news.”

We don’t have to wait long to know. Maeve and Piper’s mother frantically texts her all morning, hoping she’ll meet them at her mother’s house.

Piper seems worried until I tell her, “There’s no way I’m letting you go in there alone. I’m never leaving you with those people again.”

She jumps into my arms and wraps herself around me. “I love you, daddy.”

My lips brush her cheek as I smile and hold her tighter. “I love you, too, my baby.”

Piper’s mother’s home is exactly how I would picture it: stuffy, too clean, and smells like cheap perfume. Maeve’s face is red and puffy as she greets us from the kitchen island. Piper’s mother glances up at me with a pouty bottom lip, then sticks out her

hand and flutters her lashes at me.

“Hi, Cora Hendricks. You are?”

I don't bother giving her a handshake, maintaining a grasp on Piper's shoulders as I simply nod instead. “I'm Adon Griffin, your daughter's boyfriend.”

“Oh my,” she says, pressing her open palm to her chest. “Aren't you a little bit too old for her?”

Piper grimaces and straightens up, then grabs my hand in hers, but doesn't say anything. I know she only wanted to come today for one reason, and I'm here to support her through it.

Maeve sniffs and grabs her sister in a mock hug. “Oh, it's so awful, Piper. I'm not sure who will take me to the Greek formal this year.”

It doesn't surprise me that she's so vapid, but her sole concern still makes me shake my head subtly.

Piper takes a step back into me, away from her sister. “Listen, I only came here to tell you both something. You, my dear sister, have terrible taste in men. First with Noah, who raped me, and you, Mother, for choosing a man like my father.”

Both gasp and open their mouths to argue, but Piper takes the floor by holding up a finger. “You can deny everything all you want, but the fact remains, you allowed me to get hurt for years. And I'm not going to take your abuse anymore just because we share blood.”

“Throwing away your family for some man, Piper? How tired.” Her mother rolls her eyes at us both.

“He’s not just some man— ” Piper says, but I interrupt.

With a grip on her waist, I pull her closer to me, press my lips to the top of her pink head and say, “Right. I’m her family.”

Her fingers latch onto one of mine and squeeze in response.

She doesn’t know it yet, but the ring has been burning a hole in my pocket. I can’t wait to give it to her.

“Let’s go.” Piper turns and walks toward the front door, and I follow, but then pause when we reach the stairs.

“Do you want to go up there?”

I hear the deep breath she takes as she considers the second floor and her old room. The memories are practically a vision within her eyes as they scan the house. Finally, she shrugs. “Nope. It’s meaningless now. Not even a bad memory. It’s just there . Like it happened to someone else. Not to the Piper who stands here with you.”

Heat radiates over my eyes as I behold her power. When she looks at me, a bright smile crosses her lips like she’s just won a prize. “Come on,” she says. “Let’s go to my real home.”

We get in the truck, but I drive the back roads and take my time, nervously gripping the steering wheel.

“Adon, it’s been on this stupid commercial for a minute. Can I change the channel?” she asks.

My thoughts are brought back to the present as I nod at the radio. “Sure, change it.”

She hesitates for a moment while eyeing me suspiciously, then selects a new station. Still jazz, though, and that makes my heart warm enough to tell her what I need to.

“So, I did something. And I need to tell you before we move forward.”

Her eyebrows stitch together, and she slinks back against her door. “What?”

One of my palms rubs against my jeans to swipe off the sweat. “I found Noah.”

A gasp parts her lips as she whispers, “Yeah?”

“He was in medical school.”

“Was...”

Perhaps the pause before my reply is too great, but I take the time to swallow and stare straight ahead. I can’t even look at her. “I took care of him.”

She’s still and silent for so long; I glance over at her while stopped at a red light. “Took care...”

I let the words hang in the air without explaining.

Her voice is tiny when she asks, “Will anyone find out?—”

“No. And this is the last time I ever want to talk about it.”

Once we reach my driveway, I put the truck in park and wait while peering into the open garage. I’m afraid to peek over at her. To see any sort of change in her demeanor. What if she’s afraid of me now? What if she feels differently?

A little finger slides under my hand as it rests on my lap. When it does, I finally lift my head and take her in. Instead of fear, she holds an expression of awe. “You didn’t cheat on me.”

My brow lowers. “What? No. What the fuck? Never. I’m just letting you know where I was instead of at that hockey game.”

Her pert pink lips curl into a smile. “Oh. Okay. I’m thinking of making more cinnamon rolls today.”

As she bops inside, she makes a spin, her vintage skirt flying up around her waist. She crooks a finger to beckon me inside. I sit in my truck, stunned by her reaction. Or lack thereof.

She’s the safest person I’ve ever felt to spill every thought and emotion to. A smile crosses my face. I did it. I opened up, and it makes me realize...

Piper and I are perfect together.

Her little body dances toward the door, and I hurry to catch up. I break into a sprint, and she squeals as I chase her inside. Just as she darts for the kitchen, I snatch her up into my arms and place her on a counter, then step between her legs.

“Rosy, you need to behave, or daddy will need to punish you.”

“Hmm, maybe I want him to.”

My lips meet hers in a soft kiss before I pull back. A glint crosses her eyes as she waits for me to say something.

But I just gather her up, toss her over my shoulder, and race up the stairs with her

jostling and giggling on my shoulder. My palm swats her ass, and she screams my name.

“You’re going to get it hard, little girl. You ready for it?”

“Always.”

PIPER

It's so hot. Not only is the summer morning blazing, but the ovens are adding to it with their yeasty steam until I hurry to the back door and throw it open. The back of my forearm meets my sweaty cheek as I swipe up a drop before it falls onto the counter. Fuck. Got to start all over again.

The swinging door squeaks as Shirley pops it open with her generous hip. A few strands of her gray, frazzled mane sneak beneath her pink headwrap. "Any more orange scones? Old man who comes in every Thursday wants to know."

"Not today. I can barely keep up with the doughnuts!"

"We need more help, Miss Thing."

She never calls me boss or any sort of formal title. I actually really appreciate it. It's less pressure on me to perform as the owner of a bakery. Like, Shirley and I are just hanging out, making fun cakes and cookies. We've become best friends, despite that she's in her late sixties, has about a gazillion children, grandbabies, sisters, and a husband that's "retired so much, he looks dead half the time."

"Tell your sister to come over here and help us! I'll give her the same rate I do you. We can't keep going like this."

"She's too lazy. Let's get one of those high school kids after school. My niece— Another customer." The door swings with a groan as she heads back to the front.

Can I afford that? Adon says I can. With the way sales are going, things are rapidly accelerating until I may need to expand. In space and staff. It's only been two years since I started, and Rosy Sweets has done better than I ever could have dreamed. Shirley is a huge part of that.

She doesn't know it yet, but she's about to become co-owner. Her family recipes, combined with my "newfangled" ideas, have helped this place be successful. That and being the only bakery near campus for the university kids.

As quickly as she left, she returns with a scone in her hand, wrapped in a napkin. With a heavy sigh, she shakes her head. "Man out there says there was something in this one. He looks pissed."

My brow furrows as I inspect the sweet. It looks fine to me. I dust off the flour from my hands onto my apron and take it from her. "What's wrong with it?"

"Don't know. He's causing a scene, I think."

"He didn't even taste it! Ugh! Probably just looking for money back."

"He said he found something in the last one he bit into, so he was afraid to bite into that one. Maybe one of the cranberries was hard, I don't know. I'll try to shoo him off."

Shaking my head, I snap it in half and freeze.

A ring drops onto the stainless-steel surface where I had been rolling dough. The intricate pewter sides are cut like it's vintage. Something from the art deco era. And just my style.

My hand slaps over my gasping mouth. "It's a diamond..."

What in the world?

I take the ring and wander to the front of the shop, where Adon stands across from the cash register, a bouquet of red roses in his hand. A creeping grin tugs at the corners of his lips when he spots me.

“Adon, did you do this?” I ask breathlessly.

In response, he drops to a knee. Customers loitering about watch with little smiles and gasps as I round the counter, holding out the jewelry, in utter shock.

“My beautiful rosy girl, you have brought color into my black-and-white life. Sweetened every bland moment with your spices. And heated the cold parts of my heart with your warmth. My children adore you. And I love you. Please, become part of our lives forever and marry me.”

Tears have seeped out onto my cheeks, and I swallow before giving my squeaky reply. “Yes! Absolutely!”

His fingers attempt to take the ring from me, but I’ve already jumped into his lap and wrapped my body around him until he’s sitting on the pink tile floor. He laughs the same as I do and grabs my face with both hands, then kisses me in a way that leaves me dizzy.

My regulars drinking coffee and eating their pastries clap and yell their congratulations as I hurriedly give the diamond to Adon, then hold up my hand with a flourish.

“Put it on me! I want to be your wife now!”

After two years of hesitation and working through more things with a new therapist, I’m not only ready, but I’m eager to become Mrs. Adon Griffin. He’s the hero I

needed by my side to overcome my past. Someone who accepts me for exactly who I am. He knows I'm still hesitant to have kids, but he's more than willing to give me the space and time I want before making a final decision about that.

"How did you get the ring into the scone?" I ask as we stand and straighten up.

Adon's dark brown eyes meet Shirley's. "I had help."

"And now you've got help the rest of the day, Miss Thing. Take off and spend it with your old man," she says.

"Did you hear that, old man?" I ask him, and he takes my hand, taps a kiss to the back of it, and smiles.

"Yes, little girl. Let's go before your lip gets you in even more trouble."

As his hand presses against my lower back, leading us out the front door, I smirk.

"What if I want to get in trouble?"

Adon slips his hand into mine as we walk down the busy sidewalk. He doesn't answer for a minute, but when I look up at his beaming face, he tightens his lips, then says, "Then daddy will have to punish you."