



Under Her Skin (Skin Deep #2)

Author: *Jolene Raine*

Category: Suspense Thriller

Description: She's my only light, my only weakness.

It was too good to be true. Men who cause pain like I've caused don't get to be happy. We don't get to have it all.

Ava's brothers, my best friends, were right to want me out of her life, but I couldn't let go. We were just starting to settle into our own version of normal when the world turned upside down, and my worst nightmare came true.

I lost everything.

I lost her.

Now, I'm on a mission, ready to move heaven and earth to get her back. While I fear we'll both be broken beyond repair when all is said and done, I'll take that risk.

There are very few people I'd willingly follow into the darkness, but Ava has quickly become one of them. If there's one thing anyone who goes against me should know, it's that I'll stop at nothing for those I care about.

I failed to protect her once; I will not fail her again.

Even if it costs me everything.

Even if it costs me my life.

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KIEL

5 years ago

I clear my throat as I push off the corner of the wall. My chest burns and cramps, but I keep shuffling through the dark. My shin slams into an object I can't see as I break into a run again, silently praying that the noise wasn't heard.

My side feels both hot and cold and my shirt is damp with blood. I'm almost certain the bullet only grazed my skin, but it feels like I'm dying. Shouts echo from behind, followed by a noise that doesn't sound human leaving my mouth. Bullets ricochet off the walls, the noise is deafening.

Abandoning caution, I run blindly through the tunnels. They must have some sort of night vision capability with how easily they are following me. But why haven't they struck me down? It's then I realize: I'm being hunted. Everything in me screams to run, and I don't fight the urge, despite the exhaustion burning every muscle.

He whistles as if he's on a holiday instead of hunting a drug lord in the Middle East. The other laughs at the sound and shouts my name. I trip and flail for purchase, but am suddenly without a wall to lean on. He laughs again. The other pauses his tune to laugh with him. Their footsteps are faster now, and I know they're done with the chase. I consider begging, but it will only excite the crazy one. His eyes are dark—too dark—and they contain nothing but cruelty and malice.

It's his hand that grabs my neck from where I'm sprawled facedown in the dirt. He brings my wrists together behind my back as he speaks. "It's you and me now, Kiel.

Well, you, me, and your wife. She's so lovely."

I'm cold all over, and I start shaking. There are few things I love in the world. Really only one thing, and she's in this monster's possession. I can't help it. I beg.

"She has nothing to do with this. Please. She doesn't participate in my business." He laughs and hauls me upright.

"That's what she said too. She stuck to her story even after feeling my blade a few times. She's a tough one, your wife. I get what you see in her." I hear the smile in his voice, and I thrash in his grip.

"You're sick," I pant. The hand releases my neck as he steps in front of me, leaning in close.

"I am. And I will enjoy every moment I spend with you and your wife." I know he's trying to intimidate me, but I believe everything he says. I know he'll enjoy torturing me and I know he's enjoyed whatever he's done to Lyssa.

"What did you do to her?" I rasp. He grasps me again and pushes against my back, forcing me to move.

"Why don't I show you?" His voice is a sinister whisper, and the hollow feeling in my stomach returns in full.

We walk in silence while he steers me around the cramped space without pausing to assess for obstruction. I begin brainstorming ways to steal his night vision goggles when he opens a door and pushes me through.

1

CAL

Her dark hair is tangled around her face as she makes a fruitless attempt to push it behind her ears. She could roll the window up, but she seems content with the consequences of unruly hair, even if it means getting an unobstructed view. I squeeze my hand once on her thigh before removing it. Releasing my hold on the steering wheel, I remove her hair elastic from my wrist and hand it to her wordlessly. I don't understand the look in her eyes as she takes it from me and wraps it around her hair.

I return my hand to her thigh, which she covers with one of her own. The car is silent and it's a kind of silence I could live the rest of my days in. Roadside landmarks become more familiar to me as we head further north. My stomach twists at the thought of being in my hometown in just a few short hours. I haven't been back since Chase and I hunted down my father. The time before that was for my mother's funeral, so I don't have many positive feelings associated with the place. I didn't have many positive feelings about it as a kid either, but for some ungodly reason, I got the idea in my head to show Ava around.

I wanted her to see the place where I grew up, but the closer we get, the more I regret the decision. She was already watching me when I glanced at her, her amber eyes warm in the early evening light.

"Watch the road," she scolds, but she says it with a laugh. "I'd rather not die before I get to see your hometown." I roll my eyes at the insinuation.

“I’m not going to wreck the car. Have some faith, Viper.” She scowls at the name, her humor well and truly gone. It’s my turn to laugh as her scowl deepens. Regardless, I oblige her and turn back to the road, resisting the urge to look at her again when I feel her eyes on me.

“What?” I ask, my voice softer than I intended. She’s quiet for a moment, but she doesn’t move her focus.

“Your hair must have a red undertone. It looks almost auburn in this light.” I cut my eyes to her.

“My hair is definitely black.” She rolls her eyes.

“Nothing is ever just one color. It all depends on the lighting when you perceive it. On a cloudy day, your hair may seem darker, but something about this evening sunlight emphasizes the undertones.” I’m moved as I realize how differently we see the world. She sees such variation of color and light, whereas my world is very black and white. I tell her as much and she squeezes my hand.

“I happen to like the way you see the world,” she whispers, and I can’t help but look at her again. Her hair is already escaping the hair tie, small strands whip around her face.

“God, I love you,” I whisper back, and she grins. I hit the rumble strips, making her shriek.

“Watch the road, Cal!” She’s laughing again. I feel all of the anxiety from earlier melting away. I’m watching for a gas station, and take the exit when I see a roadside advertising one nearby.

“Oh great, I really have to pee,” Ava says, looking out of the window again.

The station is right off of the exit, and she starts unbuckling as soon as I'm parked. I grab her forearm before she can open the passenger door, hauling her toward me. My lips crash into hers. Her lips part, and her breath intoxicates me. I thread my fingers into her tangled hair, pulling the elastic free. Sliding it back onto my wrist, I kiss my way down her neck.

"Wait," she pants. "I'm down, but I really have to pee first." She giggles, and there's no way I'm letting her out now. She groans when I grip her waist. "I want you to fuck me, but I really don't want to pee on you when I do. I'll be five minutes tops." She's breathless, but I force myself to let her go.

"Five minutes, or I come in there and fuck you in the bathroom." She grins devilishly as she opens the car door, giving me a quick kiss before racing inside. I pull up to a pump to start filling my tank. Glancing at my watch, I see a minute has already passed.

Four minutes later and my tank is full. I take a look at the other travelers and find them all watching me. Three people at separate pumps are all turned away from their cars, their eyes not leaving my vicinity. I glance over my shoulder and see two more men leaning against a parked truck, watching. Ava has less than a minute left, but I don't wait for her timer to be up. I race inside. Shelves and racks have been upturned, scattering snacks and candy all over the floor. The soda fountain lays discarded on the ground, liquid spreading across the cheap linoleum.

I nearly slip as I rush to the back of the store in search of the bathroom, but there's nothing there. Running back to the front, I see a back door that I hadn't noticed at first. There's a sign with an arrow saying: 'Bathrooms out back'. Cursing,

I rip open the door.

The women's bathroom door is locked, and I pound on it several times with no

response. Panic rises in my throat when all I hear are muffled sounds from inside. Forcing it down, I slam my shoulder into the door, ready to break the hinges. On the third try, I hear wood splintering as the hardware gives way.

Inside is a sterile room with an observation window. The light is bright white, and I have to blink a few times at the harshness. It's at that moment, I realize I can see something through the window. There's a hospital bed and Ava is strapped to it, naked. I sprint toward her, pounding on the glass. She starts screaming for help when she sees me. Tears pour down her face. As she cries, wounds seem to open all over her body, the streams of blood flowing with her tears. My own face is wet with tears as I realize the glass won't break.

"Ava, sweetheart, I've got you. I'm going to get you out." Her face twists with hatred even as she continues to cry.

"You did this to me," she wails. A figure walks into the room.

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I wake with a start and nearly throw up at the pounding in my head. I try to pull my arms to my face but realize that I can't move. The dream, and my reality, suddenly catch up to me. I'm bound to the same chair and, when I look up, I see Ava through the observation window. She's awake, but doesn't seem aware of her surroundings.

Her naked body is covered with wounds. For a horrible moment, I'm nearly glad that she's been drugged. I pray to anyone that might be listening that she doesn't remember what he did to her, even if she has the scars to remind her.

I pull at my restraints again, but they won't budge, so I try to take stock of my surroundings. My vision blurs as I turn my head from side to side. The nausea climbs up my throat again, and I have to take a few breaths. My room is mostly empty, aside

from the door that connects me to Ava. I'm only a few feet away from her, but I've never felt more helpless in my life. I try to scoot the chair forward, but the legs are bolted into the floor.

I'm debating other ways I could escape when someone walks into Ava's room.

She's still confused and just stares at Kiel with a frown as he slowly walks toward her. The room must have a microphone, because I can hear his footsteps amplified into my room. When he's only inches away, he places the palm of his hand against her forehead, pushing back her hair.

"Are you in pain?" Kiel whispers. His eyes never leave her face as she nods. Her brows are furrowed, but she doesn't look away either.

"I can make it go away," he whispers again and walks to a metal stand behind her. He draws fluid into a syringe and looks into her eyes as he depresses the plunger, emptying the contents into her veins. It only takes moments to hit her system. Her face instantly relaxes, and Kiel places a hand on her wrist as he studies the effects of his drug.

Kiel touches her face again before he walks away from the table. I'm fighting to control my rage as he stalks toward my door. I know I can't show him how I really feel or else risk him hurting Ava even more. By the time he's through the threshold, I've contained myself.

"She's so pretty when she bleeds, isn't she?"

I'll kill him. As he grins at me, eyes too wide and bright, I make that promise. I will kill him.

"I know you agree," he continues. "I remember that night well. You took her into

your bed and drove the blade into her skin before driving your cock into her cunt.” I fight to keep my face neutral, and his smile broadens like he knows it. “I can still hear the noises she made that night. Even outside your bedroom window, I could hear how much it hurt, and how she loved it. Do you think she loves my blade as much as yours?” The insinuation nearly causes me to lunge forward, but I remember my restraints in time, and I make myself sit still.

“I remember the way you cut up my wife. I do not remember those noises as fondly. You butchered her right in front of me. Do you remember that, Callum?” I close my eyes as the memories flood my mind. I try not to think of that time. I’m not proud of everything I’ve done, and even though it was a part of my assignment, I often regret what I did during those years.

“To your credit,” he continues, “You kept your cock away from my wife. I’m not sure I’ll be able to show the same restraint.” I bare my teeth before I can stop myself. He chuckles, his eyes still open wide as he laughs. “Enjoy the view, Callum.” Kiel turns his back to me and pauses in front of the window into Ava’s room. He watches her for several long moments before leaving me alone in the room. Ava doesn’t stir.

KIEL

The symphony of birdsong wakes me up in the morning before my alarm. I've already received several messages, demanding my presence to negotiate trade deals. I decline, claiming to be unavailable for the foreseeable future due to a personal emergency. Said emergency is strapped naked to a hospital bed somewhere below me.

She looked so relieved to feel the needle slip into her smooth skin. I'm drawn to the light in her eyes, but I'm much more intrigued when it grows hazy. I made her feel good. Part of me is desperate to do it again. Instead, I shuffle into the kitchen and brew a single cup of coffee, scratching my bare chest as I look out the kitchen window.

The mountains are covered in a thick mist that's slowly evaporating in the early-morning sunshine. There isn't another human soul for miles, allowing me to relish in the solitude. So much of my business revolves around handling people. My product is worthless without people to distribute it, but I've been craving time to just be alone.

Even better, I'm alone with a beautiful woman and the person I hate the most at my disposal. The coffee instantly burns my tongue when I drink it, but I take another gulp anyway as I start responding to messages.

I've only answered a few when the thought of her naked body flashes into my mind unbidden. I didn't expect to enjoy making her bleed, but I've hardly thought of

anything since. The bright liquid pooled on her belly before dripping down her hips. It trickled down her breasts and accentuated every curve. I grip my cock through my boxers for several seconds, letting out a sigh as I get another notification.

My second, Pete, has been blowing up my phone for the last 48 hours. I know my empire is in competent hands, but I desperately need him to make more executive decisions, allowing me to focus on my task. I've composed half a message when he calls.

"Peter," I say, my voice thin.

"Look, Boss, I know you're busy, but I need answers." I'm glad he's intent on not fucking up my empire, but I sigh anyway.

"What do you need?" He must hear the tension in my voice, because he pauses.

"You okay over there? Do you need reinforcements?" He knows I've been tracking Callum and Chase for years. Hell, he's helped with a lot of the search.

"No, I have everything under control, but I'm busy as usual. So, what do you need?" He doesn't ask about my feelings again and launches into his many questions.

"We had a drop go wrong last night. One of our most reliable mules had a change of heart. Instead of making the drop, she kept it and ran. It was her biggest drop yet, too. We have men going after her, but we have more drops to make tonight, and I don't know if I can spare the resources." I pinch the bridge of my nose as he continues.

"There've been several more overdoses in the city, and we're working on distributing the product further into the suburbs. It's attracted the governor's attention, but according to our mole in the city police force, they don't have any promising leads or suspects. We have a solid team stationed in the city, so I think we're ready to start

distributing into the next county.”

“Have you selected mules in the next county?” I ask, unbothered by the rest of his concerns.

“They’re marked, but unapproached. There’s a pretty large strip club outside the city, but it seems to be where the city folk go. Plenty of desperate girls who are willing and ready to take bad deals. We’ll approach with offers when you’re ready.”

“Go ahead and make the connections. Have a good time while you’re at it. Treat them well and pay them generously. Show them what a professional relationship with me could do for them. As far as the runner, she won’t get far. Send me her file, and I’ll take care of it. Anything else?”

“No, Sir, that’s it for now.”

“Thank god. Don’t call me again today unless you’re dying.” I end the call before he can respond. Seconds later I receive the file on our runner. Bella Thomas. A beautiful young woman and a popular stripper in the city. I forward her file to Eddie, the independent bounty hunter I keep on retainer. I pay him well and his loyalty has been unshakeable throughout the years. If no one else can find someone, I always know he can. He was the one who brought me the lead to Callum and Chase, so I’m sure he’ll have no problem with a disloyal slut.

Eddie responds in minutes. I refocus on the larger issue at hand: Ava Channing. I imagine her spread on the bed as if she were waiting for me and the pain and relief I bring. My coffee is cold as I knock back the last sip. I refill it before walking down the steps into the basement.

3

AVA

Goosebumps pebble along my skin and I try to curl my legs toward my core. Straps rub against my bare skin. I open my eyes, confused. Dried blood is everywhere. And straps. I'm covered in dried blood and straps. My head spins and aches. I know I should be worried about the blood, but my mouth feels like I've swallowed a cotton ball.

"Cal?" I call out. I don't know why I say it. I don't know anyone named Cal. But the name feels nice in my mouth, so I say it again. "Cal?" My voice is hoarse, but the name still sounds so nice. I'm thinking about the sound when I remember.

I remember him. The 6'3" Greek god of a man who watched me, hunted me down, hurt me, and loved me. I remember the other man, the wide-eyed one, who took me.

"Cal?" I ask again, tears welling in my throat. I imagine him bursting through one of these doors and cutting me free from my restraints. He'd kill the wide-eyed man, making sure he never touched me again. A moment later the door opens. For a moment, I think Cal's actually come for me.

The wide-eyed man holds a mug as he prowls toward me. I thrash on the bed, never looking away from him.

"Good morning, Ava. Did you sleep well?" His voice is smooth and deceptively kind. I gnash my teeth and attempt to draw my legs together, feeling horribly exposed on

this table. My movement only pulls his attention to my private area. Nausea twists at my empty stomach as he studies me, but a moment later he turns his back to me.

I'm briefly relieved until he turns around again, this time holding another needle. I suddenly remember him and these needles. This isn't the first time I've felt this, and even as I try to fight it, a part of me is glad. No matter what he does to me, if it's while I'm asleep, I have a chance of getting through it.

4

CAL

The pain in my head is familiar now, but the grogginess takes longer to dissipate. Even still, my mind is immediately on Ava. It takes me too long to remember where she is, and even longer to remember why we're here. I vaguely remember a person approaching me with a needle, but I don't remember anything after.

I'm in a new position too. Someone removed my clothes and has rechained me to the back wall of the room. The idea of Kiel coming that close to me while asleep has me ready to knock his teeth out. There's a bucket nearby that I imagine I'm meant to use as a restroom.

The room is still dim, but I can clearly see the bright lights into Ava's room. I don't know how much time has passed, but she's still covered in dried blood.

Hopelessness settles into my chest. I fight the feeling away and focus on the activity in front of me. Kiel approaches the bed with a bucket and places it on a nearby stand. I feel my body tense as he places a hand inside, but relax a little when he withdraws a sponge. He wrings it out, letting the fluid drip over Ava's unconscious form.

He pats the sponge over her wounds, wiping the dried blood from her skin. Dread coils in my gut as I watch his measured and tender movements. I recognize the expression on his face, and I'm sick to see it on him while he tends to Ava. Kiel performs his task slowly, taking the time to change out the solution in the bucket several times as he cleans the blood.

He drags the sponge across her breasts reverently and grips one of them in his bare hand. My face feels numb as I watch in horror when he traces the sponge down her torso to her inner thighs. My chest is rising and falling irregularly, and I can't seem to catch my breath.

I'm again thankful she's asleep, that she won't remember this moment, but I nearly come apart as he tends to the wound on her vulva and the blood gathered on the inside of her thighs. She could have bled out. I don't know how she didn't. A horrible part of me wishes she had if it meant she could be spared from whatever he has planned for her.

Kiel places a hand on the inside of her thigh, the movement offering an unobstructed view of her vagina. I can't contain myself anymore, my rage bubbling past my mouth.

"You motherfucker!" I thrash in my chains. "I will eviscerate you, you piece of shit!" I keep shouting at him, but he doesn't so much as flinch. Realizing the room must be soundproofed, I slump against the wall. Vomit rises up my throat as I prepare to witness the worst.

A moment later, he stands up to dump the bucket. As he washes his hands at the sink, I take the opportunity to watch Ava. I pray for her to have the strength and courage to hold on a little longer. I know her brothers have to be looking for us - and if I know the Giovanni brothers as well as I think I do, they will find us.

Too soon, Kiel comes striding into my room, his expression indiscernible. He paces in front of me a few times, then stops in front of the window to watch Ava.

"Have you ever felt as worthless as you do now?" Kiel asks softly.

"What? Are you my conscious now?"

He smirks as he turns to face me. “Always the smartass. Tell me, Callum, when you abducted and slaughtered my wife, did you imagine our story would end like this?” I flinch and he continues. “You killed my wife in front of me. You tortured me. And yet you still couldn’t stop me. My empire is flourishing. You couldn’t stop me from taking the woman you love. Everything you did was worthless.” He may be trying to manipulate me, but it’s hard to deny that he’s right.

“The only reason Ava is mixed up in this, is because of you. She’s suffering because of you, Callum Drake. And she will never forgive you.” I close my eyes,

unable to face the truth of his words. He laughs wryly. “Not that you’ll live for long. Ava, however, I might keep. If only so you can go to your grave knowing that she’ll be mine for the rest of her life.”

Kiel leaves me then, and I watch Ava in the silence.

5

AVA

The cold is always what hits me first. I'm so tired of being naked, but I'm even more tired of being awake. Every time I'm awake, I'm afraid. And I'm so tired of being afraid.

I have no idea how long I've been here. There aren't any windows or outside noise to give me any clues either. My spine and my skin where the straps hold me down are on fire from laying in this position for so long. I need to use the restroom, but I'm afraid to ask.

Trying to focus on something else proved to be hard because of how hyper aware I am of my nakedness. They're keeping the temperature so low, it feels as if my nipples are perpetually hard. I listen to the rattling of the AC and the subtle dripping noise from behind me. There might be a sink somewhere close, but I can't be sure. The water drips steadily. For a few minutes, I forget where I am and how badly I need a restroom.

My temporary peace is broken as one of my doors flies open and the wide-eyed man strides into the room. I freeze and fight to keep my face still so that he won't know how terrified I feel. He smiles at me as if I'm his favorite person in the world and pulls a chair to the bedside.

"How are you today, dear?" He seems excited today. For some reason, this scares me more. He frowns a little when I don't respond and pushes my hair away from my

face.

“You are very important to me Ava,” he says, voice suddenly gentle. “I didn’t anticipate it. You always intrigued me, but now you actually mean something. I have incredible plans for you, and you’re going to perform them beautifully.”

His eyes have taken on this strange light again. I remember the first time I witnessed it. I squeeze my eyes tight as the memory of his blade floods my mind. He cut into my flesh over and over, and I remember asking him to kill me. There was no pleasure like I had felt with Cal. There was only fear like I had never experienced before.

“Eyes open, Ava.” I ignore him and keep them closed. A second later, my nipple is being twisted and pulled. I gasp, eyes involuntarily flying open at the painful sensation.

“Much better,” he murmurs, and lightly traces my nipple with his fingertips. My eyes well with tears as he watches my expression. “As I was saying, you are very important to me and to my future endeavors. You are mine, now, and it’s time you come to terms with that.” I have no idea what he’s talking about, and I open my mouth to ask him when his hand curls on the inside of my thigh. I gasp, a tear trickles down my cheek.

“Please,” I whisper. “Please don’t.” I didn’t want to beg him like this, but any remnant of my pride is out the window.

“You’re mine, Ava. I will treat you as such, and you will behave as such,” he says firmly as he spreads my slit. The cut on my vulva burns as I feel it open again. Tears are flowing freely now as he circles my clit.

“Please,” I choke out. He doesn’t respond as he drives a finger into my opening. He pumps his fingers in and out harshly and the wet sound fills me with shame.

“Your body wants me,” he says, “Can’t you hear it? Your body knows who it belongs to.” He pulls his fingers out and circles my clit roughly. My body responds to the sensation, back arching away from the bed.

“That’s it,” he murmurs, eyes fixed on my core. I pull against the restraints as a shameful pleasure builds in my belly.

“Cal will kill you for this,” I pant. He grins at me and plunges his fingers into my heat again.

“Callum won’t even want you after this.” He pumps his fingers in my vagina with one hand as he circles my clit with the other. I know I’m close to an orgasm and try to push it down.

“Who do you belong to?” He whispers, forcing another finger inside me. I whimper, but the sound only seems to encourage him. His actions grow frenzied, but when I don’t answer, he pinches hard on my clit. I cry out before dissolving into sobs. “Who do you belong to?” He asks again. When I still don’t answer, he draws away from me completely. For a moment, I think my resistance has worked. When I look up, he’s watching me.

“I can make this very painful for you, Ava, and I will.” His eyes have taken on a predatory glint as he spits into his hand.

“No, no, please,” I wince as he forces three of his fingers into my opening. I cry out with burning pain and undeniable, horrific pleasure. I know I don’t want this from him, but when he brings his other hand back onto my clit, I know I won’t be able to fight the reaction. His movements are vicious, and he asks his question again.

“Who do you belong to?” He growls. I can’t bring myself to answer. If I do, I feel like it will officially ruin everything Cal and I have together. God, just the thought of

Cal right now fills me with more self-loathing than I've ever felt.

He withdraws himself again, the sudden removal startling me. "I can make you suffer all day, Ava. I'll keep you right on the edge for hours until you're begging me to finish you off. Have you ever felt that kind of pain? Every time you refuse me, I'll stretch you out even more. Even if it means tearing you the fuck apart." He spits into his hand again while I push and pull against my restraints.

The wound on my vulva is steadily trickling blood as he wedges four fingers into my opening. He doesn't look away from my core as I weep and beg. He pinches my clit; the overstimulation is painful.

"Who do you belong to?" He says again. This time, his voice sounds deadly.

"You," I whisper as tears drip into my mouth. He smirks and brings his fingers back to my clit. I instantly climax, the pleasure immediately giving way to nausea. He stays inside of me until my muscles have stopped clenching.

"My name is Kiel," he tells me before standing and walking out of the room, leaving me with my shame.

6

AVA

I know I slept for at least a short time because I dreamt of Elliott. For better or worse, I couldn't spend long reliving that awful night in the frat house because my bladder forced me awake. No matter how much I try to shift my weight, I can't escape the cramping in my abdomen. I try to focus on the sounds in the room again, but the drip in the sink only reminds me of how much I need to relieve myself.

I've nearly resigned myself to wetting the bed when the door opens. Kiel walks in, and I nearly spit on his feet as he passes me.

"Waiting for me to piss the bed?" I hiss. He laughs, the sound vibrant and filling the small space. A man walks in behind him, momentarily stunning me. He's tall and wearing light blue scrubs. Kiel leans against the sink counter, just watching me as the new person rummages through the cabinets in the room. The man approaches me with a bedpan, making me balk.

"Wait, I can't use that," I interject. The man pauses and looks at Kiel, who shrugs.

"You can either use it and accept the assistance of my friend here, or you can, as you put it, 'piss the bed.' Your choice." He smirks as if that's a choice at all. I consider wetting the bed in hopes that they might release me to clean the sheets, but they'd be more likely to make me sit in the mess.

"Fine," I mutter. The man approaches. When he lifts me up, I realize how much I've

been sweating. The room is freezing, but my lower back is damp. He slides the bedpan underneath me and waits expectantly. I glance over at Kiel to see that he's moved closer.

"Freak," I say as he watches me carefully. He smiles but doesn't respond.

"Do you have to go or not?" The man says and begins reaching for the bedpan.

"Yes, hold on," I say quickly. The relief is instant, but my cheeks feel red as Kiel watches the urine trickle into the bedpan below me. My humiliation only grows at how long it takes to empty my bladder. Kiel doesn't look away from my core the entire time, gripping the front of his jeans. When I'm finally done, the man in scrubs lifts me up to remove the collection.

"Planning to drink that?" I ask Kiel and he laughs again.

"I'd put anything from your body in my mouth, pretty girl." I press my lips together, my comment having the opposite of my intended effect. The man in scrubs returns to my bed and moves suddenly toward my core. I flinch as he wipes me with a cold cloth.

I was clean after a few wipes, but he lingers, the pressure hovering then circling around my clit. I watch him in horror as he looks over his shoulder to see Kiel facing away from us, disposing of my waste. The man slips a bare finger between my slit and fingers my opening. His eyes are locked on mine. I have never seen eyes so cold in my life. I debate calling for Kiel, but don't imagine I'd get much help from him. He curls his fingers into me, but quickly withdraws as Kiel turns around. The man tosses the wipe before leaving us in the room.

"Feel better?" Kiel asks, as if I hadn't been moments away from soiling the mattress. I don't respond, which makes him frown. "It has become apparent that you are

incredibly strong willed. In some ways, I enjoy that. In others, it is simply unacceptable. For instance, you should always know who you belong to. As much as I enjoyed my time with you during our last session, your disobedience will not be tolerated. This is a lesson that needs to be cemented and you will learn it now or face the consequences.”

Dread coils in my belly again as he turns away from me, studying the instrument cart. Kiel selects a wicked blade and approaches my bed. He uses the other hand to unbutton his pants. A moment later, he pulls his cock free to stroke himself a few times. He’s massive and I know he’ll hurt me.

“This is for your own good,” he claims, dragging the blade through an unmarred patch of skin. I can’t help it; I cry out. “I love it when you make that sound,” he groans as he grabs himself. Hot blood erupts from the wound on my belly and trickles down my side. He finds a place on my thigh where he creates a laceration there as well. He pumps into his hand as I sob.

“Remind me, Ava. Who do you belong to?” Kiel cuts below my navel.

“You!” I shriek, my voice breaking on the word.

“That’s right,” he says, and cuts right next to my nipple. I gasp, suddenly terrified he might remove a part of my body. He seems to sense my fear because he grabs hold of my breast and massages it. The pressure opens the wound further; the contact against his skin burns red hot.

“You’re mine,” he continues, “which means every part of you and your body belongs to me. Your skin, your blood, your breasts, your pussy, your anus, and your mouth. It’s all mine.”

My entire body is shaking from duress and the obvious threat. He cuts in line with

Cal's old mark, right between my breasts. Kiel might be trying to get into my head, but he's right about one thing. Cal can't possibly want me after this, if he's even still alive. A horrible, hopeless part of me wonders if Cal is dead, because I can't fathom any other reason why he hasn't rescued me yet.

My eyes are shut tight as blood pours over my belly, but they fly open when I hear Kiel groan. He's clutching his cock as he ejaculates over my abdomen. Ropes of semen mix with my blood. He studies it for a moment as he catches his breath.

"You will be obedient." It's not a question, but I nod anyway. Wordlessly, he tucks himself into his pants and leaves the room as I lay covered in my own blood and this awful stranger's cum.

7

CAL

I don't know when I last slept. I've been living in a nightmare every time Kiel comes into Ava's room, but I know it's been so much worse for her. The look on her face when Kiel said I wouldn't want her again will haunt me forever. She believes I've abandoned her, and I don't blame her.

He left her with dirty, open wounds for hours. She'll need antibiotics, if her older wounds aren't already infected. Ava is slowly breaking down before my eyes, but I know an infection could take her down sooner. The only time I've found any peace has been when Ava's slept. Whether it was a drug-induced state or not, I'm always thankful when her eyes are closed, and her breaths are steady. I know she must be having nightmares, but it's a break from her bright room.

Her rest breaks also give me a chance to plan. When she's awake, I feel like I have to always watch her, but now that she's asleep, I can focus on a way to get out of here.

There's one exit in my room and it connects to Ava's room. From what I can tell, her room has two doors: one leading to my room and another leading to a separate part of the building. When our shared door is closed, our rooms are virtually sound proof. Our room is separated by a large one way mirror, which could be breakable.

My arms and legs are both bound to metal cuffs, which are connected to short chains in the wall. I can't even bring my hands together, but I have a little more freedom of movement now that I'm out of the chair. I begin to lean away from the wall, putting

my whole weight into it to apply pressure on the joint where the chain connects to the wall. It may not work right away, but over time, it might cause the chain to break. I'm so focused on my chains, I don't hear Kiel come in.

"Pretty nice setup, right? At least you have your own piss bucket now," he says with false positivity. I think about pissing on him, but I know Ava will pay the price for any of my unfavorable behavior.

"You know," he starts again. "I really like Ava." He walks closer to me; his eyes are glazed over. "She's so pretty. She's pretty when she bleeds. She's pretty when she comes. She's pretty when she pisses." He grins at me like a psychopath. "I planned on killing her in front of you, but I just can't do that now. I'm smitten." He paces in front of me, studying me closely as I stay silent.

"This all started as a way to hurt you. I planned to rape her and kill her to hurt you. But now I just want her. You don't even matter to me like that anymore. Although, I will receive no small amount of pleasure when you watch me fuck her for the first time. Maybe I'll arrange to bring you closer to the window for the occasion." I lunge at him, but my chains draw me up short.

"I'm going to stick my cock into your girl's little pussy, and she'll love it. Because she may never like me, but I know she loves my dope. And, over time, she'll take my cock any way I give it to her if it means she gets her fix. One day, it will be like you never existed. I'll kill you eventually, but for the time being, you can watch me stretch her out." Kiel winks at me and leaves.

Rage and panic take over my nervous system. I'm suddenly a kid again watching my dad wail on my mom. I'd come home from school to find her covered in bruises. I thought I felt helpless then, but nothing could have prepared me for this. My lungs feel like they are shrinking as I mentally grasp for anything to ground me, trying to focus on Ava's face but I can only see it contorted in pain.

My mind lands on Chase. Just the thought of him reminds me that he's out there still. The brothers are looking for us, and they will find us. One way or another, Ava's getting out of here. But when she does, I don't know how she'll look at me knowing how badly I failed her.

8

AVA

I eventually develop a routine in this timeless room. The man in scrubs will come down to let me use the bedpan. He sometimes tries to touch me, but Kiel is usually right behind him.

Kiel enjoys cutting, but he often doesn't go much further. The man in the scrubs will clean me up after. Then I'm left naked and alone to sleep until the routine starts over again.

Every so often, the man in the scrubs will hook me up to an IV. I suppose this is how they administer fluids since I constantly have to pee. I can't remember the last time I ate, but the hunger pangs don't come anymore. They often inject a syringe into my arm as well. This is my favorite part of my routine. Nothing hurts or bothers me so much when I've had my syringe.

I've almost grown accustomed to this grizzly routine. I may be getting mutilated, but at least I know what to expect.

The man in the scrubs had just left for the last time, and I'm finally falling asleep in this bright room when the door slams open. I jolt in the bed as Kiel strides into the room. He begins pacing. It's obvious that he's deeply agitated.

"I've tried to let you adjust to me. Don't get me wrong, I own you, but I want you to like belonging to me." I shake my head as fear coils low in my belly.

“I don’t understand,” I whisper. He leans over me, his cotton shirt brushing against my hard nipples.

“I have to have you. I have to have all of you.” I shake my head again, understanding dawning. He goes to the instrument table and fills a syringe. I pause, my fear temporarily overridden by the prospect of whatever is in that syringe. “That’s right, baby. I’ll give you this and you’ll love it.”

I know he’s going to do what he wants to my body regardless, so I don’t fight him as he injects the syringe into my vein. I feel the effects immediately, but it doesn’t feel like it normally does. My limbs feel heavy, and I can’t move, no matter how hard I try. My brain feels as present as ever. Terror, real terror explodes throughout my body.

Kiel begins unstrapping my arms and legs. The utter helplessness I feel makes me want to weep. Tears gather in my eyes, but I can’t move my mouth.

“That’s it, pretty girl, you’re going to be so good for me. You can understand everything that’s going on right now, can’t you?” I try my best to glare at him, and he must get the point. He takes off his clothes, throwing them on the floor before climbing on top of the bed. Taking my limp hand in his, he curls it around his cock. He groans, his head tilting back.

“You have no idea how much I’ve dreamt of this.” The thought makes me feel sick. I panic as I realize that if I were to throw up now, I’d choke. Fresh terror rolls over me in waves.

Kiel spits on his tip and continues to pump into my hand. Using his free hand, he slides his fingers between my legs to circle my clit. He drops my hand with another

groan. “I have to taste you,” he says, out of breath. “Every time I’ve been down here, I’ve hardly thought of anything else.”

My attention catches on the word down , and I realize I must be in a basement of some kind. It doesn’t help me much, but I feel a brief flare of hope, which dies as I feel his cool mouth on my vagina. I try to wiggle away, but my body doesn’t move even an inch. His tongue darts in and out of my entrance then flicks against my clit. My nerve endings are alight, and I know he’s going to force me to orgasm again. He pulls away for a moment before inserting a finger into my opening.

He pumps into me a few times, then continues lapping at my pussy. I want to fight him off and push him away, but instead my body responds in the only way it can. A guttural noise escapes my lips as I climax against his mouth. His mouth is covered in my arousal when he sits up; his wide eyes are triumphant.

Before I realize what’s happening, he draws my knees up so that my feet are flat against the bed. In one sudden movement, he lines his cock up to my core and drives into me. Another cry escapes my throat, and the wrongness of the sensation is overwhelming.

Kiel pushes my knees toward my chest as he rocks deeper into my core. There is nothing gentle about his rhythm as he pounds against my cervix. My traitorous body is working to accommodate him, and I can hear my slickness with each thrust.

“That’s a good girl. You’re going to give me your pussy or whatever hole I want, whenever I want it. I’m going to hurt you and you will thank me for it.” He grabs one of my nipples and pinches hard enough for me to shriek again. “Be thankful I didn’t force myself into your asshole. I will eventually, but I’m giving it to you easy tonight.” He pushes a hand on my lower belly, and I can see the movement of his cock from the outside of my abdomen.

I don't know how long I've been crying, but fresh tears wash over my face at the sight. The pressure of his hand breaks open some of my scabs; beads of blood appear on my skin.

"Fuck," he groans as he sees the blood. He hauls my knees over his shoulder, turning his head to bite down onto my thigh. I scream, the sound a shredded, trapped thing. He lets go and moves his attention to my core. He watches where we're joined then pinches my clit. His moan syncs with my cry when his thrusts go faster.

"You're going to be a good girl and take all of my cum." He rubs fast and hard against my clit. Despite the pain, I'm climaxing again. As my muscles clench, he drives into me one last time before emptying himself. Kiel's panting and watches my private area as he slowly removes his penis from my core.

"You're so pretty when you're dripping cum." He grins, quickly rolling out of my bed. He rummages for something behind me, but my body is still frozen. Climbing back into bed, he's holding an odd object. He pushes it against my opening. My interior muscles flex as they prepare for another intrusion, but he doesn't push it into my vagina.

"I figured I'd get it a little wet first." He holds it up. The object is covered in his semen. I'm still not entirely sure what I'm looking at, but I panic when he grabs my waist and starts rolling me over. I still can't speak but I grunt in protest as he puts me onto all fours before pushing my head toward my measly pillow. I'm afraid I'll suffocate here, but he turns my head at the last moment so I can breathe. As he spreads my ass, I suddenly realize what he has in his hand.

“I know you’re drugged, but try to relax.” He spits on my hole, then the toy is at my back entrance. I want to wiggle away, but he forces my hole to open as he pushes firmly against the flared base. There’s not enough moisture and it’s painful as the toy finally slips in.

“There you go, pretty girl. I’ll take this hole too, but I’m feeling nice. I’ll at least let you prepare for it.” He rolls me onto my back again. My chest is quivering with sobs. This final intrusion has eradicated any sense of control I had over my panic. I wish he would use a stronger drug to knock me out. I want to be anywhere but in this room, even if it means I’m unconscious.

...

My routine changes. Kiel still comes into my room every day, but everyday is a new horror. When I get my syringe, I never know if it will leave me unconscious or leave me paralyzed. He sometimes gives me the good stuff. I know he fucks me, but at least I’m asleep. Most of the time, it paralyzes me. He likes me awake to remember.

The intrusion never gets easier. I think of Cal less and less. At first, I would sit in the silent room after and cry, praying he’d forgive me. Now, I’ve accepted that I would never be wanted after such defilement. There are some things I know men can’t look past, even men like Cal.

When Kiel leaves me in the silence, I usually fall asleep thinking of the next syringe. My body has been trained to dread pleasure. He works me to a climax every time, and my body has begun to correlate the feeling with shame.

Kiel comes in one day, his expression dour. I know these days will usually end in my pain. I close my eyes and ask: “Can you just dope me now? I’m sure it will be more

bearable for both of us.” My eyes fly open as his hand cracks across my cheek. I gasp and my eyes sting.

“How fucking dare you? I’ll fuck you the way I want you.” He glares at me for a moment then presses a button on the wall. He begins preparing a syringe in the silence. I know I’m not getting dope, but I hope for it anyways. The craving nearly overpowers the dread and fear. The man in scrubs walks in a minute later.

“Sir?” He asks, confused.

“Her mouth is yours. She wants to talk shit, so show her what her mouth is

good for.” Kiel plunges the needle into my arm as he speaks. Within minutes, I’m paralyzed. He unbuckles his pants and pulls himself free.

“Being a smartass has consequences, Ava.” He rolls me onto my stomach, hiking my ass into the air. “You’ll have to hold up her top half,” Kiel instructs. “She’s totally immobile so you’ll have to manipulate her to get the angle you want.” The man in scrubs grins at his boss.

“Hold on, I have an idea.” He runs out the door. Kiel takes the opportunity to grab hold of my butt plug. He slowly pulls it out and I feel my hole shrinking without the intrusion. The man in scrubs returns with a stack of pillows. Kiel laughs at him then pulls me upright by the hair as the man stacks them on the end of the bed. My scalp burns and I grunt in pain. When Kiel sets me back down, my upper half is propped up.

I hear Kiel uncap a bottle then feel the cold lube over my opening. Kiel pushes into me first. I’m sure he only used lube for his benefit, because he doesn’t pause for me to adjust before burying himself in my ass. The toy in no way prepared me for the intrusion. The pain is momentarily blinding. I gasp and the man in scrubs drives into

my mouth. His tip hits the back of my throat, making me gag, saliva pouring out of my mouth. The man groans and grips my hair as Kiel thrusts into me from behind.

“Imagine if Cal could see you now, pretty girl. A cock stuffed in your ass and a

cock stuffed down your throat. What do you think he’d say if he could see you dripping cum from both ends? I’ll give you a hint. Callum doesn’t like a whore.” Kiel taunts as his fingertips dig into my hips. He suddenly strikes my ass, the sound echoing in the small space. I yelp, but choke on the sound. The man in scrubs groans.

“Fuck, do that again. Her mouth felt so good when you did that.” Even though I’m expecting it, I cry again at the second hit. The man holds me still for a second as he pushes his entire length into my mouth, and I gag again. Tears slow down my cheeks. The sight makes him snap. He begins fucking my mouth so hard that I can hardly breathe. Kiel sets his pace to the man in scrubs. My body rocks in time on the hospital bed.

He reaches around to circle my clit. Shame washes over me as the pleasure

builds. I feel nauseous by the time I tip over the edge. The man in scrubs finishes first, hot ropes of cum shooting into the back of my throat and coating my tongue. The taste makes me gag, and for a horrible moment, I think I really will throw up.

Kiel strikes me on the ass one more time, and sinks into me. Before he can roll

me back around, he eases the toy back into my anus. I couldn’t swallow even if I

wanted to, but my lips won’t move into a shape to let me spit, so the man’s semen

drips out of my mouth. The pair stand there with limp cocks, watching me where I

lay on the bed while they steady their breathing. Kiel cuts his eyes to the man in scrubs.

“That was a onetime thing to teach her a lesson. Don’t get any ideas.” He nods his head, but doesn’t meet Kiel’s eye. My routine changes again after that day.

The man in scrubs likes spending private time with me, too.

9

CAL

I was never trained to endure this. Officially, I was trained to endure anything, but that was before Ava. Everything I learned about resisting the enemy became null and void the moment Kiel approached her in that room. I've lost track of time and hardly know when I'm awake or asleep. I think I sleep a lot. Either way, I'm in a nightmare. My heart perpetually hammers in my throat. My body feels heavy. I slump against the wall and can't convince my legs to support my weight.

There's a horrible sound. I think Ava's crying. When I look toward the window, she's asleep and alone in her room. The sound doesn't stop.

"Ava?" My voice is raspy but cuts through the noise. The room is so empty, and I don't know where I am. "When I was a boy, I wanted a sister." I say into the room. Maybe Ava can hear me. I doubted it, but that didn't stop me. "Ava. I wanted a sister, but I knew my dad would treat her like my mom. So, then I thought I wanted a brother, but I knew there'd be a chance that he'd turn out like my dad. I figured I was better alone." The light in the room seems to pulse.

"Ava," I say, but I don't know what the word means. I like the way it fits in my mouth, so I say it again.

My body trembles so violently it feels as if my very skin is trying to slide off my flesh. There's a woman in the other room. She's naked and asleep. Even thin and bloodied, she's beautiful. I know her.

“Ava,” I whisper. Tears clog my throat. Horrible images flash through my mind. I see Kiel on top of her. I am the reason she’s here. I am the reason she’s hurting. I’m dying in the other room. She’s dying.

I have never felt more useless in my life.

“One of the only times I felt like my mom was safe was when we went to church. I never liked Christianity, but I really hated it when my dad became a pastor.” She doesn’t respond. I watch her chest rise and fall.

“She was the most beautiful woman. She had dark hair like me and eyes like the deepest part of the ocean. She smelled like the beach during winter but was always soft and warm. The women at church pretended to like her, but they were all jealous of her. She was more beautiful than anyone else in the congregation, and they always talked behind her back. You would have loved her.” The room spins, and I have to close my eyes to avoid the growing nausea. My heartbeat pulses all the way down my fingertips.

“I stopped going to church when I was in high school. I wanted to appease mom, but I couldn’t stand before a god that let such horrible things happen to the person I loved the most. When I was younger, I thought going to church and keeping up appearances would encourage my dad to go easy on her. I eventually learned that it didn’t matter what I did or what she did. If he wanted to beat on her, nothing would stop him. So, I stopped going.”

I open my eyes again, but my vision won’t focus. Ava’s still in the adjacent room, but her body is a blur. “Something about the imagery always stuck with me. There’s so much interest in Christ’s blood and his suffering. What can I say? It held a certain appeal.”

I chuckle, but nothing feels funny. The laugh swiftly turns into a cough. Suddenly, I

can't stop coughing. My lungs are on fire as precious moisture pours from my eyes. I force myself to hold back the cough and focus on controlling my breath.

"I'm so sorry, Viper," I say when I can speak again. "I would do anything to save you from this." I am suddenly a little kid again, kneeling on an altar while the congregations' eyes bore into my back.

"God, please," I whisper. "If you're real - if you're out there, please spare her from this. I know it's too late for my soul, but spare hers. I don't deserve her, and she doesn't deserve this. Please, for once in my life, show mercy." I can't even find it within myself to feel foolish because escape is inconceivable. I can barely stay conscious, let alone plan a breakout.

"Please, God," I whisper again. This time, I feel something wet on my face. I'm crying. I don't know the last time I cried. There's a building pressure in my chest. Panic follows right behind the tears, and I quickly lose what little control I had on my breathing.

Who am I fucking kidding? God didn't answer any of my prayers when I pleaded for him to save my mom. Why would he show up now? It doesn't matter. I would beg for Ava.

"You owe me," I say between gasping breaths. "You watched me and my mom suffer for years while you sat on your shitty ass metaphysical throne in the fucking sky. You let her suffer and then you let her die. So, you owe me. Ava has to live." I choke on the words and lean the back of my head against the wall.

I think I sleep, but nothing has changed when I open my eyes. She's asleep on the table. The wounds on her stomach and legs are an angry red. Some are scabbed but so many have reopened. Her dark hair twists around the pillow, full of tangles.

The man in scrubs tried to brush it at first, but now he occupies himself with different parts of her body during those visits. The memories make me nauseous. Ava will never forgive me for this, but it's not like I deserve her forgiveness anyways. She should kill both Kiel and me for what's happened to her. I wouldn't even fight her. I'd give her the loaded gun myself.

I think I'm asleep again when Ava lifts her head. She scans the room with an alertness I haven't seen in a long time. It's as if she can see through the glass because I feel her eyes looking into my very soul. She pulls at her restraints, but gives up when they don't budge.

I'm sure I'm asleep when both Kiel and the man in scrubs barrel into Ava's room a few minutes later. They're disheveled, but Kiel immediately begins preparing a syringe. When he's injected it into her arm, he waits for her eyes to close before pulling on her restraints. They work together to unbuckle her before Kiel scoops her into his arms. He carries her out the door as the man in scrubs opens mine. He's through the threshold when Kiel yells after him.

"Leave him! Let's go!" Doors open, I can now hear alarms echoing from another part of the building. I thrash in my chains, sure the place is in the process of burning down. The skin around my wrist is raw and bloody when I slump back against the wall. There's no smell of smoke, but the building seems quiet aside from the alarms.

The silence breaks fifteen minutes later when I hear the unmistakable sound of gunshots. Hope flares white hot in my chest at the sound. Thudding footsteps follow a moment later, and Chase Giovanni surveys the room, assault rifle raised. I might be asleep, but I call out anyway.

"Chase! I'm here!" His head whips toward the sound. He looks between the one-way mirror and my door. He keeps the weapon raised as he pushes into the room. When he sees me, he lowers the gun, mouth agape.

“Cal? Jesus Christ, Cal, I’ve got you man. I’ve got you.” I fall forward, but Chase catches me before the chains can.

“Ava’s gone. He took her again,” I groan before I pass out.

10

CAL

The steady beep is the only sound in the room. For a moment, I think I'm at the grocery store, but when the antiseptic scent hits me, I realize where I must be.

Sure enough, when I open my eyes, I'm surrounded by white-washed walls and machinery. For the first time in days, I'm not dizzy when I prop myself up. My wrists and forearms are bandaged. A white cotton blanket slips from my chest as I move.

"Are you cold?" a deep voice asks. I start at the noise and freeze. Chase's eyes are haunted, but he seems relieved to see me awake. I am a little cold, but I shake my head. My friend studies me for a moment before standing and striding out of the room.

I'm sure he only stayed in the hospital because he felt obligated to make sure I woke up. I'm sure he can't stand to look at me, let alone be in my presence after letting his sister go through everything. But a few moments later, he walks back in the room holding another blanket. He wordlessly drapes it over me before dropping back into his chair.

"Thank you," I choke out. My chest is tight, but I feel some relief when he nods. He has dark circles under his eyes as he gives me a little smile.

"Didn't think you were going to make it for a second. You were close to dead." I look ahead without responding. The local news flashes across the TV but I can't make any

sense of it. Chase continues. "I'm sorry it took us so long, Cal." I've never heard him sound so gentle. I turn toward his chair.

"Ava?" I ask. My voice is still raspy. Chase stares at me for a few seconds before responding.

"We're not sure. We got one of his men, but we're still trying to figure out where he went. But you just need to focus on getting better. We'll focus on Ava." I close my eyes. "We're going to find her, Cal. I swear we will." His voice is firm now, but I shake my head.

"I should have gotten her out of there." My voice is unsteady, but I continue. "I should have gotten her out. I don't know how you can even look at me right now. You should have left me there and gone after Ava."

"The fuck is this, a pity party?" Chase's voice is venomous. "You want to die, Drake? That's too goddamn bad. There's not a doubt in my mind that you did the best that you could while you were in there. But my sister is gone and there's no way in hell I'm going to lose my best friend too." I close my eyes again, breathing through my nose before exhaling from my mouth. I repeat this over and over until I feel like I can look Chase in the eyes.

"I'm sorry. So, what's the plan?" There's a quiver in my chest but I force it down. Chase surveys me for a second before responding.

"Why don't you start with your side of things. I know it might be painful, but we need to know what we're looking at." Deep, terrible dread settles in my gut as I remember how all of this started.

"Kiel called me that night. Told me to meet him somewhere else. He threatened Ava.

I had no choice but to go alone.” I clear my throat then continue. “It was the simplest trick in the book. He and his men cornered me and of course he didn’t give Ava back. Ava became collateral and leverage all at once. I didn’t expect what he would do to her. Chase, I-”

My voice breaks off and it takes me several long moments before I can continue. The beep of the machines is the only sound in the room as he waits.

“You couldn’t imagine the horrible things he did to her. Or maybe you can. He made me watch everything. I have never felt more useless than I did during those days.”

“Weeks,” Chase interjects, his expression solemn.

“What?”

“You were missing for 2 weeks. We were going into Day 15 when we found you and stormed his place in the mountains.” I’m momentarily disoriented at the realization of how much time has passed.

“And here? How long have I been in the hospital?” Chase looks like he doesn’t want to answer, but he does anyway.

“This is Day 4. The doctors wanted to keep you asleep for a while. You were distressed when they brought you in and they needed to focus on refeeding and getting fluids in your system without worrying you’d make a run for it.”

“I don’t remember any of that.”

“Yeah, you probably wouldn’t. They said you were experiencing psychosis. The doctors honestly weren’t sure how you were still alive.” I know the reason, although

it couldn't be proved by medical science. I couldn't leave Ava. While she was alive in that hellhole, I knew that I had to stay alive too.

"We have to get her, Chase. I don't know how much longer she can withstand him." The haunted look returns to his eyes.

"The twins are trying to get more information. They talked to the local Air Force base yesterday. They confirmed that a private aircraft took off the day we found you. It was only 100 miles away from his hideout, so it seems plausible. The flight wasn't appropriately logged, though, so they couldn't tell where he was going. Satellite imaging shows the aircraft flying over the Atlantic. I don't know how they fucking missed that when it was happening, but it gives us some information."

"He took her out of the country?"

"We think so. But we're going to keep looking stateside too, just in case he's trying to pull a bait and switch. I called in some of our old friends from Ops to help with the search, so we're not spread so thin. It doesn't help that I shot the one source we could have used. He was going to shoot me, but I should have gone for non-lethal. I don't know what I was thinking."

"Wait, what? Who are you talking about?" I have a guess, but I need to hear him say it.

"I'm not totally sure. He was wearing scrubs, like he was a nurse or doctor." Chase may or may not have been able to get information out of him, but I can't deny the satisfaction of knowing he's dead.

"Did he suffer?" I ask, voice low. Understanding dawns in Chase's eyes.

"I left him to bleed out, so he definitely didn't go easy."

“He deserved worse, but I’m glad we don’t have him to deal with, too.” Chase nods. For the first time, I see how exhausted my friend is. His shoulders are slumped and his clothes are wrinkly.

“You should go rest,” I tell him. He scoffs as he sits back in the cheap hospital chair, the vinyl squeaking beneath his weight.

“I’m not going anywhere. Paige is coming by in a little bit to bring me a change of clothes. I don’t trust you not to make a fucking run for it.” I roll my eyes at him.

“The doctors let me wake up. Obviously I’m not in psychosis anymore.” Chase narrows his eyes at me.

“That may be true, but you have a tendency to operate solo when you shouldn’t. So, I’m staying here until we can bring you home. We have to get you strong again because we’ll need you to bring Ava back.”

I must look confused because he continues.

“If Kiel went through all the trouble to take her instead of you, and then leave the country, I’m sure he’s taking her to some kind of stronghold. There’s no way he’s going to risk us storming the place like we did. So, we need you to get your strength back as soon as possible. Ava needs you to get better.”

Chase’s words flip a switch. I have a lot to process about the last couple weeks, but I can process when Ava is safe. The door bursts open and a tall woman strides in.

“Glad you’re alive. You ready to get our girl back?”

11

AVA

The room is breathtaking. I wish I could enjoy it. I can hear the ocean in the distance and the setting sun paints the room gold. My skin seems warm here. It's almost as if I wasn't in a basement for a couple weeks. Kiel moves behind me and I track his movements in the mirror. He rests his hands on my shoulders as he offers a soft smile.

"Isn't it better here?" I nod truthfully. It's still a prison, but it's at least a pretty one. Kiel's been giving me the good drugs again, so the transition hasn't bothered me much.

He kisses my shoulder and I fight back a shudder. I've learned that it's best if I pretend to like his touch. If I seem to enjoy it, he's more gentle, and I get the good drugs that help me forget.

I'm wearing a slip of a gown; the outline of my figure is visible through the sheer, cream fabric. I don't remember putting it on, but I try not to think about that. He runs a hand across my waist, placing a kiss on my shoulder again.

"Come have dinner with me." It's not a question, but I nod. He frowns and turns me around. Kiel tilts my chin up so that I'm looking into his too-wide eyes. "Where's that pretty voice?" I swallow to try to clear my throat discreetly.

"Dinner sounds great," I rasp. It doesn't sound very pretty to me, but it must do the

trick because he smiles.

“Much better.” He places a hand on my back and steers me toward the door.

“Don’t you want me to change?” I ask, suddenly hyper aware of how much of my body is on display. His answering grin is carnal.

“No, pretty girl. I like you just as you are.” The guard surveys me as we walk out the door. Kiel nods to him before addressing me. “Devin will be posted here most of the day. He has a few breaks here and there to sleep, in which case Ryan will temporarily take his place. You will not try to escape my home. Your guards will first attempt to track you down. If you somehow manage to make it out the front doors, you should be warned: my perimeter guards are trained to shoot on sight. I am the only one who can call them off, and if I don’t know you’re outside, I can’t protect you. Do you understand?” I nod, then remember what he said earlier.

“Yes sir.” He smiles at that, then continues, his hand trailing lower down my back.

“You will eat with me when I call on you. One of your guards will typically escort you, but I’ll come fetch you when I can.” Kiel opens a tall door and gestures for me to step inside. A long table has been set for two people. I’m thankful we’ll be eating on opposite ends.

Kiel pulls out my chair. I sink into it, joints aching. After he sits, he makes a gesture. People I hadn’t seen step away from the walls and begin tending to the table. A man in a tailored suit fills up my empty glass with water as a crew of others emerge from another room with food. They pile my plate with food like I’ve never seen before. The waitstaff blend back into the wall as Kiel begins to eat. He notices my hesitation and smiles at me.

“Don’t mind them. They’re here to tend to us. Pretend like they’re not even there.” I

try to heed his advice, but I feel eyes assessing my nearly-naked body as I take a tentative bite of my food. I haven't eaten solid food in two weeks. The flavor explodes across my tongue.

A groan escapes my throat, and my face flushes in embarrassment. Kiel chuckles, pausing to watch me.

"Enjoying your food, pretty girl?" I nod sheepishly and try to focus on chewing as he continues to watch. Something about the attention makes my throat feel constricted, making it hard to swallow. He resumes eating eventually, but every so often I find him studying me.

"I love how your body works. I could watch it all day." I freeze, discomfort writhing across my skin. I have a sudden flashback of my time in the basement and remember the way he watched me relieve myself in the bedpan. I lose the remnants of my appetite and set down my fork. He seems to enjoy my discomfort, but I don't give him the satisfaction of a response.

"As I said before, Ava, I have big plans for you. When you first came into my possession, I couldn't have fathomed what you would mean to me. Of course, I enjoy your company, but you have been essential to my business, whether you've realized it or not."

"I don't understand." He nods as if he anticipated this.

"I have expectations. I will not tell you everything now, but here's what you need to know. I have a grand estate. This is your home now. However, it is also a place of business. I host many functions for my various clients. They travel very far in order to attend these events. You will participate in these events and play your part around my guests."

I understand even less, and I tell him as much.

“I’ll give you more details when they arrive in a few days. For now, you need to rest. Are you finished?” I glance down at my half-eaten plate and nod. “Good. I’ll take you back to your room.”

He guides me out of the room. The waitstaff are quick to clear the table as we leave. Other members of his staff pass us in the halls, all of which look me up and down as they go. I wrap my arms around my torso for a semblance of modesty. Kiel quirks an eyebrow at me but says nothing. He greets the guard outside my door before following me inside. Dread coils in my gut, and I suddenly wish I hadn’t eaten so much at dinner.

“I’m not staying tonight,” he says as he brushes a strand of hair over my shoulder. “I know you’re exhausted and could benefit from a chance to acclimate.” He pulls me close so that my chest brushes his. “But don’t forget, just because I’m feeling nice tonight doesn’t mean you aren’t mine. I would like nothing more than to fuck you in this pretty room, but I want you to like it here, so I’m giving you a break. Do you understand?” I nod, then speak.

“Yes sir.” Kiel kisses my forehead then steps away.

“Good girl. Now take a bath and get some rest. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

With that, he walks swiftly from my room. I don’t move for a few minutes. I feel like I don’t exist inside my own body. His words are in my head again. The thought of a warm bath brings me back into myself.

Someone brushed my hair and cleaned me up before I arrived here. I try not to think about that either. Regardless, I’m thankful that I didn’t have to detangle my hair.

The bathroom is just as beautiful as the bedroom. It's dark outside now but the soft lights warm the space. The marble floors are cool against my bare feet. The sensation makes me feel more grounded in my body. I turn on the water and pump several squirts of an unmarked soap into the stream. Bubbles cover the top of the water, and soon the entire room smells like amber.

A long mirror covers an entire wall. I can't help but study myself in the reflection. I've lost a lot of weight. I feel angular now, my curves lost to hunger. The wounds on my stomach and thighs look worse than I had anticipated. I can't count the number of lacerations marring my flesh. A doctor must have looked at them, because they're all covered in butterfly bandages, as well as clear, waterproof bandages. A few of the fresher ones actually have stitches, making me frown as I poke at them. The bite mark on the inside of my thigh is scabbing and itches. I refrain from scratching at it in hopes that I might at least avoid that particular scar.

The water burns my skin as I step into the tub, but I sink into the water anyway. The sound of the thundering water soothes me, and I feel myself relax for the first time in weeks. I know I'm still in danger, but in this moment, I feel a modicum of peace.

I've never valued the luxury of a bath the same way I do now. As I scrub and exfoliate my skin, I feel as if I'm washing away some of the trauma from the basement. My older cuts sting in the water, but since most of them have been tended to professionally, they're all finally healing.

I soak in the tub until the heat is gone. Exhaustion stops me from draining it and refilling it with fresh water. While drowning in the tub would be better than getting shot by the perimeter guards, I have work to do. Cal has clearly discarded me, but I know my brothers are somewhere out there. They won't give up. I just have to stay alive until they can find me.

12

AVA

Kiel doesn't come for me in the morning. Instead, I'm woken by a timid woman who opens my curtains and delivers breakfast. She doesn't say anything to me, which I'm partially relieved about. As much as I would like to ask her a dozen questions, I'm sure she couldn't answer me without endangering herself. She leaves without a word, and the smell of eggs and pancakes causes my stomach to rumble.

I roll out of bed and eat facing the window. The sunrise is like nothing I've seen before. In fact, I start to consider that I might not be in the United States anymore, because the view is more beautiful than anything I can think of. The ocean is somewhere in the distance, and for some reason, it gives me some resolve. There's a way to escape if I'm clever enough.

My mind feels clearer than it's been in days. I feel the craving for a hit and know his poison must be making its way out of my system. The stirrings of white-hot anger bubble up in my chest as I think of everything this man has put me through. I hate myself for acting so submissive, even if it's kept me alive this long.

He took me away from my home, my life, my family, and my friends. He took me away from Cal.

The thought of Cal brings tears to my eyes, and a sob gets lodged in my throat. I brush aside the memory of him and focus on my plan. I know the ocean is out there somewhere, but considering the size of Kiel's estate, I doubt we're close to a town.

It's hard to believe he could maintain a compound like this anywhere near civilization. That means I would have to travel far if I even managed to escape the perimeter.

Hopelessness starts to creep in again and I lay back on my bed.

Images of my brothers flash through my head. This time, I don't fight the tears. The boys had always been so good to me when I was a kid. Even though they were all a decade older than me, they made time to play with me. My favorite game was Pretty, Pretty, Princess. Jax would win every time without fail. He'd be decked out in fake costume jewelry and a cheap plastic tiara, but you'd think he was a real monarch on a throne. The memory makes me smile and cry harder. I know they'll find me, but I can't just sit here and wait.

Hours pass. In some ways, I feel more cooped up than I did in the basement. The basement didn't feel real half of the time anyways. Here, I can hear the ocean and see outside. Escape feels possible now.

As hours go by, my anger grows. I hate Kiel in a way I've never hated anyone before. In my mind, Elliott was a saint in comparison.

When the guard tells me I've been summoned for dinner, my rage takes control of my mouth. I refuse and shut myself into the bathroom. Fear takes root in my stomach, but I try to keep my ground.

The bedroom door slams open a few minutes later. I flinch at the noise before the same thing happens to the bathroom door. Kiel stands in the entrance, fuming. His eyes are wider than ever, and I think he might actually kill me. His voice promises violence.

"Day two, and you're already failing to meet my expectations. You will do as I say,

when I say it. When I tell you to breathe, you breathe. When I tell you to sleep, you sleep. When I summon you to dinner, you come to fucking dinner.” I can’t make my voice work, so I sit in silence, terror making my limbs feel hot. “And when I tell you to disrobe and get into bed, you get into bed.” His voice is a whisper now as he approaches me. He leans in and his mouth brushes my ear.

“Get into bed, Ava.” It is an unmistakable command, but I can’t allow myself to back down.

“No,” I whisper. My voice trembles at the word, but it doesn’t matter. The shock registers first, and then rage. I don’t see the hit coming. He backhands me across the face, making me fall to the ground. I pull myself up using the side of the bathtub with a glare. He grabs me by the throat, and I claw at his hand.

“You dare defy me? Do you think it will convince me to give you a hit, baby?” He brings his lips close to my mouth. I try to bite him but his grip holds me tight. “You can kick and scream all you want, but you’re going to be sober, and you’re going to feel everything.” He pulls me up by my throat, and my vision begins to go dark. Kiel drags me into the bedroom, throwing me onto the mattress. I immediately squirm toward the now closed door, but he grabs my leg and hauls me back.

Before I can make another move to the exit, he climbs atop me, straddling my hips. He bunches my gown in his hands then rips it down the middle. I gasp as cold air hits my skin.

He pinches one of my nipples hard while I claw at him frantically. Blood beads on his skin as he backhands me again. I feel him pulling the scraps of my gown from underneath me, but I’m too disoriented from the hit to try anything.

I feel pressure around my wrists and realize too late that he’s used the scraps of fabric to tie my wrists to the headboard. I pull at the restraints, but they don’t budge. Tears

burn in the back of my eyes as I take in the predatory look in his eyes.

“I don’t know what’s gotten into you,” he hisses, “but I will remind you of your place. Callum forfeited you to me which means you are mine, soul, mind, and body.” Cal’s name is like a blade to my heart. I don’t know what he sees on my face, but he laughs. “You didn’t suspect? I used you as bait to draw him out. Callum was my real target after all. He told me you weren’t worth it and to have my fun with you. I’m sure he hasn’t thought of you since.”

His smile is cruel, and even though I don’t want to believe him, I know he’s telling the truth. I was probably just a quick fuck to Cal. Somehow, he had me convinced that he might actually love me. I’m sure he packed up and ran the moment he got word of the abduction.

“I don’t belong to anyone,” I hiss, before spitting on his face. He grins and grabs my jaw, forcing my mouth open. Leaning over me, he spits into my mouth.

“Wrong. You’re my whore.” Kiel unzips his pants to pull out his dick. He strokes his already hard length as I begin bucking underneath him. That stupid grin is still plastered on his face as he grabs underneath my knees and forces my legs against my chest.

“This is going to hurt, pretty girl,” he says before forcing himself inside me. I’m so scared, my interior muscles are more constricted than normal, making the intrusion burn. “So tight tonight. You fucking like this, don’t you, pretty slut?” Tears well in my eyes and pour down my cheeks. His wide eyes never leave my face as he relishes in my agony.

He’s right about one thing. This is not something that I can endure while sober. The pain between my legs increases exponentially as he rolls my pelvis back. The angle forces him deeper, and my anatomy was never meant to receive this treatment. He

slams against my cervix over and over as if he's trying to break it open and fill my uterus. A scream bubbles out of my throat. He grins down at me.

"That's it, baby. It hurts so bad, doesn't it?" I'm hyperventilating. My vision begins to darken when he drives into me one last time. He groans as he empties himself, keeping me pinned beneath his body for a few more moments. My fight is gone by the time he pulls himself free.

"That's better. This is what I expect of you. Obedient, submissive, and silent. The tears are a nice touch, too," He adds with a wink. I hate this man more than words, but I'm quiet as he studies me.

"I won't call on you again until dinner tomorrow. You will be there." I nod in agreement, and he releases my restraints before climbing off the bed. He leaves without a word, the door clicking shut softly behind him.

Tears drip down my face in a steady stream, soaking the pillowcase beneath me. Hours pass like that, but I'm not in my body anymore. The cool evening air from my open window brings goosebumps to my skin.

I mechanically climb from the bed and make myself use the bathroom before climbing under the covers. Despite the horrors of the night, I relish the soft mattress. After spending so long on a hospital bed, this is a luxury. Either way I was violated,

but at least now I have a comfortable place to rest.

The soft mattress reminds me of Cal's bed, and then horribly, I'm thinking of Cal. The tears come back in full force as I remember how safe I felt with his arms around me. I finally manage to fall asleep as I pretend he's next to me again.

13

AVA

True to his word, Kiel calls me down for dinner the next day. The soreness between my legs is almost unbearable, but I try to walk normally into the dining room. He remains seated as I walk in, his chair angled toward the door.

He observes me over the rim of his wine glass as I take my seat. I had a lot of time to think earlier today and decided on a course of action. As much as I feel compelled to fight Kiel, I can't do it successfully right now. I'm better off doing what he says, while scheming in secret. I'll build his trust so that when I'm ready to move against him, he won't see it coming. That was my plan, but as I sit across from him, I begin trembling with rage.

"Sleep well?" I nearly lunge across the table. He smirks at me. He knows he's gotten under my skin. I take a deep breath and plaster a demure smile across my face.

"Yes, actually." I drop my eyes to my plate as the waitstaff delivers my food. Grabbing my fork, I start shoveling food into my mouth to deter me from giving another snarky remark. I can feel Kiel's eyes on me, but I do my best to ignore it.

Our utensils scratch against the plates, but otherwise the room is quiet as we eat. I'm hoping to spend the meal in silence, but he seems intent to disrupt whatever fragments of peace I possess.

"Care for wine?" He gestures to my empty glass. I glance at it, but don't respond,

electing to take another bite instead.

“It’s one of my favorites, although I’m generally fond of most Pinot Noirs. It would likely pair well with your meal.” I can feel a wicked response on the tip of my tongue and I gulp down some water to hold it back. “There are strong notes of blackberry and cherry, but I think I’m mostly captivated by the color. Such a dark shade when in the glass, but splattered on the floor, it looks just like blood.” My chest is trembling again. I want to throw his glass of expensive wine across the room.

Kiel slams his hands down on the table and the force of it rattles the dishes. I snap my head toward him. He’s standing, hands braced on the table. “Is that what it takes to get your attention, pretty girl? Violence? Force?” His voice is quiet and dangerous. I shake my head as he hits the table again. “Speak!” He shouts, as if I’m a fucking dog. And like his bitch, I obey.

“I’m sorry. I was just hungry and focused on my food.” The words burn in my mouth as I try to defuse his anger. I want to fight back, even if it means riling him up. I force my hatred back down. His eyes narrow, not buying my excuse in the slightest.

“Come here.” I hesitate, but I don’t make the mistake of refusal again. He sits down again as I slowly walk toward his side of the table. “Much better,” he murmurs as I stand in front of him. He gently grasps my fingertips and pulls me closer so that I’m standing between his legs. “Get on your knees,” he commands.

He is swift to fill the silence when I hesitate. “I could kill you, of course. I’ve grown tired of your attitude. But if that’s not enough to keep you in line, you should know that I could kill Callum instead.” I blanch, and my eyes go wide. Kiel laughs at my expression.

“I may have let him go, but I have my eyes and ears on him at all times. It would only take a simple text for his life to end. Get on your knees, Ava.” Cal may have broken

my heart, but I couldn't live with myself if I was the reason he suffered. I sink to the floor without argument. Kiel pushes back my hair and tilts up my chin with his fingertips.

"You're so pretty when you submit to me. Now unzip my pants and pull out my cock." With shaking fingers, I fumble at the closure. I steel myself before pulling his hard length free from his underwear. Just looking at his penis reminds me of the pain from last night, and I consider biting down on him. I briefly wonder what it would take to bite all the way through when he interrupts my mutinous thoughts.

"Open your mouth and suck me off like a good whore." I glance up at him with pleading eyes. "Or do you want round two of last night?" He whispers, the threat clear. I take him in my mouth. He groans as his tip glides to the back of my throat. Threading his fingers in my hair, he pulls my head up and down. I release him with a loud pop when I hear waitstaff come back into the room.

Kiel grabs my throat and pulls me back toward his crotch. "You will ignore them." I open my mouth to protest but he angles his dick back into my mouth, cutting me off. "Use your hand," he commands. I grip his base in my fist. I sense one of his staff members standing next to me as they collect Kiel's empty plate. Humiliation makes my cheeks burn, but I don't dare stop.

"That's it, baby. Show everyone what a good slut you are." He groans as I

try to remember what Paige taught me about blowjobs. I rationalize that if I make this good for him, it will be over sooner.

I hollow my cheeks and begin bobbing my head in time with my pumping fist. He makes a sound I've never heard before and curses.

"You've been holding out on me," he grunts. I know he's close. I ready myself to

swallow, because I already know he won't accept anything else from me. "That's it, just like that." The words are barely out of his mouth before hot, salty streams erupt from his penis. I nearly gag and force my throat to work. As I break away from him this time, I open my mouth and hold out my tongue. He grasps my jaw, the action more gentle now.

"You swallowed all of that?" he asks, sounding mesmerized. I feel like I might have won back some of his favor and am momentarily relieved.

"Yes, sir." Kiel leans down and kisses me firmly on the lips. It surprises me, making me flinch on instinct. Thankfully, he doesn't register the response.

"I'm afraid I've stayed longer than intended. I have business to attend to, so I trust that you can see yourself back to your room?" The question is rhetorical while his meaning is clear— go back to your room, or else .

"Of course," I whisper. He tucks himself back into his pants and is out the door

before I can stand up.

The waitstaff left the room after clearing the table, but I don't dare stay here any longer than necessary. I adjust my clothes as I walk out of the room. The hallways are surprisingly empty, and I'm soon lost in the corridors of the sprawling estate. There's no one to ask for directions, so I start peeking into rooms.

There's a beautiful library and music room, but it seems a shame for them to exist in such a vile man's home. The smell of books and leather is so familiar and inviting that I push into the room before I can think better of it. The room is grand, with high ceilings and dark wood shelves. I'm just thinking that this space has the potential to make my time here more bearable when I see them.

In the back corner of the room, a small group is huddled by the fireplace. I can see the others in the circle, but the one with his back to me seems familiar. He's tall; his black hair is shorter than it was the last time I saw it.

"Cal?" I gasp, forgetting where I am. The men immediately stop talking and whip toward me. The tall man arches an eyebrow at me.

"I think you have me confused for someone else." And indeed, I do. This man's face is warmer than Cal's, and his eyes are an earthy shade of brown. I nod, beginning to back away. The man takes a step toward me, brows now furrowed.

"Who did you think I was?" he asks. The question feels important. Afraid I've given too much of myself away, I turn and flee the room.

14

CAL

A week later, we're no closer to finding Ava than before. Lucas and Jax have been working to infiltrate a club where Kiel's circle tends to run with no success. Everyone connected to him is on high alert and they've cleared out of the city. They all know how we can make people talk.

Chase brings me food and water like a goddamn mother hen. I've been steadily rebuilding my physical strength over the past several days, but I've barely slept since leaving the hospital. Whenever I close my eyes, I see Ava strapped to the mattress while she suffers for sins I committed long before we knew each other.

I know I'll get her back, but I don't know who that person will be. I barely know myself anymore. I can't begin to fathom how these last few weeks have altered my girl. At the end of the day, it doesn't matter which version of her I have. Ava will always be Ava, and I will help her heal. She didn't have support after the first man who hurt her, but I'll be with her for whatever comes next. I just have to find her.

We've spent most of our time working at my house. Chase crashes on my couch so often that he eventually just brings over a bag of clothes and toiletries. He didn't witness Ava's suffering, but I know it haunts him too. Neither of us sleep. We usually end up at the kitchen island, desperately looking for clues.

Paige lets herself into my house one morning, with coffee in tow. "Courtesy of The Sable House," she declares, setting them on the island. She looks between the two of

us, shaking her head. “You’ve been here all night, haven’t you?” Chase cuts his eyes to her and takes a sip of his drink. She shakes her head again.

“I have news. It’s not much, but it’s something.” I perk up a little at her tone. “I’ve been talking to the girls. I thought I’d see if anyone had a private session with him. He has a pretty memorable face, so I started asking around. Sure enough, he paid Mikayla for a session, and he told her some interesting stuff. He said that he operates a lucrative business, usually out of Europe, but he wanted to see if there was potential in the States. I know it’s not much, but-” Chase cuts her off.

“It at least narrows it down to a continent. That’s better than what we had before. Good work, Paige.” He grabs her hand and gives it a squeeze. I nod and chime in.

“Anything helps. That’s great, P.” She glares but doesn’t correct me. The nickname started when she bombarded me in the hospital. I had initially meant it to mock her, but it’s stuck since. I’ve grown to really like Paige in the last week. I see now why she and Ava are such good friends.

Paige seems tough with her sleek black hair and the tattoos running up her arms and legs, but she’s one of the most caring people I know. I’d bet anything that she feels too much, and I find that entirely too relatable.

“So, what now?” She demands, ready to jump into action. Chase and I consider one another for a moment. Paige snorts. “I love the bromance, really, but if you could clue me in on the silent conversation happening right now, that would be great.” I smile. It’s the first time I’ve felt any sort of amusement in weeks. It dies as fast as it came, but I appreciate Paige for trying to keep things light.

“We have some connections in Europe. Not many, but hopefully they could get us in contact with the people we really need,” Chase explains.

“Which is who?” She asks, prompting me to chime in again.

“If we could get air traffic logs, that would give us a pretty solid starting point.” Paige nods her head slowly and crosses her arms.

“Okay, then write your emails. Make the connections.” She wiggles her fingers at my computer, and I feel a second smile creep onto my face. Chase actually laughs as Paige leans against him. I open my inbox, pausing in confusion.

“Cal?” Chase asks, voice laced with concern.

“What is it?” Paige asks, walking around to my side of the kitchen island.

“It’s a weird email from an unknown address. It just came in.” I frown as I reread the message.

“What does it say?” Chase asks.

“It says, ‘You got a girl?’” I look at Chase, utterly bewildered. He looks as confused as I am. Paige turns the computer toward her. She reads the message again before she starts typing.

“What are you saying?” I don’t try to intercept, mostly because I have no idea what to say. Paige’s reply is only 4 words: Have you seen her?

We all pace around the kitchen in silence as we wait for a response. We only have to wait 10 minutes, but this message is more confusing than the first. There’s no text, only an encrypted file.

“The fuck do we do with this?” Paige demands, clearly exasperated. I point at Chase, who is already on the phone.

“Lucas, are you with Jax? Good, put me on speaker. We have a lead.” Chase walks out of the room. I can hear him explaining the email to his brothers.

“Lucas knows a guy. If anyone can get into this file, it’s him.” She nods thoughtfully, but doesn’t take her eyes off of Chase. When he returns to the kitchen he grabs my computer.

“Lucas is about to send over the email address to his guy. I’ll forward the file from there.” Chase begins drafting the message while we wait. Within minutes, we’ve sent off the file.

“Jesus, this suspense is killing me.” Paige says as she perches on my kitchen counter. “What if he can’t get into the file?”

“Oh, he’ll get into it,” Chase says soberly. “I’m just afraid of what we may see.”

I feel sick at the implication. It could be from Kiel, who would do anything to fuck with me. Paige slides off the counter and puts her arms around Chase from behind.

“We have to know. For Ava.” He’s about to respond when I get an inbox notification. We all bolt toward my computer. The subject line is, File-Decoded. Paige opens it and, for a single, tense heartbeat, we’re all frozen.

“Coordinates,” Chase breathes. “Holy shit. we’ve got coordinates.”

15

AVA

Expensive black cars line the cobblestone horseshoe drive. Men dressed in custom tailored suits and women dripping in jewels flood Kiel's estate. I've watched them arrive in droves. Thankfully I have viewed it all from my upstairs window. Fortunately, I've been left alone aside from a meal delivery; it smelt divine when it was delivered early, and yet I couldn't stomach eating a single bite. Why gorge on the luxurious meal, when the unknown of tonight's festivities could have my dinner making an unexpected reappearance?

Shaking my head, I watch another couple gracefully climbing the wide stone steps to enter and enjoy Kiel's twisted hospitality. I could only hope that he forgets about me and his party rages on without me, but I know it won't happen.

Kiel's edict comes back to me. I know he has cultivated a role that I will be forced to play and hope that I would just have to be a trophy on his arm. But after weeks in his deranged presence, I can expect that tonight will push me to the edge. I just pray that, whatever edge it is, I can somehow bounce back.

So lost in my internal musings, I don't notice that the quiet woman from before is walking to me with new clothes hanging over her forearm.

"I'm here to get you ready, miss." she whispers in softly accented English. I nod and stand.

“What do you need me to do?” She ushers me toward the bathroom.

“Bathe first. Some of this may be a little uncomfortable, but it’s what Signore Kiel wants.” My ears catch on Signore. For the life of me, I can’t remember what language it belongs to. I decided to play my hand at being dumb and ask.

“I understand. I won’t make this difficult for you. Your accent is lovely, by the way. What language do you speak? Spanish, Portuguese, Italian?” She purses her lips and raises a delicate eyebrow, indicating I have failed at playing dumb.

“I cannot talk to you about such things. Please be silent so we can both live through this encounter. Disrobe, please.” I nod before tossing my clothes to the shiny white marble floor. Noting the bandages covering the still healing wounds on my stomach, she gently removes them, as though I was a child. As the scabbing wounds are revealed, she glances up to my face. I can detect the questions in her eyes, but watch as the concern slip away into an indifferent mask while she turns to place the bandage on the counter. I take this small moment in this opulent bathroom in this house of hell, that at least one person has a soul and cares, even though she shouldn’t.

She gestures for me to step into the bath. The heat of the water is instantly soothing. In the next instance, the woman is drenching my hair with a cup. While it’s a little odd, it’s also extremely comforting for someone else to wash my hair. Lost in the sensation of her firm hands cleaning my scalp and hair, I don’t notice her stepping back.

Her tone is brusque. “Towel off, then please lay on the bed. This will be the uncomfortable part.” She softens the demand. “And I’m sorry. But it must be done.” I frown at her and clutch my towel tighter against my body.

I feel my eyes narrow, whispering “What are you going to do to me?” She rifles through a bag I hadn’t seen her carry in.

“Signore Kiel insists that your private area is waxed. I do not know why, and I do not question him.” Turning her back, she plugs in the wax warmer and patiently stands there as it heats up.

“I really don’t want that.” Clutching at my towel as if it was a lifeline, I take a tentative step back towards the bathroom. My eyes never leave her face as I consider locking myself in the bathroom to avoid this unpleasant task. The woman's eyes are pleading as she stoically stands before me, a trapped victim.

Hoarsely, she croaks: “He will kill me if this is not done. Please let me do my job.” Shit, I can’t have this woman’s blood on my conscience, I’ve already been through so much, I don’t want her to pay for my insolence. My body slouches as I concede to her ministrations.

“Thank you.” Gratitude shining in her eyes, she gestures to the bed. “You can lay your towel on the bed and lay atop it.” I do as she requests, while she bustles about setting her things up. “I’ve done this many times, so I’ll try to make it fast.” That reassures me a bit, as I lay bare before her. I’ve never had this done before, but I’ve heard that it hurts. A laugh almost slips up my throat at the thought. It may hurt, but there’s no way it compares to anything I’ve endured in the last few weeks.

The wax is warm against my skin, then tears spring to my eyes as she rips off the first strip. True to her word, she works quickly.

“You have a new scar here,” she says. “It might hurt more here, be ready, yes?” I nod my understanding. Yes, there is a scar. It looks healed when you gaze upon it, and yet, the scar is sensitive and at times hurts. It’s a painful reminder of my time in the basement, of the person who fucked me and left me to this monster.

She places the strip over the scar. I squeeze my eyes shut preparing for the pain, yet a shocked gasp still leaves my parted lips. More tears gather in the corners of my eyes

at the stinging fire that is left behind after she rips the strip away.

She presses a hand onto the newly exposed scar, thankfully easing the pain temporarily. "I'm sorry, that was the worst, I promise." She sounds genuine. I nod with unshed tears in my eyes. I can't blame this woman for anything. I suspect she's a victim too. When she finishes the wax, she hands me a skimpy piece of black lace lingerie.

"What-" I begin, but quickly remember that I can't ask her questions. I shake my head, swallow heavily and slide it on. I walk over to the mirror. My entire body is on display. This scrap of fabric doesn't cover the essentials. I turn back to her and see she is holding another piece of fabric. She hands it to me. I shake it out, revealing a sheer robe. I slip it on. Glance back at the mirror, a sigh of relief slips out. This flimsy robe blocks out my figure. I quietly thank her profusely. Satisfied that I'm being compliant, she guides me to the vanity. I stand there while she quickly and efficiently applies light makeup to my face.

"Bella," she says softly. It was almost a whisper on the wind, as though it wasn't meant for my ears. I smile gingerly at her, but it goes unnoticed as she's too focused applying the last bit of makeup. My hair is still damp, but she leaves it alone.

"I think it's lovelier down and more natural. We will leave it." I nod, thanking her again. She quickly and quietly collects her things before heading for the door.

Reaching out, I grab her arm and gently ask her: "Wait, please. What's your name?" She comes to an abrupt halt, first looking at my hand on her arm, slowly bringing her gaze to mine.

"Bianca, signora," she whispers as she walks to the door and walks out.

I look at my reflection in the vanity mirror; a stranger looks back at me. Who is this

woman? The woman in the reflection looks comely and kind. She doesn't appear to be a woman who's been abducted, with a lifetime of emotional damage, a woman that has been forced to pleasure her captor at his every whim. She looks like Ava, the girl before this nightmare began. But I don't feel like that Ava, I feel like...

My head snaps up at the sound of my door opening. I'm thankful that the monster interrupted my whirlwind of thoughts before it plunged me into the abyss.

Kiel stands in my doorway, a spawn from hell wrapped in an expensive tailored suit. "You look beautiful." He politely offers a hand to me, as though he was a pure gentleman; what a joke. "Let's go." I stood immediately, having learned my lesson last time. I gingerly take his hand.

"What are your expectations of me tonight?" I demurely ask. The pleasure that passes over his face at my question makes my stomach twist.

"You're on my arm tonight, but you will entertain my guests as well. These are my investors. I'll be showing them my new product tonight, so I need their favor." I nod, although his instructions are abstract at best.

We continue walking down the elegant and opulent corridors, until I hear the murmur of voices ahead of us. Kiel pauses outside of the dining room, an unhinged smile creeping on his face as he reaches for the ties of my robe. My hands twitch with the need to stop him from exposing me to this unnamed guest. He freezes for a moment, catching sight of my ill-advised movement, eyes snapping to mine as a dangerous gleam enters them. I freeze as the predatory glint takes hold. He finishes his task, allowing the silk robe to hang open, giving his guests a glimpse of what he considers his. My serene mask slips as my brows furrow with his actions, but I know better than to argue. My belly twists again, more nerves and nausea take hold as I follow Kiel into the room.

“Friends!” he exclaims. His voice booming throughout the expansive room grabbing every single person's attention. The room instantly quiets.

“Welcome to my home. Please partake in food, wine, and good company. We’ll have a demonstration shortly, but until then, mi casa es su casa.” He gestures for me to stay at his side as we walk toward the dining table. I suddenly feel the heavy weight of the crowd upon me.

Chatter begins to flow as we pass by, and I know deep in my gut that I am the topic of their conversation. My stomach rolls as I meet the stares of hungry men. The need to shower hits me like a freight train as the feeling of pure disdain rolls off the elegant women scattered throughout the palatial room. Kiel politely hands me a glass of wine before grabbing my ass cheek, a subtle claim for all to see. He roughly pulls me against him.

“I can’t tell you how it feels to know every eye is on you,” he roughly murmurs as he squeezes my ass to the point of pain. That dark glint reappears as he licks the side of my face and growls against my lips. “But you belong to me.” He claims my mouth. His lips are hard and unyielding and so very wrong. I comply. Why? Because I can’t embarrass him in front of his guests by pulling away.

“You’re such a good girl,” he groans against my lips. I paste the sweetest smile on my face, in the hopes that this pleases him. It must, because he kisses me again. I stay by Kiel’s side while his guests mingle and eat, but I don’t have to say much. I’m more of an ornament for people to lust after and gossip about. Once the guests have finished their luxurious multi-course meal, the waitstaff appear out of nowhere and flood the room. Rapidly and efficiently clearing off the dining room table.

“My guests!” Kiel’s voice booms as he clasps his hands behind his back.

“I know you are all anxious to see my new product in action.” He laughs. “It’s unlike

anything I've ever made before!" He claps, snaring the attention of everyone in his audience. "I can't tell you how pleased I am by the results." Kiel's voice becomes slightly manic, his excitement coming through his words. "And tonight, I have created the perfect presentation to exhibit what my drug can do and why you want to join me in this business venture." His smile is faintly crazed as he delivers the punchline. "I know you'll all enjoy."

Kiel snaps his fingers, but nothing seems to happen. Then, I feel it, a needle pierces my neck, and a dreadful realization dawns on me. I am the presentation, that the contents of this needle is not the good stuff, the stuff I crave. In the next instant, my body goes limp as the paralysis consumes me. The mysterious person who injected the drug swoops me up before I can hit the floor.

Kiel's arm swings out as he gives the crowd the information they have been craving all night. "This is Ava. She's my personal companion. But tonight, she is yours to sample." I'm so happy that I can no longer see the faces, not sure I could handle seeing the dark intent of the men and the curled lip of the few women splattered about.

Kiel's voice booms: "She's grown quite accustomed to this particular product, and I can assure you, she won't and can't put up a fight." His booming laughter is heard around the room. "Her limbs are completely paralyzed. This particular product maintains this symptom for hours !"

The frenzy of excitement he ends his statement with twists my stomach in horror. Noise erupts in the space as men force their way to the front for their turn is deafening. As I'm deposited on the table, a puppet for their pleasure, my robe is shucked off so I'm presented to Kiel's benefactors in the lingerie. I'm forcefully yanked forward so that my ass cheeks kiss the edge of the table. In a cruel twist of fate, a cushion is placed beneath my head so that I now see every person who approaches the table. There are so many that I can't even fathom the true number of

men who have eagerly pushed their way to the front to participate in this evil debauchery. Dear god, will I survive this?

“Charles, I believe you were first in line. Why don’t you take the first dip?”

An elderly man approaches the table, quickly jerking his penis out of his crisp dress pants. A cry of displeasure builds in the back of my throat, but my lips are frozen only allowing a guttural sound to push forward. This stranger prods his hard penis towards my entrance while running his cold, paper thin skin hands along my body.

As this aged stranger roughly thrusts into me, over and over again, I feel another innocent part of my soul fracture and slip away. That fracture deepens and grows as each new face steps up and roughly thrusts their cock in me over and over. I know that tomorrow I will feel each and every bit of what they are doing to me.

A fucked up thought passes through my brain: I truly hope that the amount of semen that has been pounded into me has created lubrication for those that have yet to take their turn, and maybe prevent any more damage then what has already been done. These men, these monsters, are ripping my vagina to shreds. They are pinching, twisting my nipples and so much more, hoping to glean a reaction, proving Kiel failed. He hasn’t. I know this, but they are testing the sample as Kiel requested.

I have no tears to cry. My body is not mine anymore. I don’t even know how long or how many, and I don’t want to know. Kiel stands next to me as each man steps forward. Once each one has finished, he whispers words of praise before the next man steps up. As I watch another man tuck himself into his crisp Armani pants, I have a moment of pure terror. Knowing that not a single man has bothered with protection because I’m just a simple whore for them to use. What if I contracted an STI? I guess, it’s a silly thought. I don’t plan on living long after this.

Just as the last man leaves, the crowd parts, revealing a young muscular man. His

confident stride eats the space between him and my prone body. His cold lifeless eyes travel from my toes to my exposed pussy where they take in the devastation of those before him. He finally meets my eyes, and once our gazes connect, a determined, malicious glint sparkles to life as a smirk graces his hard, unyielding lips. His demeanor screams 'I will break you and bask in every second of it'. An unexpected sliver of fear takes hold, but there is nothing I can do. Nothing but pray that the monster who owns me won't allow his guest to cause permanent physical damage to his favorite toy.

Kiel continues to whisper what he considers sweet nothings into my ear until his guest stops just short of the table and begins to unzip. There is something about this man that lets me know he'll be the one to break that last shard of Ava into pieces.

His eyes never leave mine as he pushes his pants down far enough so his penis springs forth. He slowly glides his hand up and down his shaft, leaning forward until our noses touch and whispers: "I only wish that it was you and me ... so I could fulfill my fantasy. I wonder how much would it cost for Kiel to give me you and his magical product for a night?" His harsh brow raises. In that moment I wish I could rip his face off.

Pulling back, he winks at me. In the next moment, I feel excruciating pain as he takes his nails and pinches my clit, slamming into me. I lay motionless, tears sliding down my cheeks as he rams into me over and over. He never relents his hold on my clit. His other hand reaches up, pinching and twisting my nipple so hard it feels like he is going to rip it from my body. My body continues to rock back and forth with his aggressive movements. I mentally plead that he is done quickly. Minutes go by and he continues his torment. Back and forth between my breasts, he's resorted to painfully pinching and slapping my clit, all while keeping up his bellicose thrusting.

The others had been so revved up that they were eager and moved on quickly. This one seems to truly enjoy tormenting others. I feel the wetness building in my hair

from the tears leaking down my face. My body will be bruised and battered tomorrow. The table shockingly holds for his ministrations. However, the amount of liquid beginning to pour from my sweaty body has me sliding backwards, away from him. He growls in frustration and, to my complete horror, Kiel walks behind him, reaches around him, and grabs my legs, wrapping them loosely around his guest's waist. The cherry on top is when Kiel continues to stand there, holding my legs in position while his guest continues testing out his sample.

The beast in front of me is spurred into action by Kiel's generosity, ramming into me harder and harder. There's a sharp pain in my clit as he pinches and pulls it from my body. My eyes widen, snapping to his only to almost piss myself with the amount of pure hatred that seeps from them.

"Good, I have your attention." He leans closer, then maliciously whispers: "I want to look in your eyes as I spill my cum in the fucking whore that Cal left behind."

A startled gasp puffs from my frozen lips as his words find their mark. Tears pour like a river from the corners of my eyes. What little hope that was there seeped from my veins. I was truly left to this hell alone. As this evil man groans his satisfaction and spills his seed deep into my body, I pray for death.

16

AVA

A feather light touch skims my skin, as if someone's delicately petting me. It's soothing, pulling me further back into slumber. Did I work a double yesterday? My brows scrunch in sleepily confusion as I wonder if I have an early shift at the diner this morning. I stretch my arms, groaning as the muscles become taut - the pull feeling exquisite. As I shift my stretch lower, there's a sharp burning agony that makes itself known between my thighs. My foggy brain takes a moment to recall my nightmare and current prisoner state, and self-loathing engulfs me as my mind replays the hours of being raped the night before.

My eyes snap open as everything hits me at once. My stomach recoils at the horrors I was forced to live. As I come to, I hear the soft murmuring, turning slightly to see that Kiel is sitting on the edge of my bed. He is the one petting me like the good lap dog that I am. Seeing me stir awake, his gaze is pulled away from my naked chest. He looks me in the eyes as a delirious and deranged smile crosses his face.

He cups my cheek. "My pet, did you sleep well?" I nod my head, having no nice words. I'm not sure I can handle another round of Kiel-style punishment.

His caressing continues. Languidly, his finger travels to my breast, circling my nipple. I want to push his hand away, but it's easier to let him do as he pleases. I wait, his eager expression blooming dread that begins seeping into my muscles.

"I must say, my sweet, that you were perfection last night! It made me see you in a

new light. You were everything I needed you to be and so much more. By the end of the night the investors were throwing millions at me.” He chuckles, still circling my nipple. He leans down, placing a sweet gentle kiss on my forehead as he tweaks my nipple. His twisted version of affection.

“I brought you something.” Is it wrong to hope he brought a syringe filled with the stuff that makes me forget? Maybe this time it will be enough to make this all end. The thoughts diminish as he hands me a small white pill. I tentatively take it and he sees the questions lingering in my eyes as I hesitate to bring this unknown pill to my mouth.

His eyes harden at my slowness to follow his silent order. “Take it” he demands. “We don’t want any accidents from last night's festivities.”

I look from him to the small pill I hold, quickly swallowing what I now know to be the morning after pill. Something changes in his eyes as he watches my throat bob taking the pill to my empty stomach. It’s an unidentifiable emotion, raising goosebumps on my skin and pebbling my nipples. Kiel takes this reaction as my enjoyment of his touch and continues to draw lazy circles around my nipples.

“After watching how enthralled my investors were with you, my pet. And seeing them heavily lusting for your magical golden pussy, when they have whores and wives to please them, I could see how much they envied me.” Rubbing my thigh, he sounded manic as he continued, “I realized that my empire is missing something. A key to my legacy.” Excitement leaching into each syllable furthers my apprehension with each word he spoke.

Suddenly stopping, he places his hands on either side of my face, bending so our lips almost brush as he speaks.

“I figured out my next move. And my pet, you are an integral piece to this long-term

plan.” Winding his fingers in my hair, he forces us to sit. “The casual chats showed me a weak link in my kingdom. My investors. My competitors. They all have one thing I do not, and you will be doing me a grand honor providing what will strengthen my reign.”

Staring deeply into my eyes, he is watching me as any predator would do. He is looking to see if I show any uncertainty in his grandiose plan. Keeping my face blank, voiding the emotion in my eyes, he seems satisfied as he grips my hair, causing a sharp pain as he takes my mouth in a sloppy kiss, biting at my lips as he pulls away, panting heavy with pleasure.

“You, my darling pet, will be the mother of my new empire.” I freeze. This monster expects me to be a breeding mare for him, and willingly subject any child I have to live in this hell on earth. He is fucking delusional. I pray that none of my internal musings show on my face.

“So, my sweet, the pill will ensure no mixing of bloodline. I’d hate for someone else’s brat to lead my future empire.” He is smug about this.

I’m not worried about accidental pregnancy. Not long after Eliott raped me, I had an IUD put in - better to be safe than to wind up pregnant with a rape child. The only time I worried was after Cal and I had sex that first time, so I hit a pharmacy, and I took the morning after pill, just as a secondary precaution. Schooling my features to be void of emotion as I turn to Kiel, I simply nod my acceptance of his crazy plan. No one is coming to save me. I’m not even sure my brothers can.

He firmly grabs my face “Are you on birth control?” I still, not wanting to give myself away. Squeezing my face harder, his monster starts to flare in his eyes. “Now, is not the time to lie, my pet. You are going to ruin our beautiful morning.” He harshly whispers, “Are you using birth control?” I shake my head.

“No” I spit out.

I watch in pure horror as the monster fully engulfs Kiel. His patience snaps, his grip tightens on my cheeks, so much that I fear he is going to break my jaw. He tsks me, shaking his head in pure disappointment, releasing my face to sit fully up.

“My sweet, sweet pet. Do you think I am stupid?” He cocks his brow. “I know everything about you. Did you not think that I dug up every single spec of dirt, intel and minuscule detail about your existence the moment Callum began his obsession with you.” Flinching at Cal’s name on his lips. I watch indecision flash across his face. “I’m not keen on giving a second chance, but you did so well and made me so very proud, I’m willing this once to make an exception ... but just for you my pet. Now, last time. Do you have contraceptive?”

Gritting my teeth, I shake my head again. Kiel’s demeanor switches, his voice chills. “I know you have one and this is GOING to happen.” I don’t see it coming as he backhands me. Blood feels my mouth as his hand latches to my throat.

“You are going to regret your disobedience ... but me,” He chuckles. “I’m going to very much enjoy this.”

I feel his hand tighten around my throat as his weight shifts. His arm snaps back suddenly, taking me by surprise as his knuckles make contact with my cheek. My vision goes fuzzy. The room spins, so I shut my eyes to keep the nausea at bay. I don’t see Kiel lean down until I feel his tongue lick the inside of my upper arm, as his fingers trace from my elbow to my wrist. His grip tightens, pinning my arm in place and squeezing my throat in warning. He licks my lips, biting them and leaving his teeth marks on my lower lip. After releasing my mouth, Kiel smirks before starting to place gentle kisses down my neck and arm.

I relax into his hold, eagerly hoping to convey my acceptance of his touch, leading

Kiel to believe that I'd be pleased with being the role of his children's mother. I feel him still, as though he doesn't know what to make of my welcoming body language. He pulls back, squeezing my throat. I don't react. I lay there compliant and willing to take what he gives.

A chilling smile takes over his face. He releases my throat to reach down to unzip his dark blue pants, pulling out his engorged cock, precum glistening on the head. I watch as he methodically and firmly grips the base slowly bringing his hand to the tip, causing a flood of precum to seep out. Kiel takes his finger, wipes it over the fat mushroom head, gathering the liquid before slowly painting my lips with his precum. Licking my face, he harshly whispers: "You're mine."

The saltiness leaks into my mouth, a taste I desperately want to forget. Mentally, I am trying to con myself into believing it's sour cream that has turned - wishful thinking on my part. I don't feel his mouth move from my neck until he sinks his teeth into my upper arm. He bites so hard that I feel his teeth gnash together, cutting through muscle. Not moving, he lets my blood fill his mouth as his cock slides through my folds bumping my clit over and over. Then, he suddenly wrenches his head backwards.

A silent scream slashes from my mouth as blood pours from the jagged gaping wound painting the white duvet and sheets in crimson. My back bows as the agony whips through my nerve endings, Kiel times it perfectly, ramming his cock inside of me before my back can hit the bed again. I'm overloaded with excruciating pain, tears slide in waves from the corner of my eyes. My legs are sliding up and down in the hopes to dislodge the beast.

A groan of satisfaction reverberates from Kiel as he pounds into me, not holding back his strength. The screams cascade from my salty lips as he continues to shove his cock in my raw and swollen vagina. My shrieks only spur him on, groans of pleasure fill the room along with the smacking of flesh. Gripping my throat, he tightens his

hold.

“Open your eyes.” My eyes snap open. His maniacal grin shines through the blurry tears clouding my vision. “You think you could lie with no consequence.” His deranged laughter rings in my ears. My vision goes dark as rough material is hastily whipped over my face. To my dismay, he has cleared the tears that were shielding my brain from this moment. Blood runs down his lips and neck; the tip of his tongue sneaks out to take a taste of the blood sitting in the corner of his fucked up smile.

His hips smashing into me over and over, his breath coming out in small pants. “You will carry my seed.” Slams into me. “We will build an empire a legacy for all to envy.” He groans. His hand slides down from my throat to pinch and tweak my nipples. To my disgust, my body flutters in pleasure.

Kiel takes notice and smirks. Letting go of my wrist, he dips his finger in the still bleeding wound, trailing his bloody finger down my body marking me with my blood as he goes. His bloody finger finally stops and begins to circle my clit. He primes my body to force pleasure as he rapes me again. I feel the impending orgasm, desperate to stop it from happening but knowing that nothing will stop Kiel. He is relentless, playing with my clit and twisting my nipples until I’m gushing, writhing and moaning beneath him.

He begins ramming harder and harder, my orgasm seemingly pushing him to the edge of his pleasure. His grunts come out in rapid session until he bruisingly slams into me a final time. I feel his seed pulsating into me and attempt to hold back the horrific tears. Kiel’s eyes open, a different light flashes in his eyes as he looks down at me before leaning closer, licking the salty tears that travel down my face.

“You will be the perfect mother,” he whispers softly. He pulls out, stands tucking himself back into his pants. Walking to the door, he turns, shaking his head. “Clean up this mess.”

I hear the hushed snick of the door and fall to pieces. My body is a bruised and battered mess from being used as a cum bucket for two days. My arm throbs where Kiel removed a small chunk of skin. Sitting up, wincing at the burn that makes itself known between my thighs, I prod the bite - and to my utter misery, Kiel bit out my contraceptive device.

There was no scar or noticeable incision mark. How the hell did he figure it out? The repercussions of what this means slams into me. What miniscule part of me that was still intact fractured at the knowledge of what my fate has become. I fear looking in the mirror, picturing something straight from some horror movie. A shell of a tortured victim, sitting in the middle of this posh and opulent room on a scarlet, chromatic duvet that was once a beautiful snow white. Dejected. No more tears to shed.

Desperation takes hold. Is there anything in this showy prison that will shorten my time?

Can I take my own life? Yes, yes I can. If the alternative is to birth Kiel's legacy, I wouldn't even hesitate. I pause. I have no qualms about ending my tortuous future, but will my brothers understand? No, I can't think of them. I can't think of what ifs. I need to survive this ... I just don't know how long I can withstand this hellhole I'm trapped in.

17

AVA

The smell of fresh bacon and pancakes wafted from a tray has been placed on the settee at the end of the bed. Looking around the room, ensuring no one is going to jump from the shadows, I tentatively reach for my meal. The tray is arranged beautifully, so rich in color it almost seems a shame to disrupt it. Shrugging, starving, I dive in. Hoping that the small kraft holds coffee, I eat in absolute peace. The moment is one-eighty from the day before.

Breathing deep, I drift back to my scrub session in the shower after Kiel's departure. The tears were as crusty as the body fluids that covered my skin. Stepping into the scalding hot water, hoping that the temperature would burn away the touch, the memories, and the ghostly sensation of unfamiliar hands roaming my body. I came to the realization that Cal used me, and maybe - just maybe - my brothers have no idea where I am. This sends a tendril of fear through me, which leads me to form a new plan.

I let myself have twenty-four hours of selfish self-harm plots. Feeling sorry for myself gets me nowhere. Knowing that I would never be in the hands of Kiel if it weren't for Cal, I get angry at my brothers, at Cal, and most of all myself. Anger is so much better to work with than sorrow and pity parties. With a new determination to face this shit hand I've been dealt, I step out of the hot comforting spray.

Grabbing the shampoo, dumping it in my hands I start to clean my hair, still thinking how I can live through this. Drowning in my wayward, jumbled thoughts as I move

from conditioner to body wash, I don't hear that I have company. A warm hand runs down my back, causing a quiet shrill of shock to escape me as I whip around rapidly. I lose my balance in the process; my naked wet chest plants firmly into Kiel's hard and equally naked chest.

I try to push away as he tugs me closer. "Let me help you, my sweet pet." Lesson learned, I don't shake my head like I want to. This was my inner sanctum for peace and healing, and he shattered it. Gritting my teeth, I silently hand over the cloth and soap. Smiling at my obedience, he takes the cloth while twirling his finger in the air, indicating that I turn and give him my back. Slowly turning, he methodically and efficiently cleans my body. Now clean, I turn to grab the towel, but he stops me. I watch as he cleans his body with my used cloth before rinsing, all while that delirious smile never leaves his lips.

"I'm so very happy today." Not knowing if this is a trap, I say nothing. He steps out, snatching a towel and dries himself quickly. His eyes never leave my body. I can see there is a spark of something lingering in his eyes as he reaches his hand out to help me from the shower. I take his hand and wait for his next directive. A huge grin stretches over Kiel's face, proving submissiveness is what he yearns for.

"Good girl," he whispers as he steps closer. He gently dries me with an almost unknown reverence and passively leads us out of the bathroom. Stopping near the bed, he flicks his wrist toward it, another silent directive that I heed. Crawling on the mattress, I turn to lay on my back, but he stills my movement.

"I want to watch my cock sink into your warm and welcoming pussy between these two globes," Kiel sharply grabs my ass before slapping my cheeks. I silently sigh, hating him with every fiber of my being. I want to turn around, lash out and gouge his eyes out. But I am truly afraid of what my punishment would be. Instead, I brace myself for whatever games he deems need to happen this time.

“We will come together every day,” he groans, shoving a digit in me. “Every. Single. Day.” Each word punctuated with him thrusting into me. “Our children will have your beauty. But they will lead as I have.” His finger is quickly replaced with his cock as he continues speaking his fantasy. “My pet, we will fuck ourselves into delirium until you are round with my heir.” He slams into me with so much force that my back bows with anguish. “Oh, my sweet pet, you bring me so much pleasure ...”

Happily pounding my sorely abused body, Kiel takes little notice of the change in the air. He doesn't know that those words catapult me into a fake submission - a submission that will grant me the freedom I desperately seek.

Feeling my lax body, Kiel must believe the lie I'm formulating, the plan that is going to hook into his very soul and be the reason he crumbles and disappears. Taking a deep breath, I do what I never thought I would do: I play along in his game. But my game is one of vengeance and freedom.

Allowing my mind to wander to a time where sex was everything I imagined it to be, I pretend that I am there with that person ... with Cal. I tentatively rock back, reaching for my own pleasure and laying the groundwork for my escape.

Kiel's rhyme stutters with my bold action. Waiting for him to catch up, I put my fingers on my own clit, circling it how I like it and moaning in rapture while rocking on him. The action is meant to encourage him, silently asking him to fuck me. A gush of wetness floods him. His control snaps finally and he relentlessly pounds me.

I don't fight my orgasm, instead welcoming it as it engulfs me. Drowning in the aftermath, I hear Kiel roar out his release. I lay there panting as he gives me his entire weight. Sickness coils in the depths of my belly, but I hush it. This is how I will survive. I will trick him into believing that I have agreed. I will silence my anger, my fear and my trepidation - if I can survive.

That is the only thing that matters.

After whispering words of praise, Kiel dresses and leaves. I don't bother with clothes. Carefully walking back to my ensuite, I turn on the shower, jump in, and scrub my body with soap and scalding hot water. When I finally feel like I am clean, I plot.

The scheming begins. Coming up with hundreds of strategies and then methodically thinking it out, and realizing they are all crap. Frustration takes hold. The pacing starts. I have nothing to help my nerves, nothing that will help me think everything out. What I wouldn't do to paint and dump all these emotions onto the canvas. Maybe then I could fucking plan this shit out.

Snarling at my lack of solutions, my fingers wind into my hair ready to yank it out. I jolt to a stop. Gah, so dumb Ava! It hits me; it's so simple, of course. I keep my farce of 'loving' Kiel's disgusting attention and play the part of the perfect woman who wants ... no needs him. Then, he will lax his guard. Not only drop his guard with me, allowing me to get closer to him, but he might lax his guards who watch me like dogs.

This is a long game. Can I wait this long? Maybe I can trick one of the guards - convince him a stroll to the kitchen would be beneficial for my health and allow me to pick out my own meal. There are pros and cons. I need this plan to work. I'm desperate to leave here. I know the obstacles after getting free from this mansion of misery are still there, but one fucking thing at a time.

Slowly, I go over how and when, knowing that the guards are lighter in the evening. More importantly, that sadistic day guard will be off shift and sleeping, which helps ease my mind. Decision made. Once I see the moon high in the night sky, I will knock on my door and humbly request a late night snack. I pray the night sentry will fall for my woe-is-me act. Since most of the house is asleep, I can use that as a pro for letting me walk to the kitchens under his watchful eye. Once there, I hope that my

stealth along with my bashfully compliant behavior, will relax his attitude, allowing me to hide a deadly weapon.

This idea has merit.

Dinner is brought to me. Putting the plan into action, I allow the staff to bring in the dinner. Standing in the far corner of the room, gazing out the window, I slump my shoulders and rub my stomach, groaning and mumbling nonsense. The person who brought the dinner cart stops to look at me. I wipe my forehead, fanning myself giving the illusion that I am unwell.

I wait for them to come grab the meal that I purposely left untouched. They arrive while I am bundled under layers of bedding pretending to be asleep. The sun slowly sets; the hours pass by at a snail's pace, but I know that I need to get my wits about me. This is for my freedom. I can do this. Taking a deep breath, I peek from beneath the mounds of cloth surrounding me. The sky is pitch black, stars twinkle in the sky.

I quietly tiptoe to the door, putting my ear against it. Maybe through the thick wooden door I could hear that the house had finally settled. But there is nothing. Grinding my teeth at the expensive door, I shake it off and remind myself: 'You are meek. You are playing a role. But you will survive this'. Taking a breath to get in my persona, I gently twist the knob.

As the door cracks, the guard on duty whips around. "What are you doing?" I thank my lucky stars that it is the nicer of the guards - not sure what that says about the sadistic assholes Kiel has on staff, but at least he doesn't threaten me right off.

Forcing my voice to crack, I ask: "Ca-can, I have a meal? My stomach is feeling much better." Standing there staring at my toes, I don't want to give my ill intent away with a slip of an expression. Dragging my toes against the plush soft carpet, wanting to give the illusion of being compliant. "I ... um don't think I can wait 'til

morning. I p-promise to be on my best behavior.”

I hear his sigh of frustration more than see it, then he grunts. “Fine. Follow me.” I subtly nod my head in agreement, internally jumping with excitement. Tapping it down, I wait for him to start walking before following him.

When we make it to the kitchen, he flicks his wrist in the direction of the pantry. “Help yourself but do so quickly. You will eat in your room.”

Softly smiling at him, I whisper a “thank you.” Deciding on a sandwich, I duck into the pantry to grab the bread and the chips. Dropping the dry goods on the counter, I quietly and frantically search. I find nothing in plain view, letting out a breath when I finally spot what I need.

The knife block is sitting just to the right of the coffee machine. Turning, I pull out a plate and ask the guard: “Can you grab the meat and cheese from the fridge?” As he opens the fridge and dips out of sight, I take my chance. Lightning fast, I grab the knife, lifting my shirt and tucking it into the waistband of my panties, before quickly re-tying my robe as he pops back up with his findings.

Anger flashes over his features, “You whore,” he growls. “You lied.” He tosses the sandwich fixings on the counter, stomping towards me with malice rolling off him in waves. I turn to protect myself from his attack as he reaches for me, squeezing my eyes tight and waiting with bated breath for the first hit of violence, but hoping that maybe he will just snatch me up, drag me back to my room, and not beat me.

No pain. No rough hands. Nothing. Then a muted thud reaches my ears. I whip around, eyes rounding, my head snaps up to the person standing behind him. The air fumbles from my lungs.

It's him .

Taking a step back, bumping into the counter, I look at the slumped guard. Vermillion spills from his neck, coating the floor slowly seeping out. I feel no sorrow for the loss of this soul.

The stranger steps over the body, gently places his hand on my elbow to steer me out of the kitchen. No words are spoken as we make our way back to my gilded prison.

The door is in sight when he quietly whispers: “Keep your head on a swivel. Don’t let your guard down. Your wits are imperative to your survival.”

I stumble at his directive, mumbling more to myself than him: “What?”

Reaching my door, he opens it and gently pushes me. He stops just shy of closing the door. “Don’t make any moves that will risk your survival. Until you know it’s the right time, and then do what it is you must to live.”

“Thanks,” I hurriedly muttered as he shut the door, leaving me wondering what the hell just happened. Knowing it’s best to take his words to heart, I rush to the bed and hide my newly acquired weapon. Tucking myself into the bed, I reach up, sliding my hand between the mattress and the headboard. I wrap my hand around the warmth of the wooden knife handle. This small comfort alleviates some of my fear ... now to plan and wait.

18

CAL

Landing on a small undisclosed airstrip, the Giovanni brothers and I double check then triple check our gear. This is nothing new. We have done this thousands of times. The normal steady feelings are nowhere to be found, replaced by the pure rage and determination to hunt Kiel down. These emotions pump adrenaline into my veins. One mistake. One thing doesn't go according to plan - this all goes to shit.

"You good, man?" Chase questions with a pat on the back. I know what he's asking.

Shaking my head, I throw his comforting hand off and grunt. "Yep, mother hen. I've bounced back. Doctor cleared me, so fuck off."

Chase chuckles at my words before turning serious. "I know," he hesitates. "I'm just not sure what we'll find there."

"Get fucked." I growl at him, throwing the rest of my gear in my bugout bag. I stomp off as I throw it over my shoulder. "Her being in his hands.." I pause, shuddering at the reminder. "It's my fault ... what he has done to her is my fault." Taking a few steps, I stop. "I will fix this and patch every single fracture and broken part of her soul." Chase and the other brothers listen silently to my intimate thoughts. I watch them exchanging meaningful glances and simultaneous nods.

We load up and begin our trek to the unknown coordinates. Flying into Italy was easy enough - I have connections all over the world. It's how we smuggled in an arsenal of

weapons and gear. I was not heading into Kiel's territory without enough weapons, bullets and tactical equipment to outfit an entire troop. Underestimating Kiel is how we got here. Thinking we had the upper hand, and that we'd taught him a lesson, is how Ava became a prisoner to that sadistic scumbag.

"Fuck," I spit out. The brothers are also tossing out various expletives. We reach the coordinates location, and I'm staring at a fortress. Towering stone walls line the perimeter, multiple security shacks splattered around the grounds from the perimeter to major entry points. Kiel learned from last time. What a damn shame.

The Giovanni brothers are scoping out the area, attempting to find a weakness. If I can't find one, they won't either. Their shoulders slump. Chase looks at me. "Fuck. What the hell do we do now?" Even after being tortured, carried from the building, and weeks of recovering, they still look at me. I am still the leader, and I need to get my shit straight or we will all lose.

I slump over the wheel, closing my eyes, running through the different scenarios. Snapping up, I turn and look at the brothers. "Where is the computer?" Jax digs around for it before pulling it out.

"It's a long shot. But so was someone sending these coordinates." I open the computer, pop open the email with the location, and reply to the message with 'We're here. What are the next steps?'

Each brother takes a look at what I wrote. "Really?" Chase snorts. The others shake their heads.

"Let's hope that whoever is sending us this info is wanting the same thing we want." Shutting the truck off and turning off all lights, we sit. Hours go by as we wait. The soft ping wakes me from a nap - a nap that took me by surprise. Sleep is a complete joke since Ava was taken. I just need her back here with me.

I nudge the brothers awake. Opening the computer, I make sure the satellite connection is still solid. Clicking on the email icon, I open the newest email. The message is short and sweet: Tomorrow @ 22:00. I look from brother to brother then to brother, the serious glint seeps into their eyes. They are just as ready as I am.

“Are we sure this isn’t a trap?” Jax cautiously asks. He nudges his other brother and they both turn to stare at Chase and me.

Chase turns fully, facing the back seat to stare at his brothers. “But this is the only way,” he whispers. “I don’t think I could live with myself if we didn’t follow through.” His voice cracks with unshed emotion. These are the last clear words I hear as the three talk loudly and over each other with their opinions. I’m sure they make valid points, both good merits for following the mysterious tip, versus it’s a trap that will kill us all. Ten minutes of this bickering fiasco of pros and cons, a few harsh ‘fuck yous’, and I lose it.

“Shut the fuck up,” I bellow. The truck goes silent. I now have the undivided attention of all three Giovanni brothers. “Yes, it is possible that this is a trap and we will all die. But truth be told, I don’t give a fuck.” I pound my fist against the steering wheel. “I will walk through the fires of hell to get to Ava. And I will slaughter that piece of shit til I’m holding his beating heart in my hand.”

The brothers stare at me with shocked expressions and mouths gaping open. I just confirmed how much Ava means to me.

Turning around to face the windshield, I close my eyes and send a small prayer into the ether that Ava is surviving, that she can hold on one more night. We will get her home and I will be there for her every single step of the way.

The wait for tomorrow will be long. We were so close to her and yet ... We must wait.

The decision is made. Trap or not, we will move forward. We drive a distance away from where Ava is being kept, a place off the beat and track about an hour from the holding, to find a hiding spot to drive off road further into the forest area where we can camouflage ourselves into the surroundings. A temporary command center - a place where we can plan, plan, and then plan some more, and fake a few hours of sleep. I don't think I could even rest knowing she's so close but not here and probably being tortured by that sick fuck.

As we set up to go over our recon notes and begin to determine the best course of action, I send another pleading prayer that she is alive. If she is alive, she can survive. If she can survive, then we can stitch together all the pieces that scum broke and flayed.

19

AVA

The quiet clicking of silverware on the plate is the only noise that can be heard in the dining room as I sit with Kiel. The staff prepared a beautiful breakfast. If I was sitting here with anyone other than this deranged devil, I might enjoy the incredibly savory meal currently placed before me.

My skin starts to itch as I stab another egg, popping it in my mouth. It's his eyes; he is feasting upon me. His intense gaze makes me physically ill. The delicious food tastes like dust in my mouth. I sigh softly. If I don't clean the plate, it will push some unknown button Kiel has and I just don't have it in me to deal with his shit anymore today.

Drinking a sip of my orange juice to wash the ashy taste away, I drift away with my thoughts.

I awoke this morning to Kiel's gentle hands drifting along my body, shifting at the tickling sensation. He looks down, a soft smile slips on his face. That disturbed light that constantly gleams in his eyes only seems to intensify each time I glance into them.

Cringing, I wait for the explosion of anger. The snap of his fury for the guard - the one left dead, bleeding out all over the pristine white kitchen tile. He continues to glide his hands up and down my arms, slowly shifting to my stomach and back up until he cups my face, turning so he can take my mouth.

I know better than to fight. I give in and continue with my game - I pretend to love this and want everything he is doing. Gently rolling me over, he proceeds with our morning routine of sex.

His goal so predominant in his mind that he is letting things slip. As he thrusts into me, I let out a breathy moan of pleasure. It does the trick and Kiel picks up the pace. His need for an heir is clouding his mind. Not taking notice of there having been a death in his house makes him susceptible to the attack I am planning.

I want nothing more than to take the knife from its hiding place and thrust it deep into him, over and over again until his breath stops and life seeps from his eyes. Stretching as if I'm enjoying his heaving rutting, I arch my back, putting my hands above my head. As my hand brushes the wooden handle, a flash of the stranger's words hit.

"Don't make any moves that risk your survival until you know it's the right time. Then do what it is you must to live."

Freezing, I seductively bring my arms into a wide sweep back to his thighs where I run my nails down his skin. I'm praying that he didn't see the intent in my eyes, the hesitation of my body. Thankfully, he doesn't notice a thing. So distracted with my train of thoughts, I don't feel Kiel stiffen. It's his groan that snaps me out of it.

A throat clears, bringing me back to now. "Does the meal not satisfy you, pet?" Slipping a serene smile over my still puffy lips, I throw on my mask, a veil of deception. A school girl giggle falls from my mouth.

"Just reminiscing." I hope that will be enough, but know it won't be.

"Tell me, my pet. What has your cheeks tinged pink and a delirious look on your face?" It was better to answer the question than to deal with the evil that eats Kiel

from the inside out.

“I was thinking about this morning.” I shift in my seat. A cheshire smile engulfs his face and he sits up straight, as though my words boost his pride, before he scoots his chair back, patting his lap.

Pushing my chair back, I walk to him and gently sit on his lap. Kiel begins his petting; his fingers trail up and down my arm. “Pet, I’m shocked at how much has changed these last few months. To think, not too long ago I was ready to kill you. But you are a gift. You brought me hope and will bring forth the future of this empire.” His words are soft, filled with an emotion that I can’t quite place. I get goosebumps where his fingers still lightly coast up and down my arms.

“If not for you, I don’t know where I would be, my sweet pet.” His fingers stop, only to give me a quick gentle squeeze and pick back up. “I can see us now, telling our little ones about our story, and one day sharing that same story with grandchildren. We will have a strong line. Our empire will expand, and we will become a united and unstoppable front.” Kiel hasn’t stopped stroking me softly, a tender look on his face as he weaves this unimaginable world.

My breath catches, heart beating frantically. This crazy sociopath has feelings for me. He is telling me, without saying the exact words, that he loves me. My breakfast fights to make a reappearance. Knowing that if it does, Kiel will take offense and make my life even more of a living hell, I force it to stay down. Kiel’s not done professing his victory and love.

“Cal was nothing. He felt nothing for you. He was just a small inconsequential mistake for you, my pet. But do not worry, I will eclipse him. I will bring us into a new orbit.” His voice hardens like steel. “Cal was a nothing schmuck, who used you for his purposes and promptly tossed you to the wolves.” He chuckles. “Well, at least he unknowingly tossed you to THE wolf.”

Thinking of Cal and what we had, I can't imagine Cal was faking. Hell, even if he was using me for sex, his feelings were real. I know with every breath I take that Cal and I, what we were was special. Two parts of a whole; a soul finding its match. To even question the validity of those few short times together is unthinkable.

Thinking that Kiel is right brings forth unexpected mirth. Trying to get my snort suppressed fails as it slips past my lips. Kiel's head snaps up at the sound of my merriment, and the crazy look sneaks back into his eyes. I wait with bated breath for the back hand or the ripping of my hair, putting me back into my place. But nothing happens.

Kiel clears his throat, irritation reflecting in his features. "Tonight. Tonight will be different, my pet." I freeze, the unknown with him can mean anything. He swings too far back and forth on the pendulum of sanity to insanity. I never know what to expect.

"You will come to me tonight. To my room." He rises from his seat, forcing me from his lap as he positions me to stand beside him. Once standing, he brushes my hair aside, kissing the curve of my neck. "We shall celebrate our new beginnings. Can't wait, my pet," he whispers before leaving the room, off to do whatever it is he does when he is not torturing me.

Sighing, I can slip back into myself. I don't even want to know what tonight will bring, but I do know that I will be ready. I wander languidly back to my room, a guard in tow. Nothing but awful memories and time on my hands, I opt to take a nap until the night staff brings me dinner. Better that than to fret all day, wondering about all the what ifs.

Hearing my door open, the distinctive sound of the dinner cart with rattling dome top wakes me from my afternoon nap. Sitting up, I wait for the staff to finish and leave. I walk over, eat the offering quickly but only just enough to take the ache away. I don't know what is in store for me, and I really don't want to tempt fate with retching it

back up. I collect my long sleeve nightgown, wrapping it around my slim form before crawling on the bed to snatch up the knife. Making sure it's carefully tucked away, I knot the robe as there's the light tap of knocking on the door.

Opening the door, an unfamiliar guard is stoically waiting. He gestures for me to follow him. Slipping out of the door, I quietly trail him to Kiel's suite. So wrapped up in my thoughts about how I'll use the knife, I almost run into the guard when he stops abruptly. Peeking around, I notice a door so very similar to my own gilded prison. Standing here, staring at the frame, revulsion seeps into every atom of my body. One way or another, I am leaving this palatial jail.

Raising my hand, I quietly knock. Kiel opens the door with a flourishment of gestures to walk in. Following him, I watch as he strolls to the sleek contemporary styled bed. Unbuttoning his shirt, he turns to place his top on the black velvet chaise at the end of the bed. When his back is turned, I take the chance, snatching the knife from its hiding place.

Rapidly lunging for his unguarded back, I strike. Kiel deflects the blow at the last minute, hitting my arm with such force that it sends my precious weapon flying to the other side of the room. I hear the distinctive clinking noise as it bounces off the floor. Grabbing a fist full of my hair, Kiel attempts to wrestle me to the bed, but I fight for everything I am worth.

I scratch. I kick. I dig my nails into any skin within reach. I fight.

In the end, he wins. His ferocious roar of pure rage fills the room as he pins me down. In the blink of an eye, Kiel opens the nightstand drawer, pulling his own knife out. The glint of Damascus steel catches the light as it makes a haphazard downward arc. On the upward swing is when I feel it.

The blade is so sharp that the initial cut doesn't register immediately. Then, with the

force of a freight train, the debilitating pain smacks me in the face. My breath whooshes and a scream of agony rips from my lips. In the next instant, Kiel tears the nightgown from my body, leaving me completely exposed to his manic unhinged wants. Leaning forward he wraps his hand around my throat, slowly cutting off my air supply in hopes of making me compliant and supple to his administrations.

Not tonight. Kiel will not win. I won't let him. So caught up in choking me, he places the bloody knife aside to slap me with his now empty hand. I will not be deterred. Kiel's need to rape me clouds his mind. The knife is within reach. I snag it as he adjusts himself to enter me and do not hesitate. With every ounce of hate I feel, I slash at him, reveling in the deep gouge that appears on his face. Blood pours from it, bathing us in crimson. The action shocks him enough that he begins to push off of me, but not today.

Turning the tables, I shove him backwards, climbing up him like my favorite tree. I let free the broken Ava, the hurt Ava, the wrath that has been pinned up while at the hands of this demented madman. I stab and stab. I hear the door, expecting reinforcements to come save this asshole, but it's not a guard.

A large man in tactical gear storms in with an assault rifle at the ready, prepared to gun down his foe. As he sees the scene before him, he freezes. I'm covered in blood, as though I've just reenacted the infamous scene from Carrie . But unlike her, I'm nude. The mystery man takes a step, but quickly stops when I flinch backwards. With slow movement, as though he is approaching a wild animal, he lowers his weapon, reaches for the visor, and pushes it up so his familiar dark blue eyes land on me.

On my next breath, Cal sweeps me up into his warm, comforting embrace.

20

AVA

My breath comes out in short, pained pants; the cuts and slices all over my body burn and itch. I keep trying to reach them, only to come up short. I'm strapped to the hospital bed, praying and hoping that Cal will save me but knowing he won't. Kiel confirmed that he left me and now all I want is another syringe full of the good stuff that makes me forget. Drifting off into a dreamless sleep chained to that horrible bed, I can only plead that my brothers haven't given up on me.

Waking with the sun shining through the large windows and the scent of antiseptic heavy in the air, I realize I am not in Kiel's basement. I made it out. Sitting up in the clean hospital bed without manacles attached, I see Cal leaning back in an uncomfortable chair blocking the door.

Tears stream down my cheeks. I'm so relieved that he is here, that he did come for me. A sob breaks free, catching his attention. He jumps from his spot and, in two large strides, stands by my side. Cal carefully places his hands on my face as though he is holding spun glass; his thumbs glide over my ridged hollowed cheeks, capturing the tears before they finish their trek landing on the ugly but clean hospital gown.

He shudders and, with the softest whisper, he speaks. "Ava. Darling, I never stopped."

Those simple words create a cascading waterfall of emotions to pour from the deepest parts of my soul. Pulling back to wipe the tears away, I'm grateful to be free. To be

here. To have this moment when I was so very sure that I would die in the dreadful horror show.

“Can I have a few tissues, please?” I croak, barely recognizing my own voice. Cal nods and walks to the ensuite bathroom, grabbing what I need. Taking a deep breath, I use the distraction to put myself to rights. I don’t know how long I have been gone. I don’t know all the things that have happened or need to happen.

I want answers.

As this floats through my mind, Cal hands me the tissues. Blowing my nose and dabbing the tears away, I stiffen when the door opens, not knowing who or what it will be. Turning, my shoulders slump when I see them.

Chase’s voice cracks, “Ava,” just as the twins echo, “You’re awake!” Their excitement at my alertness brings a much needed smile to my face.

Shoving each other out the way to give me hugs and kisses, I laugh again. They always know how to lighten the mood. Their gentle, familiar embrace feels like home. Chase steps back, letting the twins smother me with firm tender affection. I hadn't realized how much I needed and missed this.

“Ava, I know that this can’t be easy. We are all here for you.” He sighs, running his hands through his hair. His hair looks like he has been doing that gesture so much that it stuck that way. He looks down, as if he is gathering himself. Does he have more bad news? “Mom and dad are on their way. They hoped to be here before you woke up. They are going to be so very happy that you are awake.”

Nodding in understanding, I untangle from the firm grips of my brothers - too much touch is beginning to make my skin crawl, a downfall of my time with him. I get why he was so hesitant about informing me. I still don’t get along with them and this is no

time for a happy family reunion. Maybe with all the trauma I suffered they will back off. That is a huge maybe.

My brothers stand huddling around me, relieved to see me, but there's a vibe, an aura of emotions swirling between the men stoically standing guard around my hospital bed. I love them, and I'm happy to see them, but none of them will look me in the eye. The awkwardness climbing to suffocating levels, I finally snap. "What the hell is everyone's problem?"

The mutters of the group follow my outburst. "Chase, come on!" He glares at our brothers, sighing.

"We feel guilty. We should have known Kiel would NEVER leave what we did to him unchecked. We thought he would just live his life, not personally seek us all out and attempt to destroy us." His shoulders slump further in on themselves. "We never thought, Ava .. that he would take you ..." I watch as the twins sink further into themselves as well.

"Is this why you all are avoiding looking me in the eyes?" I do my best to choke down the emotions. I don't want them to walk on eggshells with me. The skittering around the bush or elephant or whatever. That evil bastard took enough from me; I don't need him taking this too. Shaking my head, I swallow to stop the quivering from my voice. "P-please don't ... Let's agree that you are not at fault. He did this to me; he made the choice; he made those decisions to take me. Not any of you. I k-knew-" My voice shakes with untold emotions. "I knew that my brothers would turn this planet upside down hunting me down."

There is a stagnant moment until they all relax, ruffling my hair and giving gentle squeezes of affection. Who would have known that my overbearing, alpha male brothers would need little ol' me to reassure them that it was okay, that this wasn't their fault, and that we can move forward. I guess no matter your size or your

strength, sometimes you just need someone to say the words to alleviate the hidden guilt. Those words were like a warm hug, thawing out the guilt and ice that hardened their hearts.

I can at least help them with this. I can help them, even though I don't think I can help myself.

Chase clears his throat, drawing my attention back to him. Rubbing the back of his neck, a gesture of frustration. "Tony and Paige are on their way too." The news that my crazy best friend is on her way lightens my spirits. I love my family, but I can't handle the judgment, the 'what were you thinking about' lectures, and God knows what else my parents will throw my way. What I need is my best friend who loves nothing more than to throw caution to the wind and bring chaos in full force. She always knows how to bring me back into the light - her hidden gift that she shares with so few.

Knowing that more support is on the way, I have time to think and question what I did. Question what happened after I saw Cal. I know my brothers are here; I know that Cal was the last thing I saw before I fainted. But what about hell mansion and the vile man who kept me there?

I don't know how to find the words to ask, but I know that I must. It's vital. This overwhelming need to find out if I killed him. It won't stain my soul. It won't keep me up at night. I think the world would thank me if they knew what I did, how I saved some other poor soul from the hellish nightmare I lived for who knows how long. But to find the words to ask, the fear of hearing the words that I didn't succeed. I'm not sure if this will crumble my carefully put together facade, the one that is alleviating the tension and the guilt that is slowly permeating through this compact room that wreaks of bleach.

Clearing my throat snags the attention of the males lounging. I look from one face to

the next. Cal stoically keeps watch by the door, not allowing a single soul to slip in without his permission. I can see the detectable stress lines around his mouth and deep blue eyes. It hurts me to see that he is still standing guard, keeping parts to himself. Maybe it is only because of my brothers, but I'm too afraid to ask. Chase and the twins are doing an incredible job of locking down their anger, their guilt, and showcasing the fun-loving brothers. Yet their stress lines mirror each other, deep lines showing at the corners of their eyes. Hating what I am about to ask, I push through my discomfort.

"Is he dead?" I wait. The men shuffle in their seats. "Seriously, did I kill him? I need to know." They quickly glance at each other. After years of working together, they have perfected the silent communication. My patience snaps. "Damn it, answer my fucking question. I deserve to know!" After my outburst, my breaths come in pants, something so little taking a toll on my battered body. Another part of myself that this heinous experience has taken its toll on.

Again, my declaration is met with silence. I'm on the verge of throttling one of them when Cal stands. He walks to me, my brothers shuffling away to make room. He gets to his knees, gently reaches for my hands. His hold is so gentle it feels like a whisper of a touch as he hovers above my skin. Then, with slow unhurried movement, Cal cups my cheeks, staring deep into my eyes. I can hear the whisper of his breath puffing against my face.

"Ava." He lightly rubs his thumb up my cheekbones, an intimate caring touch, something I have yearned for while in the hands of the devil himself. "You did some damage. B-but we were more worried about retrieving you and getting you to safety." He shakes his head, his thumbs gliding along the apple of my cheek. "He escaped in the melee. We went back and did a thorough search; the place is empty. No servants. No guards. Nothing."

Cal stares deeply into my eyes, while I take the news he imparted. He watches

closely. I see the ache this caused. It was almost as though he and my brothers had hoped that they would not have to have this conversation - as though I would simply forget, that my traumatized brain would block out all the bad, that it would delete my last few hours in that vile piece of shit's hands. Sadly, my mind never works that way. It seems to thrive in forcing me to relive my deepest, most horrific traumas over and over again.

The news hits me in the face like a sledgehammer. My breath comes in quick pants. The machines around me go berserk. The men surrounding me all carry a shocked expression ... As if they thought his escape would - what, give me relief? What the fuck ever. The beeping becomes more rapid. There is a scurry of motion at the door as a herd of nurses come running into the room.

Calmly with a firm gentleness, they push and manhandle the much larger men out of their way. A quick assessment and the stern-faced nurse steps forward, a syringe in hand.

Is it wrong that the first thought that flits through my mind is: 'Thank God. I need the numbness? I need the good stuff'. But I never feel a prick, knowing and yet not comprehending in that moment that in a hospital they do everything intravenously. They don't stick you in the neck - yet another mark of damage to my tattered soul.

The beeping noise becomes slower and slower as my lids become heavier and heavier, until I can't open them anymore. In the blackness, I hear light footsteps and heavier staggered lumbering steps, probably the cause of combat boots. I hear soft murmurs of apologies. I feel soft kisses touching my forehead. Lastly, a mumbling whisper of "I love you."

21

AVA

I stare out the floor to ceiling windows, sitting in the most comfortable bed, surrounded by pillows and blankets and anything else Cal felt would sooth my battered soul. The view takes my breath away, just like the first time I looked out to the forest that engulfs Cal's property.

He has done anything and everything he can think of to make my transition from tortured hostage, to beaten victim, to a recovering survivor as seamless as possible. I'm not ungrateful. It's been a long road to recovery, months and months slipped by as I recuperated in the hospital. I stayed at the hospital to heal from the physical damage until I was strong enough to be transferred to a drug treatment facility.

Overcoming my need, my addiction, was not easy. I relied so heavily on the drugs; it was like a warm, comfy security blanket, pulling me from the nasty reality that Kiel was shoving at me and allowed me to sink into its cozy embrace.

Cal and my brothers have been the best. A bit overbearing, but I should have expected as much. They take turns watching out for me. From the moment I woke up at the hospital, someone has been at my side, step by step. Comforting as it has been, I don't know if I can handle much more of their mother henning me.

The door creaks open. My head snaps in the direction and a gasp of air leaves my parted lips. It's just Cal bringing me a cup of chamomile tea to help me sleep, but the jumpiness is a new tick I've developed. I have so many new twitches that it's

overwhelming. The nightmares continue night after night - some more realistic, as though I'm there again, while others are faceless and full of pain. Cal is hoping that the calming tea will have a positive effect on my nighttime sleep. I'm not holding my breath.

Nothing has worked.

Sliding the tray softly at the end of the bed, Cal sits on the edge. "Is there anything else you need?" He reaches for my hand, giving it an affectionate squeeze. Shaking my head no, he sighs and sinks further into the bed, wrapping an arm around me. It feels good. I want this. I don't want to fear touch. But the reality is, I can't stand being touched. It makes my skin crawl; my stomach roils with dread, and then it happens. Instead of Cal, my brothers, or even Paige, it's him, I feel his hands, smell his scent, hear his voice. I tumble right back to being held as his captive. The shaking starts and my breath comes out in heavy pants as if I was running a marathon.

Cal snatches his hand back and scootches away, leaving a large gap between our bodies. The space looks small, yet it feels like a canyon between us. I feel like a piece of shit for it. He keeps trying, but my mind is still healing from the trauma. The demented sociopath who devoured the last bit of good that was in me, lashing his hooks deep within my soul, continues to drag me down into the depths of the abyss that I currently reside in. I haven't found a way to dislodge his hold. It pains me to see the flicker of hurt that flashes across his deep blues. I know I cut him deep, but I can't seem to navigate these churning waters. I don't know if I'm strong enough to break the surf and make it to the shore, but also don't know how to ask for the help I realize I need.

A throat clearing snaps me out of my internal beatdown. Cal is standing by the door. I didn't feel him get out of the bed.

"Drink your tea." He rubs the back of his neck, eyes skittering about the room. "I...

uhhhh...I have a few things to get done, but I'll come join you later ... If that's okay?" I nod my acceptance. Knowing that he is leaving me in hopes that it will make my adjustment back into this space easier. His uncomfortable behavior has red flags flashing, making me nervous. I wonder what secrets he's keeping, and if my brothers are involved.

I'm shaking.

Why am I shaking?

I hear screaming. A name ... My name. Someone is yelling. "Ava Wake up!" My eyes snap open. I gulp in breaths of air. I'm soaking wet; my heart is pounding. Cal's warm hands are still on my arms, and I flinch at the sensation of his skin against mine. He rips his hands away.

"Sorry." He clears his throat. "You were screaming and thrashing in your sleep. I came running in to see you scratching at your arms." There are gouges running from my elbow to my wrist; my nails are covered in red. The damage I caused in my sleep is shocking.

The nightmares aren't getting better. I can see the strain this is putting on him, and I don't know any way to make it better. Living this way is not what anyone would want.

"Cal, I can't do this. I know you can't want this either." I fiddle with the duvet, so I don't have to see the emotion burning in his eyes. "Who would want to be with me? You? That's laughable." A hoarse laugh chokes its way up from my throat. I throw my arm up at him, gesturing at him. "You have your good looks, money, a kickass job, and so much more. Why the hell would you want some broken drug lord's used up whore? A piece of trash he threw at his investors like a toy that was on the playground for everyone to use and enjoy. How can you even look at me?" I choke

on a sob. “To think you would want me to stay here with you and be by your side, you should have cut your losses.” Quivering with agitation, twisting the sheet, I look up and immediately regret it. My voice cracks. “Please just leave. I don’t want you to see me like this anymore.”

I curl into myself as the door quietly clicks shut. How could he want me? How could Cal even think about wanting a life with me? I’m used up goods. I’m a mess. I sink further and further into this puffy pile of comfort and blessedly fall asleep.

Waking to blue clear skies, I roll out of bed and take care of my basic needs. That little bit of activity knocks me on my ass. Exhaustion takes hold.

Crawling back into my comfort nest, my mind wanders. It flits from thought to thought, memory to memory, seeping further into a trance-like state. Time has no bearing on me. It could have been days since we arrived at Cal’s property or weeks.

The bed dips. A soft whisper of skin touches my face pushing back the hair that has wrapped itself into my eyes. The blurry vision before me clears, taking the shape of the beautiful smiling face of Paige.

“Sweetheart, Cal’s worried.” She moves back, giving me space to sit up. Scooching up to lean against the headboard, I stare at my friend, the one person who I know would never judge me for all that has befallen me.

“He called me. Asked - No, demand I come over.” She sighs. “He is looking to find your spark. A bit of fight, Ava. He has the tenacity of a pitbull. Goddamn, he is fucking relentless.” She sighs as though she doesn’t love a man with those exact tendencies. “He’s determined to see you back to rights.” Looking down, I continue to sit silently, watching my fingers twisting and turning as they interlock - an apparent nervous tick I picked up.

Paige doesn't push or prod. In fact, she is a silent calming presence. It feels like she is waiting me out, hoping that I will give her something. I relent.

"Paige, I just don't think I am worthy. I'm tainted. Ruined goods. Who would want to be with me after all that has been done to me." Tears gather in the corner of my eyes, preparing for their trek down my cheeks. "How can I be with him after everything I have been through?" A sob catches in my throat. "I don't know if I can let another human touch me again." Shaking, I let the emotion roll over me. Melting back into my nest, I effectively shut her out.

Murmurs glistening over me. Voices of different cadence glide on the cusp of my reality. Spots of conversation filter through. A gruff tone skits along my nerves. "She seems to have lost touch with reality."

"She's under the impression that she is used goods that no one would want," a female voice shares.

"I'd hope that she would overcome ..." the male growls, slowly fading out.

"Maybe she needs more time," a different male says, sadness creeping into the words that spill from him.

I wonder if I am dreaming about them. Who are these people? Who are they speaking about? They sound sad.

Time slips. It's beginning to blend. The bed is my vessel of safety, and I don't want to leave it. I fall deeper and deeper into numbness, closing my eyes and diving into a nightmarish slumber.

Feeling a weight on my shoulder, I jolt, scrambling to move away from it. My back slams into the headboard and my breath comes out in pants as my eyes widen in

shock. Cal scrambles backwards as if I shocked him with a cattle prod. The turmoil I feel when I look at him eats me alive. I don't want to imagine what I am doing to him.

I have only been here at Cal's house for what I think is a few days, or maybe it's been weeks. I just don't know. Each moment is slipping through my fingers like sand. But months upon months spent with him as I recovered has shown that I don't have a damn clue what I want.

I want him.

I pleaded for him while strapped to that table in the basement. I want a life with him. I want nothing more than to fall into his warm embrace and roll around in the security that his strong arms offer.

Yet, I want nothing to do with his touch. He scares me. There is a fear that takes hold and grips me, stealing my breath, and I don't know why. I feel like my heart and mind are in a marathon match of ping pong. Anytime a side scores, that's the emotion that dominates. It's a tiring game. The longer this goes on the further down into the dark abyss I feel the emotional riptide is yanking me.

To make matters worse, this visceral reaction seems to prime my body. Shame fills me. Cal scares me. I fear him and yet I want him to have his twisted way with me. I can't stop thinking about how it was between us, but I can't seem to stop my reaction to my body's fear turning me into a dripping hot mess for him.

Thinking of telling Cal about my reaction to him sends my thoughts crashing in different directions. My head has me reaching further into the numbness. Cal has begged and pleaded so many times. He wants me to walk, to shower, go to the living room and watch television or, hell, step outside and feel the fresh air.

It is not happening.

I will not move.

I can't.

As the days pass, I turn into a sloth, barely moving or eating. Just sleeping. Getting lost in the memories. Drowning in the agony of past transgressions. My mind is projecting my time with Kiel on a continuous loop. And for fun, my brain is throwing in bouts of Elliot. The longer this happens, the more their faces blur and blend. The longer the torture and rape are relived, I can't seem to identify either devil. Instead, it's as though their actions and bodies have melded. In its place, a new demon has emerged, one that I can't seem to battle. It seems to have me frozen in place and I lose at every turn. I've lost Cal. I lost my brothers. Now I'm losing myself more and more as every moment slithers past me.

Cal tries every day. It breaks me further to see how much he cares, yet I can't seem to get over the fact that he was never there. I longed for him, and he never came. Then, when he finally did come for me, he left Kiel alive. He allowed that bastard to keep breathing; the thought guts me.

After all he did, he is still walking this planet. He could be at this very moment coming for me, and Cal and my brothers expect me to pick up my life as though nothing happened. Okay, maybe not as if I wasn't tortured and raped repeatedly, but they do have an expectation of how I should be. Why else are they constantly attempting to get me to move, to eat, to live?

I vaguely recall Cal brushing his hands against my face. His words never register as I continue to submerge. He must hit a breaking point because the next face I hazily see is Chase. Worry and concern flicker in his expression. He turns looking at someone else in the room. Who, I haven't a clue. I can't seem to dislodge myself from this

state. Chase shoves a cup of something under my face. The scent of fresh brewed coffee hits me. I see the glimmer of hope in his eyes. But I can't bring myself to crave my most favorite drink.

None of those things bring me joy. He took that too.

In fact, it feels like he took it all from me. My strength. My will. My need to live.

Kiel took it all.

He won.

22

CAL

A few days of Ava being home, I'm failing her again. She has succumbed to the terror in her mind that is holding her hostage. The Giovanni brothers, Paige and I thought if she could just exist with no pressure for a few days, that it would help to revive her.

I was wrong. Oh, so very terribly wrong.

Now, I need to rectify the situation. I hate to do it, but it needs to happen. With the decision made, I leave my command center, shaking off the bad news. I have spent months and months hunting for any news on Kiel's whereabouts. I will keep turning over rocks until I find him and eviscerate him. Unfortunately, no one has heard from that bastard. Stomping up the stairs, I hesitate at the door, breathing in deeply. None of this is Ava's fault. I want to have a calm collected aura around her. I don't want to make things worse.

I push the door open, doing my damndest to box up the shitstorm brewing before I walk through the threshold and come to halt just short of the bed. She hasn't moved. She is in the same position she has been for days: curled into a ball in the center of this nest of blankets and pillows. Her eyes are open. She's staring into space as though she is lost, floating on the broken memories her brain is still trying to process.

Cracking my neck, I turn and head to the bathroom. I start running the water, feeling for the right temperature. I plug the tub, pouring in a bunch of smelling good shit, and

prepare myself for what is about to happen.

“Ava,” I call gently. “You need to get up. If you don’t get up...” I sigh, leaving the empty threat hanging. I’m not going to really do anything, but maybe that would spark her sassiness to jump out. It doesn’t. I grumble about my displeasure. “Okay, you leave me no choice.”

Dipping down, I rip the covers off her. She snaps up and screams at me. Claws at the ready, she goes straight for the eye, my vicious little thing. I bat her hands away. She is so weak from lack of food that this is child’s play. I lean down, carefully and softly snatching her up in my arms. She continues to wiggle and turn as if she were a caterpillar stuck on its back.

Once securely in my arms, the fight all but leaves her. She doesn’t have the strength to sustain her actions. Yet another punch to the gut, another visual reminder of how I failed her.

Stalking to the bathroom, I place her on the countertop. Giving her a stern look, I turn back to check the water temp and levels.

“Don’t move.” The bubbles have tripled, covering the whole tub in light fluffiness. The water is toasty. It should help alleviate any soreness and aches in her muscles.

Ava’s hoarse voice sounds muffled against the raging water as the tub continues to fill. “Cal, I don’t want this. Take me back.”

I shake my head, turning off the water and facing her with my arms crossed. “No, Ava. Not happening. You will get in this tub and get clean.” I soften my words. “Then, you can go back to bed.” A look of indignation flies over her face, and her shoulders drop, her body submitting before her mouth.

“Fine. B-but ...” she hesitates, then straightens those slumped shoulders. Her voice gains a bit of steel. “But, you need to leave. I can bathe myself.”

I flinch at her request. Kiel has done so much damage. He’s broken something in her that I hope and pray can heal. I won’t give up on her, but I need the chance to show that to her. I drop to my knees, reaching for her deliberately with care. I want her to see my hand coming. I want her to make the choice to accept my touch. Ava holds still, watching my hands. There is a flash of emotion in her eyes, but it quickly dies.

“Ava, would you do me the honor of allowing me to care for you?” I wait. “You deserve to be lavished with intentions of pure love and adoration. Let me remind you what it feels like. Allow my humble affection to light the candle that you are protecting deep within your soul.” I watch as a single tear falls from her eye, cascades down the hollow of her cheek, ending its journey on my hand.

She stares at me a moment longer before conceding. When she raises her arms, I stand up and approach her as though she is an injured animal with fear lingering in her eyes. I know what I need to do. Helping her remove her dirty clothes, she hops off the counter to drop her panties. I bite back an expletive. She is skin and bones. I worry she is trying to starve herself to death. Keeping my emotions on lockdown, I guide her to the tub and help her get settled.

Grabbing the bottle of shampoo, I squirt a glob into my hands and meticulously lather her wet locks, massaging her scalp. The goal is to soothe her, show her that not all hands are meant for evil. That not all men are the devil reincarnated who only search for their own pleasure. To remind her of the good and to show her through my actions how much I care. She sits quietly and unmoving. I rinse the shampoo and grab the conditioner, going through the same motions of gathering the hair, ensuring that her strands are covered. I rinse it out before carefully twisting her hair up on the top of her head, tying it up into a messy bun.

Standing up, I look at Ava. No longer needing to tilt her head back, she now has her chin resting on her knees. She embodies vulnerability and it crushes me. I squat back down to her level. “Ava, go ahead and wash up. I’m going to go change out your sheets, then I will be back to help you out of the tub.” She doesn’t even blink. It’s as though I am not here. She is so lost in her mind, and I’m determined to help her find her way home.

Walking from the bath, I come to stand next to the bed. I take a minute. Just one minute for myself. I allow the anger, the heartbreak, and anguish to devour me, letting it engulf my heart and soul. This is nothing compared to what she is battling. My need to find Kiel and tear him apart piece by piece is growing stronger every day. I can’t wait until we find him.

I make quick work of the bedding. The sheets are stale with the smell of pain, desperation and fear. In the past, fear was a scent I thrived on. It showed me that I was close to the answers I needed and wanted. It was a part of the job. Smelling her fear, it shreds a part of my soul. Maybe, with clean sheets that smell of lavender, it will ease her fear and smother her nightmares. Tossing the dirty sheets aside, I make quick work of making the bed. Finishing with my task, I walk back to the bathroom.

Stepping into the room, I halt. My eyes must be playing tricks on me. I watch quietly as Ava glides the soap loofah up and down her arms. It’s a small action, but a huge step. She is not simply sitting staring into the nothingness. She is caring for herself.

Clearing my throat to warn her that she now has company, she doesn’t startle. Another victory I’ll take.

“Have you finished?” She nods. I hold out the large bath towel for her. “Can you stand up for me?” She nods her agreement, but struggles to stand.

Reaching for her hand, I gently pull her to a stand and wrap the towel around her

fragile frame. Lifting her from the now tepid water, I place her to stand on the fluffy bath mat where I dry her off quickly. Handing her the clean nightgown and panties, I wait as she dresses. I guide her back to sit on the bed and dry her hair. Placing the towel aside, I run a comb through her wet locks to ensure there are no knots. Once the task is finished, I pull back the covers and tuck Ava in.

Tossing the towel in the pile with the dirty sheets, I put the comb on the nightstand, crawl into bed and cover up. I lay on my back, just listening to her stuttered breathing. The space between could fit her three brothers. Or at least it feels that way. I don't want to complain. I can at least sleep in the same bed. Her nightmares don't worsen in my presence, but they don't get any better either. I'm grateful we found her, but can she battle her demons without breaking further? I just don't know. The 'what if' questions continue to pile on top of me as I start to slide into slumber.

Movement wakes me. It takes a moment to realize that it's not an enemy sneaking into my room. The shifting is much closer; the mattress dips again. I freeze, not wanting to scare her. Ava is sliding closer to me. Heart pounding. I dare not breathe as she moves again. She wants to be nearer to me. She is still an arm length away, but she is no longer sleeping on the edge of the bed.

A smile slips across my lips, a foreign sensation fills me.

Hope.

23

AVA

Drinking fresh-brewed coffee, I sit and stare out the window. Cal physically removed me from the bed this morning. To my utter shock, he placed me in the plush chair that looks out over the woods that surround his property. He handed me the drink and walked out, or so I thought. Hearing a noise, I turn in the chair to look over the top edge. There he is, removing all the blankets and pillows from the bed, effectively taking my security nest away.

So, here I sit, sipping and thinking - repeating this for what seems like hours, but really it's only a few short moments. Melting into the soft velvety seat, last night sweeps through my mind. Cal was patient. He handled me with care; it was almost as if he still wanted me. It's these images and those delicate touches that have me stumped. I can't seem to match Cal's actions to what Kiel said to me. Kiel delighted in delivering those words to me. He loved the devastation those few words accomplished. It was a shot that didn't miss, and Kiel rubbed it in my face a few times.

It makes no sense. Cal is doing the opposite of everything Kiel said he would do. I expected him to assist my brothers in my retrieval and then disappear. That didn't happen. In fact, he stayed with me through each step of my recovery. I still remember my brothers manhandling him out of the room when I first woke up so he would go shower and eat. It was as though he had been holding a vigil over me until I finally opened my eyes.

Taking a fortifying breath, I whisper his name. He just finished folding all the bedding and placing it at the end of the bed. The pillows are thrown haphazardly in the corner of the room. Hearing the muted thumps of his heavy boots on the thick carpet, he comes to stand in front of me, crossing his muscular arms. He takes notice of my gulp at his intimidating stance and squats down. Gazing straight into his deep blue eyes, I try to speak.

“I want t-to ummmmm ...” My eyes flicker about the room. It's too hard to tell him these words while staring into those eyes, the eyes that see so much of me. “I want-” I shake my head. “No, I need to talk to you.” He waits patiently while I gather up my courage.

My fingers start picking at the cloth on the chair, something that seems to soothe my anxiety. “Cal, Kiel said some things to me. He was never kind. There is nothing nice or kind about that man. His words... Well, they pierced my heart...” My hands start trembling. “That doesn’t sound right but, it is. I’m making a muck of this. Cal, there were a few specific statements that he made that destroyed a part of me that I desperately needed to war with that devil incarnate.” Blowing out a puff of air, I continue.

“I’m doing a wretched job of this. This is difficult for me. Cal... Kiel said that you left me for him. That you took off once you knew that he had me.” My body is shaking so hard that my teeth clatter together. “He said that you would NEVER want me or anything to do with me once he was done having his fun with me.” I rush the words, afraid that if I slowed they would freeze in my throat. “See, it makes sense. Why would you keep me after all the horrid things that happened?” A hiccup escapes as I do my damndest to suppress the urge to blubber like a toddler who was told no to another cookie. Bowing my head, staring at my lap, I don’t see him move.

Cal reaches out, gathering my hands in his and pulling me forward. “Sweet Ava, that’s a fucking lie.” Clearing his throat, he runs his hands up my arm to cup my face.

He whispers: "I was there behind the mirror." Pausing, he waits to see my reaction. "I never left you. He took you away from me and left me behind." Cal leans forward, touching our foreheads together. At this action, my eyes slip shut. "Is this why you have been jumpy and distant?"

His warm strong lips place a subtle feather light kiss where his forehead had just been resting. "I can see how he managed to make you believe that bullshit, but my sweet, it's not true. Not a single word. Had I known that this was festering inside of you and stopping you from healing, I would have professed my shame sooner. Your brothers found me. They forced me to recover before coming for you. It took too long. I know that delay caused more damage, but I swear to you, I will make it up to you."

His words rain down on me like a tsunami wave hitting, pummeling me with shame and anger. My body quivers with the impact. My eyes squeeze shut. I can't bring myself to look at him. Why, after seeing all that happened, is he still here? Cal reaches for me, gathering me in his arms. He sits back, slumping into the wall. He quietly hushes me while rubbing my back.

"Ava, I wish I could take it all away. I can't even fathom how difficult your time with him was. I am so terribly sorry that I was unable to prevent him from taking you. I know that I failed you as I watched day after day of the horrific trauma you were forced to endure. I hope that you can forgive me. Allow me the pleasure of caring for you now. Being here for you every step of your recovery will ease my guilt for all that has happened."

His words crack something inside of me. "Y-you were there the whole time." My voice quavers with shame. "You saw all that he did. The drugs. What he ff-forced on me?" I stutter out. Sitting in his lap, I wish the ground would split open and swallow me whole. It was one thing to know he had an inkling of what happened, but it's another thing completely that he saw everything that Kiel did to me.

“You’re lying.” I start shaking my head. “You couldn’t have been there. Kiel said he saw you at the warehouse, and that you left me. That you didn’t want me, that I was just used goods.” I can hear the hysteria that slams into my voice. “No. It’s not possible.” Glancing up to his face, he’s shut off his emotions. Nothing is reflecting on his face. He nods once, confirming Kiel lied. I’m truly not shocked - he had a tendency to weave untruths. Yet, I had hoped to not have my weakest moment viewed by someone I truly care about.

“Cal, I ... uh... I can’t. You saw it all. My most vulnerable moments. I never would want anyone to see me that way. You more than anyone. After seeing what you saw, how or why could you be with me. Have sex with me. Knowing what you know.”

I crawl out of his lap. My embarrassment fueling the anger residing just below the surface. The pacing starts. “What the fuck, Cal? Did you plan to ever tell me?” My arms take a life of their own and start to gesture wildly. “The shame I feel for all that was done to me. The drugs forcefully pumped into my system. Worse, how can you even fathom having intimacy with me after watching Kiel force his cock into my body over and over again?” I yell.

Cal doesn’t move during my tirade. In fact, it looks like he is fighting a smirk. Why the hell is he smiling? That bastard knew this whole time. Casually pushing up, he leans against the wall with a carefree attitude, all concern vanished.

“Well, Ava, I know that you didn’t choose any of it. I know that you never would have chosen it. I prayed that you wouldn’t give up and let him win. I was right; you fought.” He paused to let the words saturate the air between us. “I also know that I had you first. And that makes you mine.” He growls out the last part. My eyes widened in shock at the possessiveness.

“You can’t be serious.” He is already nodding yes to my statement. “Fucking hell.

Cal, how the hell can you be so casual about this? I don't even feel like myself, and yet you don't seem to view me any different."

He shrugs his well-defined shoulders. "Ava, you see the physical scars of torture that weave throughout your body as a fragility. I see a warrior coming out of battle. I see a woman who walked through the seven rings of hell and survived."

He walks closer.

"There are many scars that I will never see. You experience them nightly. PTSD is not a joke, nor is it an easy foe to wrangle into submission. In your eyes, you view this as more damage done. When I gaze upon you, I see a woman who's in a dogfight with her demons daily. Some days you lose and others you win. It is not the battle that matters, sweet Ava. It's who wins the war."

Cal is right in front of me. He places his finger beneath my chin, tipping it back so I can stare into his eyes as they gleam with strength and need.

"And dear sweet Ava, I intend for you to snuff out your internal enemies. I'll be by your side helping you slash your way to the top and cheering you on at every turn. If needed, I will be the one to pick you up, offering you my strength until you no longer need it."

His words send a thrill through me. Cal never gave up. More importantly, he wants me, broken and cracked. He talks and acts as though he could throw me down and have his wicked way with me. I like that. I like that a lot. It's nice to feel wanted, yet respected. He finds my strengths where all I see is weakness.

Breathing him in, I take a tentative step closing the gap between us. Sneaking a glance up at his face, he is still staring down at me with an intensity I can't match ... yet. Knowing what I need to do, I make the first move. I lean my forehead against his

warm, solid chest, listening to the steady beat of his heart thumping out a loving melody. I keep breathing him in. He smells like home. I feel his arms move hesitantly, afraid to give me a fright. He finally wraps me in his warm embrace. Maybe, just maybe, I can find the light with him by my side.

24

CAL

Signaling to my next in command to go left, we surround the building. The target was confirmed onsite. Quickly and quietly, we make our way into the back. The team splits, each taking a different direction. I head further into the maze, methodically clearing every room. I finally found that bastard, hiding like a fucking pussy. I go to reach for him as he throws his wife at me. I catch her and then ...

I blinked and now I'm strapped to a table. How did I get here? Wasn't I just hunting him? How did I become the prey? My heart beats frantically in my chest. Sweat is pouring off me as I try to get out of the manacles holding me in place. I can't see a way out. All I hear are screams of pain. Where are they coming from? I glance wildly about the space. It's empty except for a two-way mirror.

Closing my eyes, I attempt to figure out what the hell is happening. Opening my eyes, Kiel's face appears above me, laughing maniacally. "Cal ... I told you I would fucking win." His eyes are wild and crazed as he brings up a Damascus hunting blade, swinging it down. I brace for the impact. Its trajectory is dead center of my chest. A final kill. As soon as it slams into my heart, I gasp for my final breath.

"Cal. Wake up." My body is rocking. "Wake up, Cal it's just a nightmare - it's not real. CALLLLLL!" Someone is screaming my name and shaking me. My eyes pop open; my chest rising and falling rapidly. I sit up and see Ava curling around me. Soothingly, she murmurs: "You're okay ... You're okay." I wrap an arm around her.

“Yep.” My voice is rough with sleep and yelling. I can’t seem to understand how these events have merged into this fucked up mess. Sure, it's the same bastard. But years apart, and the first time around, we did the harm. I give Kiel his credit, he had me over a barrel when he took me to his torture cave. He should have killed me when he had the chance. Rubbing Ava’s back, I apologize.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to wake you.” Shaking my head, I lean back against the headboard, taking her with me. “And you were finally getting a good night’s sleep until I fucked it up.” I gently kiss her head.

“Cal,” she murmurs so quietly that I barely hear her. “Umm... would you tell me about your nightmare?” As she speaks, she slowly curls into herself as though she is afraid of my response. She is still wrapped around me, allowing me to pull her to my body. It's more than I have done since she was found standing over Kiel. My hand is leisurely sliding up and down the soft skin of her back, her nightgown allowing my access to her upper back.

She doesn’t push. She silently waits. I tip her chin up, staring into her eyes. There's no judgment, only curiosity and complete openness. She is willing to be vulnerable with me. Maybe. Maybe I need to accept this opportunity. Perhaps exposing myself to her will give us the jumpstart that I am desperate to have.

Clearing my throat, I divulge everything. I talk about my first time in Afghanistan, when we captured Kiel and his wife. Not wanting to have questions, I reveal it all. I explain the reason for our choices and throw myself and her brothers under the bus at her mercy. Shifting positions to sink further into the bed, I continue, noticing that Ava doesn’t move her head as it rests on my chest. She allows me to leave my hand on her back.

Again, another win.

I don't hold back. I disclose what led up to Kiel having not only her but myself. I tell her how he gave me zero choices. How I gave myself to him hoping that he would release her. After confessing about the torture I experienced and how he left me, Ava shifts closer to me, putting her chin on my chest. She pins me with a look. I can't decipher the emotion lingering but I wait.

It wasn't easy to tell her all the things Kiel did to me. I know that what I experienced pales in comparison, but it still left me vulnerable and exposed. Knowing that sharing can only benefit us both, I didn't want her to feel like I was holding back anything. But as I gaze into her beautiful shimmering eyes, I know that this was exactly what I needed to do for both of us.

"Cal. You aren't alone. I want you to know ... that I do ... Uhhh..." Her cheeks tinge pink. Is she blushing? Her hand comes up from her side and she slowly starts tracing my chest and abdomen. Her touch does things to me. It makes me want to devour her. Completely enthralled with the designs she is mapping out on my exposed skin, I almost forgot she was speaking. Not wanting to frighten her, I choose to lay there and let her be, enjoying that she is finally touching me.

"What I am trying to say is That I want you too?" I freeze. My body locks up. It needs to because all I want to do now is flip her on her back and show her why we are so good together. But it's way too soon. She doesn't need me manhandling her ... yet. This is what I have been waiting for. The sign that she is coming home, not just physically but her mind is healing and is accepting me.

Languidly pulling my hand out from behind my head, I wrap it around Ava to hug her to me, kissing her forehead. "Ava," I whisper gruffly against her soft hair. "I'm glad."

Wrapped around Ava, I don't want to move. I lay here beside her, lazily running my hand down her back until I hear her soft snores. Thankfully, she finally falls back into a fitful sleep. She truly needs the rest. She needs to heal. I don't move. I won't move.

She is allowing me to freely touch her. I feel as though today has been pivotal for us.

Staring out the window, enjoying the view and holding the most precious gift, I think how it can only get better from here. When the sun first peaked over the tall trees this morning, it felt like today would be a complete loss. Now, as those same trees are bathed in the light of the full moon, I want to crow to the stars about my victory.

Our victory.

25

AVA

Blinking against the glistening brightness seeping into the room, I watch as the sun peeks above the trees in the distance, bathing the room with a soft pink glow. Sleepiness clouds my mind as I snuggle closer to the warmth at my back. It takes a minute to register that, in the night, we had somehow come together, and he wrapped around me. This feels like home. Breathing this in, memorizing how this feels, I gently slip from the bed.

Making my way down to the kitchen, I set about starting the coffee machine. While it brews, I head to the downstairs bathroom and take care of my morning needs, returning as the coffee finishes. Turning my attention to hunting for a mug, I snag the one I want and pour the steamy dark java. Taking the coffee to the island, I curl up into the seat, staring out the back of the house, I take in the view before me and just think.

I think about my brothers, how thankful I am to have them in my life and how worried they must be. I think of Cal and all he has done. He truly didn't need to do it but still did. It warms my heart to see how hard he has tried. His words last night were devastating. I had no idea all that he had been through. I thought he was off enjoying his life while I was in that basement. It crushes me to know that he sacrificed himself trying to free me.

Hearing a thud, I pull my head off my knees and set down my cup. I double blink at the next muffled thud-thud-thud. I know Cal's house is secure. No one can get in. I

didn't turn off the alarm. Is Cal working out? I left him sleeping, but he seems to be running. But why? The rapid stomping gets louder as he hits the stairs.

Craning my neck, I glance at the kitchen opening and watch as Cal skids into the doorway. His manic gaze flickers about as he runs into the kitchen, stopping dead in his tracks. Cal's eyes hit mine. I watch in horror as that big strong man is on the verge of tears. Suddenly he doubles over, as though his pain is too much to bear standing. Getting up, I approach cautiously, not really sure what is happening.

My hand comes up to lay against the warmth of his bare, muscular back. Unexpectedly, he snaps up, grabs me, and crushes me fully to his chest. I have a second to freak out, flashing back to touch equaling harm and pain. But for Cal, I battle myself. I will give him this. He needs it, and I don't know what's running through his mind. I don't want to provoke a panic attack, knowing it would only add to what he is going through. I count to ten slowly, taking deep calming breaths, and wrap myself around him. I can physically show him that it's okay, even if I don't have the words.

Cal breathes me in and his heaving breaths calm. "Cal, honey what happened?" He shakes his head, still unwilling to move or let me go. "Cal... Tell me, please?" I whisper to him, hoping that a gentle tone will coax him back into himself. He does a full body shudder before walking to the island, placing me down. He boxes me in with his much larger body. It doesn't scare me though, so that is good. It makes me feel safe. Releasing me, he cups my face.

"I-I-" he stutters. Taking a deep breath, he starts again. "I thought someone had taken you again." His head falls forward, the internal disappointment reflecting with his movement.

"Cal, honey, your home is safe. We are safe. And I am right here." I run my fingers through his hair. "I-I didn't think that getting up to grab some coffee would create a

situation.” I tug on his hair to get him to look at me. “Next time I’ll ask if you wanna join.” The light in his eyes brightens and he nods. Neither of us want to pick apart each other's reaction.

Pushing at his sizable body, I slide down and grab another mug, filling it to the brim. I walk around the island snagging mine, and I turn, “Come on.” He obediently follows me to the comfy couch where I place the coffee mugs down on the table. Spinning around, I grab Cal’s big warm hand and yank him to the couch. Taking a hint, he plops down next to me. Taking our mugs, he hands me mine and sips from his. Picking up my feet, he puts them in his lap, massaging them.

Bliss.

This is undeniably a moment that will be locked into my mind. Quiet, relaxing. No expectations. No flashbacks Nothing. After a short while, Cal gets up to refill both our mugs. He comes back with two mugs in one hand, and his phone in the other.

Tossing his phone on the table with a huff, he gives me my mug. The bubble has officially been popped. After all the work that happened yesterday, I am hoping that I can do this. “Cal, what is it?”

He doesn’t move, doesn’t breathe, until a small sigh slips from him. “Ava, it's nothing to worry about.”

“No, Cal, don’t do this. What happened?” I plead. Cal becomes a statue at my imploring tone and, just as suddenly, he languidly lays back into the couch.

“Nothing, sweet Ava.” He smiles at me softly. “I’d like to take you somewhere today.” His whiplash of emotions this morning is hard to maneuver through, but I am sure I haven’t been a picnic either. His eagerness makes me giddy. Where could he

want to go?

I know he wants to go out, but that means leaving the safety of his home. Being around others who could take me or harm me. The what if's pour through me. The negative thoughts cloud my mind like a storm engulfing the coast as a hurricane rolls in.

Staring at him, I wait as emotion rolls over me. I let them seize me; but the longer I'm ensnared in his eyes, the more his needs outweigh the squall threatening to drown me in its wake.

Reluctantly, I nod. "Fine. I need to get ready, but I want to see what it is that has you bouncing like a child." I laugh at his incredulous face.

"What the... I'm not-" It takes him a moment to realize I am messing with him, but it's long enough for me to make a run for it. A bit of lightheartedness before leaving the security of this home. Thankfully, Cal doesn't take the bait and lets me have my simple fun.

Once we are both dressed and ready, we get in Cal's truck, buckling up. The anxiety starts to climb. As the gate comes into view, my curiosity peaks, and the two emotions begin to battle. I'm hopeful that my need to find out where we are going will snuff out the need to claw at the lock, frantically run back to the protection of those four walls, and dive back into my nest to hide from the world. I bite back the need and squeeze my hands into fists tight enough that my nails bite the skin on my palm, the slight sting of pain helping calm me.

I sit back, with soothing breaths and nail biting squeezes periodically, and wait. I can give this to him. I can let Cal have this. He has been through so much himself, and with me. He has been on point each stop of this agonizing recovery, a steady strong guiding hand that hasn't failed me.

I can give him my trust.

And that is exactly what I do. I reach for his hand, interlacing our fingers and giving him an affectionate squeeze. Leaning my head back, I shut my eyes as I soak in the heat of the sun. This is one thing I really missed being locked away with Kiel. The truck finally comes to a stop. I open my eyes and see where Cal has driven us.

Shock rips through me. Whipping around to Cal, I stare, my mouth agape. I have never been to one of these places. An odd thing for an artist to admit, but it was not my scene. Then again, now maybe it is. He brought me to an adorable building covered in bright colors with a huge sign that says Paint . A large bottle of wine sits next to the “P” and a margarita knocking into the “T”. It's cute. It looks open, friendly and, more importantly, it looks inviting.

Cal drags me out of the truck into the building. We are greeted with happy bubbly staff who are more excited than I am to help us set up and get started.

The paints and canvas are set up. Cal is sitting next to me as the instructor gets started. She meticulously explains how the class will go, and talks about the bell and its hilarious purpose.

Our instructor, Joy, looks around the room in a serious tone. “Now, everyone, if I ring the bell, you sip.” She giggles and says: “Well, we have all learned here. If you're tipsy, you won't fret over the canvas sitting in front of you. Instead, you will have fun. Because that is what we are about ... Having fun!” She rings the bell again. Her bubbly nature makes me giggle, and I am not the only one.

Wise words. If only we could all apply this to every aspect of our chaotic lives. Getting started with how to do the background, I take a deep breath. Relaxing. Joy rings her favorite bell, so I sip. Cal brought water for us and, honestly, I am so thankful. I don't think I am ready to let my guard down and get drunk. I know I can

trust Cal, but we aren't home. I am not ready for that step in public.

As the class goes on, I get more and more into the painting. It's a simple scene of a highland cow with his tongue sticking out. It's sweet and gives me a delightful feeling. As the strokes take life on the canvas and the charming little cow's eyes take shape, I see it. I see the balm soothing my soul, the healing that grows with every flick of the brush. With each new line, I get further and further into the zone. The outside world slowly seeps away. There is nothing but the canvas and me.

Time slips by, and I chance a quick glance around the studio, taking note of the happy faces, the laughter that bounces about the room freely, and the merriment that skips from one person to the next. A small smile sneaks on my face as I take it all in. Then I turn to take in Cal. His work is surprisingly good. He has so many hidden talents. But what grabs me is his body.

His shoulders aren't tense. His arms are as carefree as the paint brush glides about the canvas. The crinkle of stress at the corner of his eyes is gone.

Painting was a therapy for me, a way to rid myself of the evil pent up inside from my past. I painted hate, sorrow, depression, and every other imaginable dark emotion. I was proud of what I could create, but here in this moment, I know why I needed this delightful little highlander cow and his too-cute-for-words tongue.

To heal. To relax. To be okay with being in the here and now. And it appears that Cal needed this just as much as me.

The session wrapped up with a dazzling addition of glitter speckled about the paint, adding the pizzazz that made me smile.

Climbing into the truck, I notice that Cal seems at odds with himself. I don't know what to make of it. He was so relaxed in the paint shop. Maybe something has

changed. “Cal, you okay? You seem tense?” He gives me the side eye. His hands white-knuckling the steering wheel.

“Ava, I need to tell you something.” His tone causes my stomach to roll and goosebumps to chase the shiver that overtakes my body. He’s already professed his love and devotion, so it can’t be that, right? So, what would cause his voice to make me feel the crypt keeper is waiting for us at home?

“I know that today was... It was everything we both needed. It was rejuvenating. I’m glad you were able to throw your fears to the wind. I love that you found a bit of yourself.” Huffing as the wheel creaks, his grip tightening to the point where my brows draw together in concern of the steering wheel collapsing under his strength.

“This morning. I got a text.” Reaching for my hand he laces our fingers, giving my hand a quick squeeze as though he is bracing me for the news. There’s another quick glance at my face. “Jax and Lucas, they haven’t been over to the house in sometime. You’ve been out of it, but they have been hunting.”

My face scrunches at this. “Cal, I know my brothers enjoy hunting sometimes. Why is this so discerning?” I watch as Cal’s face goes slack, and he bites his lip. He seems to be trying his hardest to stop a smile from blooming, faking a cough to cover his laugh. “Really, what the hell? Cal, it’s not news. I don’t get why this is so funny. Though I’m thrilled your weird mood disappeared even for a moment.” I shrug.

The truck jerks to the side of the road as he slams on the brakes. Lurching to a hard stop, he turns to me, grabbing both hands with a firm hold as though he is afraid that I will pull away. Hell, maybe he is scared that I’ll jump from the truck and run. I don’t know why he did it, but the firm hold helps me feel grounded.

“I hate this, but I think you need this.” Shaking his head, he continues. “We need this.” He takes what looks like a fortifying breath. “They were not on that kind of

hunt.” A small chuckle graces those last few words. Cal’s face returns to a pleading yet comforting look as he delivers the news. The message was simple: “We found him.” Cal is watching me closely, trying to decipher any small nuance.

I freeze.

The words send a thread of pure fear through me. Then the unexpected happens, my anger sparks to life and it feeds itself, becoming an inferno. I glare at Cal. “Well, where the fuck is he?”

A flicker of surprise speeds across his handsome features. “Honestly, leaving the house had two reasons.” He flicks a finger up. “You and I both needed to get out of the house, and you need to remember that painting brings you relief.” A second finger comes up. “Your brothers needed the time to restrain Kiel in the basement.”

I flinch in surprise. Kiel is in my place of safety, my nest of protection. Will I let him taint it? Or do I trust that Cal and my brothers know what they are doing? I steel myself, taking a much needed relaxing breath.

Cal sees my reaction. “Ava, don’t. You have come so far. He is chained and there are men on him. He has no reprieve. He does nothing alone. There are eyes on him the whole time he is under our roof. There is not a chance in hell he will leave my basement breathing.”

Those simple words refill me with relief. I never should have doubted Cal. With those words imparted, his hand stays laced with mine as he puts that truck in drive, and we make our way home. The ride is quiet, giving me time to prepare. Prepare myself for knowing that, even if I don’t see him, Kiel’s life is short lived. That is exactly what I want, even if he does smudge our air and house.

26

AVA

Days pass with a new routine of waking up together, going down and partaking in coffee and breakfast together. After slipping quietly from bed that first morning, I couldn't bear to repeat it. I didn't want him to experience that level of fear again. Not after all he has done for me. The mornings became our time. No work. No outside world. It's just Cal and me.

In that time, we begin to slowly reconnect. His patience with me is a salve to my fractured soul. He helps put the broken pieces of me back together. As each day passes, I slip into my studio more and more.

Painting is my outlet. It's my therapy. And I truly need it. Standing before a blank canvas, gnawing on the end of the paint brush, it hits me that I'm missing something.

Then it hits what I am missing. My recovery has been rough, and it's long from over, but I still need them. I miss them. It's been too long since I have been around my brothers. Now that their "hunt" is over, maybe we can have them over.

Closing my eyes, I realize that the hunt is not the only reason for us not seeing each other. My state of mind was the true culprit. Guilt weaves its way through me. My depressive state was the root of the issue, and possibly it was the reason the "hunt"—as I have dubbed it—took place.

Making plans is a must. I need them here. I need them to see that I am on the mend.

With those happier thoughts in my mind, I set up the paint palette, dipping my brush into the crimson and begin to lose myself to the process.

Mind blank. I let it flow through me. No direction, no purpose to what this blank canvas will be. Just dip and swipe. Dip and flick.

Coming back to myself, I realize my back is stiff and my arms have a soreness to them. I've been painting for a few hours. The ache feels good. It will take a few weeks before those achy muscles will be toned back up enough to handle longer sessions.

Stretching out my neck, I come back to the current work. It's beautiful, raw and completely unexpected. Leaving it on the easel to dry, I head towards the kitchen to find we have company. The low murmurs hit me long before I see them.

I approach them quietly as they all seem to be in the middle of a quite intense conversation. Watching them, the stress around Chase's eyes is obvious. The twins look a bit more rested, but they should seem to hold an unbearable weight on those broad shoulders. They look weighted down. Cal's back is to me, looking as though each muscle is clenched and tightened.

Shifting a bit to lean on the doorway, still not ready to interrupt, my movement snares the attention of Jax. He abruptly stops speaking. His eyes landing on me, he freezes mid-stand. Shaking my head yes, he finishes his movement and comes over to engulf me into a bear hug.

The others get up a few seconds after Jax's arms wrapped around me. I'm passed from brother to brother for tight hugs with tears following.

"I-I ... I w-w-want to apol-l-lgize" I wipe the tears away. "I-I finally realize that m-my actions pushed-" I paused to sniffle. "-pushed you all away. That wasn't in my

best interest or yours.” Dashing more tears from my cheeks, I keep going. “T-t-thank you all for coming for m-me. And for not g-giving up on me.” Wrapping my arms around myself, my eyes go from one solemn face to the next.

“I guess I needed to block it all out. I wasn’t ready to deal with what I went through. Or how much of me it changed and blackened. I know that I will never be the same Ava as before, and I was scared of what that would mean for me, for us. Kiel said so many things, and those things sunk into my soul. I couldn’t seem to shake them. To me, those things were real, and those words were devastating.” Sighing, I wipe a single—hopefully final—tear away. “I know we can’t change any of what happened, but I do wish I would have been able to handle touch more easily.” Looking down at my now twisting fingers, I see boots step into my view, almost touching my bare feet. A hand reaches slowly towards me, not flinching or moving. I wait. The fingers hook my chin, pulling my gaze to meet Chase’s.

“Ava, never apologize for things that are out of your control. I know, and they know that you were saving yourself. That you were protecting yourself, in your own way. None of us are mad.” His gaze is steady. “I was worried about you. Not knowing but simply imagining all the twisted shit Kiel pulled.” Shaking his head, his eyes are shining with unshed tears. “I’m just glad that you survived and are standing here before me today.” Chase pulls me into a hug, kissing the top of my head. “Seeing you here, covered in splatters of paint, tells me everything I need to know.”

Lucas steps forward, squeezing the life out of me with his hug. I’m not even mad about it. He steps back and looks at me, giving me a half smile. “Love ya, Sis.”

Cal is left standing there, looking from each brother, then to me. Nodding to my brothers, he leans back against the counter, crossing his muscular arms across his broad chest. What is going on now? These kid glove moments are starting to really piss me off. Crossing my arms, I glare at the lot of them.

Chase chuckles. “Okay, okay. We have been sitting on this, not wanting to overwhelm you, but we are the bearers of good news today.” Chase takes a deep breath. Each of the men’s faces soften and a smile tips their lips. “Kiel is no longer a fear you need to have.”

My face slips into a mask of confusion. Cal steps forward, placing his hands on my shoulders. “What Chase is poorly attempting to say is that Kiel is no longer breathing. Which is why he is not going to be a problem for us in the future.”

I knew they had him. I knew that he wasn’t going to make it out alive. But it still hits like a ton of bricks. My breath swooshes out of me. I stagger backwards and my back collides with the countertop, then my legs give out. I sink to the floor and uncontrollably loud sobs escape. Becoming a huddled mess on the floor, I feel the security of Cal’s arms come around me as he picks me up, sitting me in his lap as the quiet squeak of boots move away from us.

Cal holds me as I cry out the sorrow and pain. As the tears fall for the Ava that was, for the deeds that were forced upon me, I sob at the relief that he will never ever have me again. His cold hands will never touch me. His maniacal eyes will never gaze upon me again. It was the most cathartic moment for me. It allowed me to get the ugly that was lingering beneath the surface waiting for the cracks to widen and explode out of me.

In this moment, I knew that Cal was it. He meant all the things he said. The past few days have been everything. We have seen each other at our absolute worst, yet I love every single part of him, and he feels the same. I don’t think that I would have survived this without him.

He and my brothers work so hard to track me, to free me and help me recover. I think about Cal’s experience, how bad he truly was when my brothers found him. They had to continually restrain him to the bed to heal so he wouldn’t rip out the needles and

attempted to track me on his own. Now, here he is, the constant blanket of warmth and safety. My love for this man has deepened to the depths of my soul. I can't even imagine my life without him in it.

Pulling away from where Cal tucked my face, I look at him, cupping his chin. I lean up as I pull him toward me. Feather light kiss, once then twice. Arms tighten around me, not wanting to let me go. Twisting my lower body in his arms, I slide my legs to wrap around his slim waist. Running my hands through his hair, pulling on the silky strands, I feel Cal's hot hands sliding up and down my back.

One of his hands skims up my back, sinking into my hair. He takes control. Turning my head at the angle he wants as he deepens the kiss.

It's demanding.

It's needy.

It's so damn hot.

Feeling the dampening between my thighs, I try to squeeze them together to relieve the ache, groaning in frustration as I realize I can't because I'm wrapped around him. This only seems to make him more demanding as he growls his pleasure at my current state. He pulls on my hair until it stings. My need rises as his tongue battles mine. What we are battling for, I don't know and I don't give a damn. I need pressure. I need friction to take the edge off the ache. I rock against his hardness. My silky flimsy shorts scrunching up my thighs as I scoot further into his lap, leaving barely there lace as a barrier between my wetness and Cal's rough denim pants. The textures grinding together against my clit has a moan of pure gratification pass from my mouth into Cal's. It leaves me wanting. More roughness. More pain. I need the edge.

Cal continues his feather light touches against my covered back, never pushing me too far. Accepting my untold boundaries, he just seems to know what I need and want. His kisses are rough; nipping my lips, dominating my mouth, mapping it as though he has never kissed me before. He is taking my mouth like his life depends on it. I don't stop him.

I can't.

He feels so good.

I want to enjoy this.

I don't want my past to shade the brightness that Cal brings into my life. Continuing to rock on his hard length, fingers gliding from his soft strands to the rippling muscles of his back. So strong. It sends a shiver through me at the strength his body has. He never used his strength as a weapon against me. He used it for his pleasure, and mine. I suck his tongue back into my mouth and moan.

Not seeming to be able to get the level of rough hardness to send me over, Cal's hand slips down my back, cupping my ass and forcing me against him. The added pressure from his strength is what I need. Squeezing me against his hard cock, the material is soaked, and I'm riding the wave of pleasure. It's so close. So very close.

Rocking harder, squeezing myself tighter and tighter to him. I need something. Just as this flits through my mind and I groan in frustration, I feel the sting of a smack on my now bare ass as Cal's hand makes solid contact.

I detonate. An explosion of pleasure ricochets through my nerve endings causing lights to dance behind my eyes.

Ending the kiss, my head thumps against his firm chest. His breath comes out in a

heavy pant against the top of my head,tickling the stray strands. I snuggle closer to him as my breath puffs against the cotton covered muscles.

It has been so long since I felt this. It takes my organic mind a moment to identify it.

Relaxed. That's what this is. Utterly and truly at ease. I needed this relief. More importantly, Cal knew what I was searching for, satisfaction with no expectations of his pleasure being sought. He is such a good man for not pushing me. It makes me yearn for more ... but I am not ready - yet.

27

CAL

Devouring Ava in the kitchen was one of the highest points I have had in sometime. But the pinnacle was her finding her pleasure, her taking a piece of herself back. Knowing what I was missing didn't help things. The cold showers made it bearable, but it was nothing compared to her warm welcoming body.

The next day, I dived into a secret project - one I pray would not see me losing Ava, but helping her to heal to overcome. Calling numerous galleries around the area, negotiating for them to see Ava's pieces and showcase them, has not been as simple as I initially thought. But it won't stop me. I know this will bring her joy.

It took a few days of persistence, but I finally received the news I wanted this morning. I received a call for a boutique-style gallery here in town. After speaking with the curator, Gwen, I sent over photos of Ava's entire current collection and some from her past series work to her email. A few short hours later, Gwen and I came to an agreement. She requested the current entire series and stated that the show would be premiering this Friday. This couldn't be more perfect, with the gallery not far from the house. They were ecstatic to show her work.

Sneaking out yesterday while she was in the shower, her brothers and I moved the entire collection to the truck. I waited until she was holed up in her studio to leave and deliver the art. Before I left, I poked my head in and told her I was running to town; I'd be back soon; and that the alarms would be set. It seems to put her at ease when I let her know where I will be, how long I will be gone, and if the alarm is set.

She and I currently are the only two who have the codes to turn off the system.

Nervousness has been eating at me all morning. Today's the day of her showcase. It seems cruel to make it last minute, but it gives her less time to ponder the cons of leaving the house. I want her to enjoy tonight, not fret about all the shit that can go wrong.

"Cal," I hear her call. Instead of responding, I walk out of my office and quietly walk up to her. She is humming. It brings a smile to my face to see her happiness. Wrapping my arms around her waist, I pull her soft compliant body into me. Sliding her hair aside, I place soft kisses at the juncture of her neck. I smile as the intimate contact sends shivers down her delicate spine.

"Yes, sweet," I murmur between kisses.

"Uh," she says, causing me to chuckle softly against her skin. "Ava you called me."

Nodding her agreement. She doesn't speak. I love touching her. I want to fall to my knees and worship her body until she is a moaning, crying mess of overstimulated pleasure. The downside is touching her - hell, being in her presence - makes me harder than a fucking rock.

There have been sweet touches, light kisses, nothing more. I want her to feel secure. I want to make sure she is ready before pushing for more. It's hard for me. I want her so badly. I know that I can't find anyone else to satisfy me the way she can. I just have to be patient and then once we finally do it will be fireworks.

"Right... uhhh - I'm making lunch or about to. You hungry?" she stutters out as she pushes her perky little ass back into my hardening cock.

I groan. She smirks over her shoulder at me.

“Tease,” I whisper.

“Sure, sandwiches sound good. I’m starving.” Pulling back and rounding the island, I sit and watch as she gathers the lunch ingredients.

“What’s on your agenda today?” she asks as she grabs plates. Getting the plates on the countertops, she pulls out the bread as she waits on my answer. But I’m silent. She tosses the meat down and searches my face. I lock down my emotions for this talk, not wanting her to read my excitement or disappointment. I want her to make this choice without my influence. I want her to choose to go, instead of choosing to go because I want her to do it. A tendril of fear takes root, I can see it growing a bit.

But again, I wait. And it happens, it's a thing of beauty to see that she is comfortable enough with me to explode.

“Cal, really. What is it? I can’t take bad news today. If it’s bad, just tell me tomorrow.” Her hands wave all around. “No, never mind that. Screw that. If it's bad and it doesn’t affect me, just deal with it, handle it and then let's pretend all is good.” She nods as a gesture of that's that. I want to laugh at her antics, but I sit and wait.

“Cal, I know there is bad in the world, but things have been good. I'm painting again, and it makes me happy. I fight my demons with swirls and flicks.” She sighs. “I just don’t have it in me to deal with this shit anymore. I just want to be a hermit who paints and maybe collects cats. Okay, so maybe one day kids. And at some point, loads of steamy hot sex that has me moaning in pleasure, the kind that washes the horrid experience away.” She narrows her eyes at me. Her gaze takes me in and she sees that I am doing my damndest to not laugh. I’m biting my lips in the hopes it will stop it from bursting forth.

“Cal, don’t you start with me. I want peace. No fucking drama. No sociopaths who have a grudge. Are there more of those? Hmm? Do I need a binder filled with

potential threats, so I can just stab first and not ask questions?” I can’t hold back anymore. My laugh bubbles out of me, earning me another glare. “Don’t you laugh at me, you brute! This is why I want to be a hermit. If I never have to leave this place, then I don’t have to worry.” She huffs and crosses her delicate arms over her chest. “That sounds nice. But foolish I know... We can have hopes, right?” Smiling at the thought, I nod my agreement.

“Not foolish at all. I would love nothing more than to hold up in the house with you forever. And if we never put clothes on again, that would ensure we were never interrupted.” I wiggle my eyebrows at her. She smiles and giggles at my antics. God, she is stunning. Her eyes alight with mirth. Her sensual lips tipped up in giddiness. Her body relaxed. Nothing can compare.

“Ava, my dear, I want to talk to you about something. And I do hope that you will understand my reasons.” At this point, I pray that she doesn’t do something out of character and chuck a plate at me, or something worse. “I have a surprise for tonight. You need to get all dolled up. We are leaving around 6.”

Her face shows exactly what she wants: to run back up to the bedroom and lock the door. But then I see what I was hoping for, the spark of pure determination gleaming in her eyes. “Cal, I don’t like it, but I won’t do things like this on my own accord.” I know, which is why I planned this.

“Ava, this is gonna be a night to remember. This is us moving forward towards our future together.” Getting up, I walk around the island to stand by her, hugging her. “This is to help you heal and, if you happened to be dressed in a snug tight sexy dress showing off those legs - well, I won’t get mad either.”

She chuckles at me. “Of course, my legs are what interest you.”

I laugh at her and murmur, “And that sweet ass.” I squeeze her tighter to stop her

from smacking me playfully.

“So, we’re set. Let’s eat lunch. Then, if you’d like, why don’t you soak in the bath and get ready after.” The hope is the soak will keep her relaxed and she won’t panic at leaving the house or what I have done.

Shoving the last bite of sandwich in my mouth, I peer up to meet her gaze. “I’m going to run the bath for you. Come up when you are done.” Climbing the stairs, I get to the bath and pour in the bath salts - lavender to help with unwinding her nervousness. Gathering the variety of bath supplies for her, I get everything within arm’s reach. I want this to be a lounge space of comfort.

Hearing her muted steps, I light the candles and plug the tub. She walks in as I get up, striding towards her. I place a gentle kiss on her head. “Enjoy Ava. Soak. Relax. I’ll be in the office. Then, I’ll run through the shower while you are getting dressed, if that works for you.”

Hours later, I walk this gorgeous creature down the stairs, counting my lucky stars that I have her. Guiding her to the truck, we drive into town. It’s smoothing out. We are getting back into the swing of life. I see the pain and the flinches that she thinks she can hide, but they are infrequent and occur less and less. Our drive is quiet, both lost in our own thoughts. Reaching for her hand, I affectionately squeeze it. She turns and smiles at me. There is no darkness or panic shadowing in her eyes.

Yet another victory.

Pulling into the parking lot, I look at her. She is undeniably beautiful. It hits me every time I set eyes on her.

“Are you ready?” I don’t know if I should warn her or let the event be a surprise, something for her to see others savor. Deciding to risk it, I’ll take her ire if not telling

her gets her ass in the exhibit.

She stares at me. “As I’ll ever be.” I get out of the truck, walk around and assist her out. We get to the door, and I hold it as she walks in before me. We get three steps in when I feel her breath catch and she freezes.

Her unique take on art has come to life throughout the room. People gather around different pieces, discussing what Ava has captured in her strokes. The pain. The fear. The anger. And so much more. It's all there, where the admirers can see. They can feel what she felt as she guided the paintbrush on the canvas.

Ava’s head turns to me. “This ... This was you, Cal?” I can’t decipher her emotions. Her tone is flat, leaving me to think I fucked up.

“I can explain, ” I whisper, not wanting to garner the attention of the attendees.

She twirls around, narrows her eyes. “So, you thought that it would be okay to just send my work - that I may not have even been ready to show, I might add - to some random curator in the hopes they would schedule an exhibit.” She takes a deep breath and pokes me with a finger. “Not to mention, I thought this was a date, you know. Just me and you.” She gestures with her finger to the place. “It's not just us.”

Shaking her head, she continues. “I can’t, I don’t know - What am I to do with this Cal?” She’s trembling, but I don’t know if it is with fear or anger. “Do I thank you for the push or do I leave here in a snit and call my brothers to come take me home, so I don’t stab you with something for potentially causing me embarrassment that I was not ready to deal with? Cal, I barely had an interest in my last series of work, and this series is dark.” She takes a shaky breath. “I need a minute.” Graceful as ever, she stomps away, a serene smile slapped on her face.

“Fuck,” I whisper to no one. I hope she will see what I was trying to do. Maybe she

can forgive me for my fumble. Knowing this is what she needs and her seeing that she needs this are two different things. Losing her in the crowd - Wait. She is in a crowd, no problem. She didn't even hesitate to leave my side. So anger is the key to overcoming some of her hesitations. Good to know.

Grabbing a glass of wine, I slowly make my way around looking at the pieces and listen to what the others have to say.

“Magnificent”

“Morbid and addicting”

“A true artist understands that beauty can be dark.”

‘The longer I listen, the more my decision is cemented in the ‘I did the right thing’ category. Now to get her to see it too. I turn to look for her only to see her standing next to an older gentleman, who is pointing at her painting. His words flow over her, and she beams at him. The conversation grows, so I leave them to it. She is alight with pleasure and laughing with him.

Maybe I won't have to convince her at all.

28

AVA

The ride home is quiet. I'm processing. What he did was conniving, sneaky, and downright fucking sweet. I want to be mad at him for it, yet I'm not. Stepping into that gallery, peering around only to be shocked with people staring at my work, beautifully hanging on the walls. It took my breath away. It made me feel valued, seen and appreciated.

But what Cal did, his actions, I was riding a fence of punching him in the face or kissing him senseless. It was waging war, a list of 'how could he' versus 'damn I am so lucky to have him'. I gotta say the pro list was gaining momentum.

The drive didn't leave much time to ponder everything spiraling through me. Landing on a decision, one I know will take us to the next level. I think I'm ready. I hope I'm ready. But most of all, I hope he's ready.

Cal, well, he is everything I didn't know I needed. He knew. He knew the moment we met and did his damndest to make sure I knew it. But I was scared. I'm not anymore. I want to leap, knowing that I have been holding myself back from the moment I laid eyes on him.

Kiel did impart one lesson on me: to never take for granted those precious moments, the moments that will be what you one day look back on. It's not the grand gesture that flashes the brightest; it's the small things. It's the simple touches, the soft kisses, the key points where you can see that person who loved you more than you thought

was plausible, showing their affection as it spills over its boundaries proving they will go to the ends of this world for you.

Tonight, I'm taking that lesson to heart and putting into motion the next chapter of my life.

The truck comes to a stop, and Cal turns to me, opening his mouth. Narrowing my eyes, I shake my head no. He gets out to come around to my side. I'm not truly angry. I'm biding my time. Needing those few seconds to fortify myself, I'm ready but I don't want Cal to read this wrong. I want him living it with me, not wondering if this is a twisted thank you.

Swinging the door open, he assists me from the seat. He moves to let go, but I lace our fingers, leaning into him and siphoning a bit of his strength as we walk quietly to the door. Once we enter, he turns off the alarm. I trudge quietly up the stairs, hearing his muted thumps following me.

Breathing deep, I open the door, heading to the window, not bothering with the lights. I stand there and I wait. The anticipation increases my need. I look up to see he flicked on the hall light on his way up. I watch his silhouette hit the room. Crossing my arms, Cal joins me, wrapping me up in his arms, gently kissing my head.

"About tonight. I-"

"Cal can you unzip me?" He stills. Ever so slowly, the heat of his hand around my waist moves. Sliding my hair to the side, he gently lifts and unzips the dress. Pulling the straps off, I let it fall, leaving me in black lace lingerie and heels.

Turning to face him, his arms fall limply to his side. Our chests brushing with each breath. I let the heat of my gaze land on his, hoping to convey my want. Steeling myself, lowering the guards that I built around my heart, I open up to him. His breath

stutters as he notices that I have let him in, wrapping my arms around his neck. Pulling him to me, I kiss his stern lips with the barest of a kiss and whisper against them. "Please," I murmur.

His body jerks; those tiny words unleash his beast. Cal grabs me, slamming me into his hard, strong body. Hands travel in opposite directions, one latching on my ass and giving it a firm hard squeeze while the other reaches behind my neck. His thumb hooks my chin, forcing me to peer into his eyes. Passion flares hot and heavy.

"Be sure," he rumbles, the vibration tightening my nipples. The intensity swirling in his cerulean blues only brings forth another gush of wetness to soak my panties.

I need this.

He needs this.

We need this.

Staring him down, biting my lip hoping to hold back the smirk that wants to bloom, I nod at him. Leaning down, he takes my mouth, devouring me. Mapping me. His hands glide over every bit of exposed skin, slowly traveling closer and closer to my breasts.

Spinning me and backing me up until my legs hit the bed, we flop down. Grabbing my wrists, he pins them to the bed. Huffing, he pulls back and growls, "Leave them there." Nodding, I intertwine my fingers and hold on to the blanket.

Leaning back, he quickly and efficiently rips his clothes from his body, leaving him bare. He's an Adonis - rippling muscles, and a hard, thick cock with a shining tip. I lick my lips. I know what he tastes like. It takes everything within me to not jump up from my prone position and swallow as much of his throbbing cock as I could. I'd eat

and lick him up like my favorite ice cream. But I don't move. Why? Only because Cal demanded that I not move.

It's hotter this way; the desire is building with this teasing game.

Prowling towards me, he climbs the bed as though he is a predator who has sought and found his prey. I wonder what wicked things are flying through his mind. His face is tight with lust and his eyes are an inferno of need. Leaning down, his mouth traces its way from my mouth to the corner of my jaw, placing soft kisses as he goes. Arching my neck, giving him more access, I feel his tongue gliding down the tendon on my neck.

I moan as his teeth sink into the juncture of my neck, marking me as his. My back arches wanting more, needing more. Thankfully, he doesn't stop his journey south. He nips and licks his way to my breasts. Cupping them, he massages them, alternating between my taunt nipples. He places open mouth kisses along my breast until it's right over my nipple, which he sucks into his warm mouth. The suction is almost to the point of pain, making me groan with need. Cal sucks hard on my nipple, then slowly releases it. A jolt of pleasure hits my clit as he bites down, the sensation sending more wetness to dampen my thighs.

Desperate for relief, I seek out something, anything to put pressure on my clit, only to realize Cal has his legs between mine, opening me up to him. A whine of neediness slips between my swollen lips.

Cal chuckles and comes back up for another taste, licking my lips. He nips at them before taking my mouth again. "You need relief," he murmurs against my lips.

Nodding at his words, a whiny plea slips out. "Cal, I need you."

"No, baby. I need a taste. You can hold out, can't you?" His commanding tone makes

me want to comply with his wishes as he slides down my body, biting and licking until he gets to the junction of my hips. Kissing each hip bone, he looks up at me to pleasure and neediness that clouds my eyes.

But he waits. He is allowing me the control I didn't have for so long, and with that, I want to cry out in victory. Instead, I dip my head, giving my physical consent. A smirk hits his lips as he growls his triumph, fisting the crotch of my soaking lace panties and ripping them from my body.

Sinking down, Cal puts his face right against my pussy. He breathes me in and groans in satisfaction as my sweet, musky wetness crawls over his senses. Cal wraps his arms around each leg, pinning me to him and pulling me wide open. Puffs of hot air hit my exposed pussy once, twice, before I feel his tongue swipe from my opening to the tip of my clit.

Sucking my clit into his mouth, he ravishes my pussy, lapping at me until I'm squirming with the urgency to find relief. Nothing helps. His tongue is feather light as he takes his time.

Savoring me.

Learning me.

But my urge to climax is strong, which makes me want to grab his hair, shove his face in my pussy and ride his face to release. I clench harder at the bedding to stop it from happening. He told me not to move and, damn it, I want to listen to him.

A writhing mess, I resort to begging. "P-please..." I moan as he sucks my clit back into his mouth. "I-I-I need-" Breaths come out in heavy pants as his finger slips inside and hooks, gliding over my g-spot. "Cal," I breathe.

God damn it. It feels so good. My body is tighter than a bow. The tingles of rapture fire along my body as my back arches further and further, hoping and needing the pleasure I seek, but being denied.

He continues to lick me as though I was the sweetest dish that has ever laid before him, and he can't bear to leave a single speck of it left.

I love it.

It sends shivers of pleasure sparking rapidly across my nerve endings. My hips rock up and down, desperately grinding against his tongue and face. As I rock more and more, his tongue moves back each time, so that the pressure of his licks are the same no matter what I do. Frustration builds alongside pleasure.

I can feel it, the building. My muscles start to spasm and tense with the impending climax. As the peak comes into sight, Cal leans back, face dripping wet. "I want to be inside of you."

He crawls up my body, grinding his hard cock over my clit, making a moan slip from both of us. Leaning down, he takes my mouth as he slides inside of me. I taste myself as I suck his tongue deep into my mouth. It heightens my desire as Cal slowly tortures us both. He slips inside of me, inch by delicious inch. I wrap my legs around him, groaning as skin hits skin.

Cal pauses. Taking in the moment, I squirm as he stares down at me. A slither of fear creeps over me. In the next moment, he flips us both on the bed, until I'm staring down at him instead, still fully seated on his hard length.

Neat trick.

"Ava, sweet, you control this." Staring at me, he gives over the control, knowing I

might trickle into my past. I nod and rock my hips, the sensation sends goosebumps across my skin.

My need crawls to the forefront. My fear dissipates with each rock of my hips. Letting my body do what it needs, I shut off my mind and thoughts and just enjoy . I start rocking faster, but I need more. Shifting so my feet are planted by his hips, I start bouncing. My tits jiggle with the motion, Cal's eyes watching the movement. Finally, he reaches out to start pinching my nipples. Each sharp pinch sends a tingle of pleasure to my clit and slowly winds me up more and more.

Moaning loudly as I climb further and further into the clouds of desire and want, I rock, bounce and swivel my hips, hitting all the spots inside of me. Fucking hell, it all feels so good but I need more, so much damn more.

Cal grips my hips and thrusts into me as I continue to ride him. I feel him tapping my cervix with each thrust, making me hungrier and hungrier to fall over that edge. But it's still not enough.

Fuck it, I know what I need. Taking a huge breath, I reach over to the nightstand and grab it.

I hand it to Cal. "Please, I need it." I'm a damn mess, tears of frustration build and build. A sob flies out. I can't reach my peak without it. I have to have the pain mixed with my pleasure.

He stops thrusting, reaching for it. "Ava, if we do this, you are giving me the control ... All of it." Raising a brow, he waits for my consent. Rotating my hips in small circles, I nod.

He slams me onto my back against the mattress and drives into me with so much force that I slide back. It feels so good. He reaches forward, collaring my throat,

squeezing it, letting me know he is in control. Ramming into me again and again, sending moans of echoing pleasure about the room, my eyes slide shut as the rapture builds and builds.

Feeling the cold metal slide against my collar, I arch my back, waiting for the freeing feeling of the blade slicing my scarred skin causing a stinging pleasure. The tip punctures just below my collar bone, stopping just as quickly as it starts. My eyes pop open. He was waiting for me, staring into his heavy blissed out eyes. I feel the blade slide to the top of my belly button.

I moan as the sting feeds the rapture of this moment. Cal slices two marks on my inner thighs. He squeezes my throat and pulls me to lean on my elbows. “Look,” he growls at me. I watch as my blood glides down my thighs. The crimson smears against him and me, mixing together. The sight causes my body to spasm.

Feeling how close I am, he takes the tip of the knife, placing it right against my clit. If I grind up to meet his thrusts, it will slice. It's hot. So fucking hot. It drives me further and further towards release and the sight sends Cal over the edge as his thrust hits hard, diving deeper. Placing the cold flat edge of the blade against my clit, he presses down and drives into me again. I cum screaming his name.

Cal slumps down on me. I take his full weight and love it. Running my hands up and down his back, feeling the sweat from our activities and the strength from carrying the world on them, I know there is no place I'd rather be than right here.

Sliding off me, Cal wraps me in his arms, kissing my forehead as I drift off to a nightmare-less slumber with butterflies in my stomach and happy thoughts filling my head.

Waking with the need to pee, I roll out from under his heavy arm. Taking care of business, I step back into the room, leaning against the doorframe. I stare at Cal. He is

laid out on his back, arms stretching out searching for me in his sleep. He is always searching for me, keeping me steady and moving forward.

I know here and now that our future is whatever we can make of it. Looking back will only sink us, and with so much in front of us, we need to be looking towards the horizon.

Quietly, I slip back into bed beside him. Immediately, he curls around me, so protective, even deep in slumber. With the knowledge that Cal is at my back, I fall into a restful sleep with a smile on my face and hope in my heart.

29

AVA

Sitting on the porch drinking coffee, gazing at the beauty in abundance surrounding me, I sip, taking it in and reflecting on how I got here. Cal brought me home, to his hometown - the place that formed him, the place his mom raised him and later died. We have been here over a month and it's exactly what I needed. If I am honest with myself, Cal thought this would be another layer to us healing.

And he was right.

Cal and I took trips daily to different parts of the city. He showed me all the important parts of him. He told me about the grim nightmare his father had created for his mother and him, the high school where so many poor decisions were made, and so much more. The place he found his solitude, the place that helped him build his strength. The longer we stayed, the more relaxed I had become, and the more free I felt. Cal's hometown was the balm to my soul, each moment gave me a glimpse into who Cal was and why he is the way he is today.

He surprised me with this trip. He packed everything up, put the luggage into the truck, and woke me up. We had breakfast and then bam... He placed a gift bag in front of me after the table was cleared.

Gifts were exciting. I still had a nervous edge about them, but this is Cal and he wouldn't do anything that would harm my strides in healing.

I was correct. It was a thick spiral bound sketch pad with a variety of mediums: charcoal, colored pencils, watercolor pencils and a few others that would allow for any image to come to life off the pages. I remember being stunned by the gift when he quickly stated: “We are all packed up and this is for the trip. I thought it would let you capture the things you see or the images that need to slip from you onto the page.” Shrugging, he walked off, leaving me sitting there, mouth agape.

Grabbing a drink and the gift bag since everything, my purse included, was already waiting for us in the truck, I stalked after him. I was having a fit and that was okay. I learned that I could express any emotion, have any outburst, and Cal would love and support me, no issue.

Climbing in the truck, I slammed the door shut. I swear I saw his shoulders shaking with silent laughter. Narrowing my eyes at him, I huff. I wasn’t ready for this. I didn’t know what this trip would be. I would be away from the safety of this house. Cal would be there, sure, but was it enough?

Mumbling my frustration about overbearing men and their pushy ways, I thought to myself that I wasn’t sure I could dive into drawing and sketching again. Painting was a lovely therapeutic treatment. It was doing me wonders to flick and toss a macabre of colors at the blank canvas.

Shaking my head to dislodge the memories away, I sip my creamy sweet hot coffee as the wind whips my hair about. I look down at my cross-legged lap to the sketch book that I didn’t need or want that was now filled to the brim.

A small laugh slips out. Again another point of victory to Cal for knowing what I need before I could even think to express it. The simple spiral held an assortment of imagery - depictions of the beautiful land that we traveled, showing the plethora of unique and vivid animals that we came across. There was no shortage of those images. Within the depths of those glorious landscapes are darker more gruesome

images. I had been scared about showing these images, unsure of what Cal would think of them or me.

But again, I should have known. I really should have known that it would never matter.

After a quiet evening with Cal, we hadn't done much. Dinner and tv, then bed. I rounded up the courage this morning and jumped.

Placing the book in front of Cal, he looked at me. I nodded, giving him permission. He slowly flipped from page to page. I watched his face closely. Not once did his face show pity or grim dissatisfaction at where this sketchbook led. In fact, he told me to keep doing what I needed to do in order to heal and overcome all the horrid acts that happened to me.

He was so open and honest. Best of all, he had zero judgment. He truly loved me for me, no matter the appalling acts committed against me. And with that epiphany, I knew that the words I had spoken before were not simply words of a woman hoping to be in love, but a woman who was madly, deeply, and irrevocably in love.

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AVA

Winding the rough rope around my wrists, he checks the knots - tight but would not cut off the circulation. I squirm. The rough texture against my soft skin ups my lust. Being bound from my elbows to my wrists causes a gush of wetness to coat my thighs.

I'm helpless. I am at his mercy. I'm his toy to use as he deems. I could orgasm off this alone.

Well, almost.

His breath is heavy against my neck, sending a ripple of goosebumps along my skin and tightening my already peaked nipples. My arms bound behind my back, pushing my breasts further out, creates an enticing image of sexuality.

Kneeling on the bed, I wait. He has a plan. It all started when I finally opened up to the cuts along my thighs. So, I gave him the freedom to bring us both into a pleasure that is had between two individuals who openly and fully trust the other.

I'm bound and waiting.

He comes to the front of me, smirking. He grabs the cup, popping one in his mouth. Then he latches his icy mouth onto the tip of my nipple, sucking it between his clenched teeth, deeper into his mouth, and melting the frigid ice cube against my nipple. The dueling sensation has my pussy clenching, wishing to be filled. My nipple falls out of his mouth as he latches one of the nipple clamps on, the tip swelling. He

takes the tip of the ice and rubs it against the sensitive peak.

He spits the ice cube out and reaches for another mug, pouring the too-hot liquid across my breast. The liquid slides to the tip before he repeats the process on the other breast. Popping the sensitive nipple from his mouth he latches the clamp on, but he isn't done. He snaps forward biting on the tip of the swollen nipple until I moan in pleasure and wiggle as my need flows down my already soaking thighs.

Cal smirks at me. Passion flaring in his heavy-lidded eyes as he practically purs. "We aren't even close to being done."

Oh god. A mewl of frustration bursts forth, and a chuckle floats in the air between us. "Cal," I whine. "I need ...". My face scrunches up.

Fuck, I don't even know. He sees my yearning and, with knees spread wide for him to watch me drip with need, comes forward to lick my lips. I try to snare his kiss and deepen it. I squeak in surprise as Cal smacks my clit. It was hard and fast, but it brought forth a higher wanting.

"Beautiful," he murmurs as he steps back. Walking over to the nightstand, his cock is hard, leaking precum as it bobs and hits his washboard abs, leaving a streaking of shining wetness with every heavy stride. The image has me licking my lips and whimpering with want.

Returning, Cal has a scalpel. It's sharp, delicate; so innocent, yet the damage that the small blade can cause is deadly. He gently places it to the side of where I kneel, a writhing mess of needy lust. He smirks and slaps my clit once, twice, and three times. I almost cum. I am shaking with the need to touch him, suck him deep and licking every hard inch of his body until his scent leaks from every pore.

Getting on the bed, he reaches for a bottle just out of sight. Tipping it upside down, he pours chocolate all over his cock. Taking a hand, he runs his hand up and down,

coating every inch. He tosses the bottle aside, proudly placing both hands on his hips. "Suck it," he demands.

Fucking gladly.

I figure out how to bend and hold myself up to begin my task of licking and sucking him clean. Running out of patience, Cal runs his hand through my hair, gripping it. He winds the strands until his fist is wrapped in my silky strands. The sting from his rough grip has my pussy clenching and me moaning around his hard, tasty length. My moans set him off. Holding my head still with his grip, he pounds into my face - a preview of what my pussy is going to get.

If my pussy could clap and rejoice for what is to come, I think it would.

After cleaning him, he slides out of my mouth, yanking me up. He roughly takes me in a kiss. Dazed and high on endorphins, I sink into the kiss. It's exactly what he needed. My hazy, slow mind didn't realize that he's looped my tied arms over a hook dangling from the ceiling.

How the hell did I not see that?

Making sure that the rope is still ok and that being lifted a few inches doesn't hurt, Cal lays on his back, slowly shimmying under me. He lays there and leisurely begins to lick my thighs clean. First the right, then the left. I'm shaking with lust. His tongue finally flicks against my swollen clit before he sucks it into his mouth, nipping at it. He licks up and down, fucking me with his tongue. He won't deepen his working tongue and that is when I learn that I can't grind down.

I feel his soft chuckle against my clit, sucking me back into his mouth and devouring me. I'm on the cusp of an orgasm when he stops altogether. Sitting up, he kisses me again. I taste my saltiness and love that he doesn't shy away from mingling our fluids. I suck his tongue in my mouth just like I did his cock and he smacks my clit,

earning a moan of rapture.

Cal gets off the bed, walks to the nightstand again, and gets the cup. Taking a drink, he comes back over, lays down and reaches for my swollen, deep colored nips. He pinches them in time with pulling my clit into his mouth, rubbing an ice cube directly on my clit. I come with a scream of pleasure.

My thighs are drenched as Cal moves behind me. Pushing me forward, the strain on my arms aches. My thighs can't find any purchase as Cal uses his strength to pick me up and slam me down his full length. A gasp of pain and desire slipped past my puffy lips.

With me suspended, Cal has turned me into a swing that he can fuck as hard and fast as he wants. And he does. I grunt with every punishing thrust as he groans with each clench of my pussy. The squelching sounds grow with every plunge of his rock hard cock.

My nipples are brushing against the pillow Cal placed in front of me, the fabric was not the same as the silky pillowcase that we normally use. No, it's like he changed it and found the roughest material he could. Every swing has them rubbing my sensitive peaks, making me want to squirm more and more but I can't move, which only heightens this whole experience.

I don't see him grab the blade, but I do feel as Cal strikes out in various spots on my body. A nick on my collar bone allows me to watch as the blood drips onto the bedding. This caused the first spasm, which was meant with a punishing thrust. The second nick is at the curve of my ass cheek that he then grabbed. I felt the warmth of the blood spread over my entire cheek, which he promptly slapped, causing a deep moan to part my lips as he continues his arduous pace.

My body is winding tighter and tighter, building for the impending pleasure to ricochet forward. Cal is using the swing to force me to pound back into him, much

like a pendulum. Then he finally does it.

Reaching around my body, keeping up his rigorous pounding, he takes my nipple between two of his fingers while rapidly slicing an X across my lower abdomen before flipping the handle and hitting my clit with it as he sinks his teeth into my shoulder.

My body tightens. An earth shattering orgasm rips through me and I throw my head back, scream out Cal's name. I can feel his cock spasming inside of me, filling me up. Cal kisses my neck, whispering "Good girl."

Quickly unhooking and untying me, he rubs out my arms and massages my hands. Wrapping us up in the warm bed, I sigh, "That was mind blowing." I snuggle further into the heat of his body. "We should do this more often."

A languid laugh slips from him. "Whatever you need Ava." He pulls me closer. "We have our whole future to experience the thrill of mixing pleasure with pain."

He's right.

We do.

Thanks for reading UNDER HER SKIN!