



Under His Wrath (Devils & Pretty Sins #2)

Author: *Rhea Harp*

Category: Action&Adventure

Description: The angel basks in the dying light...

I claimed my best friends sister and made her mine.

Now shes in the hands of my enemy and I'll burn this world down to get her back.

I tried so hard to stay away. To keep her out of my dangerous life.

But she's been my secret obsession for far too long...

They took her thinking I'd hold back on my wrath for the sake of this country. But they couldn't be more wrong.

I'm the fire spreading across their cities. I'm the poison that leaks down their throats.

Ruthless.

Brutal.

Psychotic.

I'm the monster I always keep hidden from the world, only this time I get to let it out.

But when my mission ends and I get Dove back in my arms, she returns with a secret.

A secret so big and deadly that it shreds my cold hard to pieces and brings me to my knees for the first time.

Will I make it out alive in time to mend her broken mind, body, and heart?

And will she continue to love me after she finds out what I've done?

****Under His Wrath is a dark romance thriller with an unhinged, over-the-top hero and situations. Please check TW/CW and tropes on the authors website.**

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 2:59 am

one

Rowan

Five years ago

I lean my head against the wall of the ironclad truck, my pulse finally slowing down. Warm tendrils of blood drip down the sides of my face beneath my skull mask. I want to take it off, but I don't. I've killed twenty-six men tonight and completely obliterated one of the EFW outposts. But it's not enough—it never is.

Our tactical gear rattles as we speed over the manhole covers lining the streets of Washington, DC, the only sound bouncing between the walls of the truck. My team's exhausted faces show how hard they're trying to sit upright. It's been a long night, but it had to be done.

The Echelons of the Free World, the secret organization we've been fighting for years, killed the future leader of the FBI. My best friend—my brother . They delivered him in a box to one of my stations like a pile of trash, his face crushed beyond recognition. My blood boils at the image now permanently imprinted into my mind, and I close my eyes, clenching my jaw until my teeth hurt.

I checked his shoulder tattoo, hoping someone had switched his body and that it wasn't really him. But the tattoo was there—faded ink and all. No doubt about it... they murdered Cole in cold blood, and all I could do was go on a pointless killing spree to ease the pain.

Fucking pointless .

Not only did it not do shit about lessening my rage, but erasing one outpost doesn't even mean that much in the grand scheme of things. They have hundreds of them scattered around the country. Where one is snuffed out another two slink in, like rats crawling out of a sinking ship.

The truck takes the corner and comes to a stop in front of the tactical operations center, where the maintenance crew opens the doors for us. My team waits for me to get out first, but I give a quick nod instead. They're off duty now.

Hawke Ridley, my right-hand man, deploys the order for everyone to see. They all get out one by one, the truck moving its weight from one side to the other in their wake.

I shouldn't even be here. As the commander of the special ops team, I'm expected to lock myself into the command room to watch over operations like this one, not charge into the outposts like a maniac. But tonight I had to be here because my team—and the chain of command—have no idea what the EFW is or how dangerous they are. Everyone just thinks a group of misfits killed Cole Finnegan, and there's nothing more to it. If they only knew...

"I could've handled it by myself," Hawke says once we're facing each other all alone in the truck. He hasn't taken off his skull mask either. He looks like fucking death incarnate, and I bet I look even worse.

When I don't answer, he presses on. "You could've sent me with the team... there was no need for you to come. Sir."

I snort at his attempt to show deference. He knows there's no need for that when we're alone, but he always does it anyway.

“Go home, Hawke,” I say through clenched teeth. “I’m not in the mood.”

“I didn’t take you for suicidal.”

A grunt rumbles from my chest before I say, “Well, look at that. I’m alive. None of our men died. And it’s because I came with you.”

“Are you saying I couldn’t have handled it?” He dips his chin.

He looks like he’s about to strangle me. I sigh, turning my gaze toward the back of the truck.

“No. I don’t know what the fuck I’m saying. I need to make a phone call.”

He nods once, reeling with the urge to continue the conversation. He knows me well enough not to push it when I can’t think straight. And all I can think of right now is that Cole is dead.

Cole is... dead .

“I’m sorry,” he says, looking down at me. I hadn’t even realized he’d gotten up. “He was a good man.”

I don’t reply, and he doesn’t expect me to. The truck dips as he exits, the weight of his body now gone. I remove my mask and helmet, then run a bloody, gloved hand through my hair as I’m hit with the warm and humid summer breeze.

My fingers are shaking, itching to wrap themselves around my rifle again—or another masked fucker’s throat. Yeah, that’s what I needed tonight... to feel their pulses leave their bodies and their throats close in as I squeezed them shut. Better to feel their pain than mine.

A gentle rain splatters down the windshield, and my eyes follow the raindrops racing each other down the glass. I take my phone out from under my seat, dialing Maddox Thorne, now my one and only partner in taking down the EFW. It's four in the morning, but I know he's waiting for this call. I don't blame him—if he were out on a killing spree, I'd want him to call and tell me he's still alive.

“Thank fucking God, Rowan. Jesus fucking Christ,” he answers, his voice rough as if he never even went to sleep at all.

“They're gone,” I say. “The outpost is empty. You can take it off the map.”

He stays silent for a few seconds. As do I. I can almost picture him squeezing the bridge of his nose between his fingers, as he finally says, “Any deaths?”

“Nope. We're all fine and dandy. Now, where is it?”

“Where is what...?”

“The lecture about how I went off the rails again. I'm tired enough not to fight you on this, so here's your chance,” I say.

Earlier tonight, when they delivered Cole's body, Maddox was completely against this mission. First, because it was dangerous as fuck and we weren't exactly prepared to go out like that without more than an hour's notice. And second, because he knew he couldn't help once I got there. I was on my own. Just me, my men, and all the rotting bodies we left in our wake.

Which is why I don't expect it when he says, “I would've come with you if I could.”

I run a hand down my face, then rest my forearm on my thigh, leaning forward in my seat.

“I wouldn’t have let you. Your job is to run the country. It’s my job to defend it.”

And Cole’s job was to bring it justice, I think to myself.

The truth is, we didn’t just lose our brother. We lost our entire justice system as well.

Maddox is just a few years short of becoming president. And right now, his popularity is off the charts as a congressman. Just like we wanted. Me, I’m to lead the special ops team until he gets us the White House—then I can take charge of the entire military. Everything was going well. Everything was just the way we’d fucking planned. Until this evening.

“I’ll visit Cole’s family in the morning,” he says.

“No. You stay. I’ll go. It’s my fault that he—”

He growls. “I don’t want to hear it. You should know better. You know what we’re up against... And fuck, in the end, Cole did too.”

My pulse quickens, and it feels like I’m getting punched in the gut by an invisible force. But I shove the guilt down into the same place I shove everything I don’t have the luxury of thinking about. Because if I did, it would flip a switch in me I know I’d never be able to turn back off.

Cole has always been the good side of us. He was the only one who joined the military just so he could fight for his country—for his family to have a future to come back to after the war.

Maddox and I, though, have always felt like we had to prove something... to the world, to ourselves, I don’t fucking know. But Cole never cared about the ranks and the power. All he ever wanted was to leave this world a better place than he found it.

Then Maddox suggested teaming up to run the country and give it the future it deserves. Cole wasn't even interested—not until I convinced him. If it weren't for my stupid fucking arguments... maybe he'd still be alive.

My head feels heavy, and I tighten my hand around the phone. I can't not take responsibility for his death. The feeling gnaws at my flesh and bones, drawing blood out of old wounds that have yet to heal. A lifetime of pain has made me almost immune to human emotion—I rarely understand happiness or love. All I understand is hell, and that's why I choose to fight it every day.

"I'll go," I say again, leaving no more room for discussion. It's the very fucking least I can do for his family. "Keep advancing our plans. Get us the White House."

My fingers curl into a fist as I lift my arm to knock on the Finnegans' front door. I stare at the chipped paint on the weathered wood, bracing for the inevitable.

The three of us never talked much about our families, except to agree we'd look after them if one of us were to die. I know both of Cole's parents are alive, though. And in a few moments, they'll open this door, and I'll give them the news. And they'll fall apart, just like any parent would upon hearing they'll have to plan a funeral for their son.

But that's not even the worst fucking part.

Because what's even worse than making two grown adults cry is breaking a little girl's heart by telling her that her brother isn't coming home anymore. That's exactly what I'll do to Dove, Cole's sister. She doesn't deserve it—no kid deserves their childhood being wrecked like that.

I should know.

The back of my father's hand connects with my face and I slam into the wall, where blood splatters all over the white paint.

It takes me a moment to realize that the blood is mine.

That my father hit me with such force my unbruised skin splintered above my brow.

I can't breathe.

I turn to look at him, but he looks composed. As if it didn't happen at all.

"Wipe that shit off," he tells me. "Then bring me my other gun and try again."

Quiet footsteps approach me from behind, snapping me out of my thoughts.

My eyes narrow as I turn to face a pair of big hazel eyes. The girl they belong to blinks slowly, effortlessly gracious, before they glance around me, as if I've just caught her doing something she wasn't supposed to do. Her arms wrap around her body, and I instinctively cock my head to the right, observing her.

This can't be...

My mouth opens to say something, but I find myself wanting to hear her voice instead.

When she makes eye contact again, I realize we've been staring at each other in silence. She's probably stunned to see me because I'm wearing my uniform.

But I'm fucking lost for words at how beautiful she is.

"Dove Finnegan?" I finally ask.

This can't be her. It can't be, because in the few times she was mentioned, Cole's nickname for her has always been "kid." The kid is a total nerd , he used to say. Or on the phone, when they talked: I'd better not see a scratch on that Honda when I come home, kid. I mean it.

But the young woman staring back at me isn't a kid.

Ash-brown hair tumbles in soft waves around her heart-shaped face, her skin visibly soft like butter. Her lower lip trembles as she looks back at me, and she tries to stop it by pushing it between her teeth, sending an immediate shockwave of heat throughout my body. I scowl at the feeling. I don't recognize it.

A faint redness creeps into the whites of her eyes. They're surrounded by dark circles, which look miserable on such a pretty face. She's either working too much or something's stressing her out.

I look down at her slender hands, her fingertips stained with dark oil. Then my eyes glance behind her, where Cole's old Honda seems to have seen better days since there's smoke coming out of the hood. It's a fucking mess, and I find myself wanting to take care of it. Take care of her .

"That's me," she whispers, her voice small and timid and warm, just like I expected it to be.

She looks so angelic, so fucking pure as she looks up at me through a web of eyelashes. My fingers itch to drag her into my chest and undo all of that. Me . And no one else.

Would she even let me? Or would she bang her fists into my chest, wanting to get away?

The sound of a passing car gets my attention, and I lift my chin to stop myself from staring at her. She seems anxious, but hopeful. I know damn well she won't be looking at me like this after I tell her what I'm here to say.

“Are your parents around?”

She takes a moment to decide if she should tell me, as if her body sets off alarm bells about being near me. As it fucking should—though I won't be the one to tell her that.

“Okay.” I nod once, holding her stare. “Here's what you're going to do, then, Dove. You're going to go inside, bring me a glass of water, and then sit on the stairs in front of your house while you listen to what I have to say. Do you understand?”

She nods back, and the praise slips from my lips faster than I can fucking control it.

“Good girl.”

My jaw clenches on its own, because I know what those words mean to me, even if they mean nothing to her. Why the fuck would I call her that?

I contemplate just dropping the news on her now so I can leave, but all my thoughts die when I see that the color of her cheeks has changed. From pale to blood red, all in the span of seconds. She... heard me. She fucking heard me. And not just what I said, but how I said it—shamelessly, like we're in some other place, in some other universe that doesn't revolve around the death of someone we've both lost.

I drag a hand down my face and let her do what I asked. She walks past me on wobbly feet, whisking her shoulder against my arm. And in that fraction of a second, I can't help but lean in closer, the warmth of her skin and the sweet scent that wafts around her calling me in like honeybees drawn to nectar.

I've never in my life paid attention to such an insignificant detail. And so, I worry. I fucking worry that this innocent touch and the way this woman looks at me might just be enough to damn me to a lifetime of obsession.

My eyes follow her until she disappears behind the door. I can feel my heart thrashing against my ribs like a bird in a bower of bones. My cock strains against my uniform pants, craving the sight of her. But I take a few aimless steps in front of her house, reeling back my need and pushing it down into the darkest pits of my mind.

There are a million reasons I can't have this woman. I don't do relationships, for one. I can't. My life doesn't even have the guarantee of tomorrow, let alone being with the same person for the rest of my life. I'd break her heart either way. And if by some miracle I did have the guarantee of staying alive, it wouldn't be next to her. She's my best friend's sister, and I know exactly what I'm made of.

If I had her, I'd fucking break her—clip those angelic wings and sink my teeth into that sweetness she carries within her. I'd want her heart raw in the palm of my hand and her body dripping with my cum from all her tight little holes long after I'm done using her. I'd want her mind bound to mine until she can't make out where her will ends and mine begins.

Every breath, every fear, every fleeting hope—she'd hand them all over, and I'd give her no other choice. And then... then I'd show her off to the fucking world, so they all know who owns her.

Dove enters my field of vision with a glass in her shaky hands, and I nod my approval—she'll need that water. She then sits down on the porch, and I come back to my senses. Her brother is dead. It snaps me back to the task at hand like a spring.

Big, round tears coat her eyelashes and stream down her cheeks as I make out the words and tell her what happened and who I am. I have to lie to her, of course, and

tell her he died on the battlefield. Cole's family is just as in the dark about our plans as my family or Maddox's. All they know is we're in the military, fighting for our country against the Coalition, who attacked the Ridge.

Quiet sobs shake Dove's petite body, and if I had a heart, the sight would fucking break it. But there's a growing need somewhere deep inside of that hollowed-out space, a need bigger than me and what I know to be right.

I crouch in front of her, my thumb pressing against the soft skin under her left eye. A teardrop slides down and covers it, and the next thing I know I'm tasting her pain on my tongue: salty, and bitter, and smooth like early morning dew. I groan—fucking groan—as she spreads throughout my body like wildfire, breaking into every cell that keeps me alive.

Fucking hell.

I comfort her as best I can and when I realize I can't be this close to her anymore, I stand up and turn my face to the street, arguing with myself about leaving. I did what I came here to do. I should go. I should let her get on with her life and find a man who deserves her. But then she whimpers, and my eyes seek her again. Like a wounded little bird needing food and shelter, she sits there, her throat choking on sobs and the air she's trying to pull back into her lungs. And all I want to do is lock her in a cage, feed her my cum, and make her mine.

I extend my hand forward, seeing if she even wants to be picked up. But surprise catches me off guard when I feel the warmth of her skin wrapped around mine. I pull her in, and she lets me, sobbing in the safe space I created for her against my chest. Her hair, just like the rest of her, feels like silk against my scarred palms. And the scent? This woman smells like sugared strawberries and summer rain, and I never want to forget what that feels like. In fact, I don't think I can.

“Rowan,” she whispers, and my body hums at the way my name rolls off her sweet tongue. “It’s okay if you want to kiss me.”

It’s okay if I want to kiss her.

The fucking devil couldn’t tempt me more if he wanted to.

But in this moment it takes everything in me to realize the truth of what this is... that Dove’s grief looks different from mine. That she wants this— needs this—because not experiencing it means having to deal with the harsh reality weighing down on her. She thinks my grip will protect her, and that my voice will soothe away her demons. I want to give that to her more than anything. But I can’t. I won’t. Cole would never forgive me if he knew the kinds of thoughts that are going through my head. The kinds of things I’d do to his little sister if given the chance.

“You’re grieving. It wouldn’t be right,” I tell her, my body going tense at the conflict within me.

Silence passes between us, three breaths deep. I hold her close and press my lips against her forehead as my fingers dig into her wavy hair, pulling it back. Her body sags against mine, and she looks confused as I say—

“Take care of yourself, Dove Finnegan.”

I can still feel her on my skin when I reach my car. The image of her crying is now etched into my mind, right next to the one of Cole’s lifeless body in that fucking box.

The best thing for both of us would be to let her go. To forget this day ever happened and blow off steam the way I always do. But I made a vow to her brother. I told him I’d look after his family, and that’s exactly what I’m about to do. Dove Finnegan might never know the monster lurking in the shadows of her life... but that monster

will sure as fuck know her.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 2:59 am

two

Rowan

Five years ago

“Leave us,” Sebastian Delaney, the president, says as he loosens his tie.

I raise a questioning brow in response, but otherwise keep my expression neutral as I’m forced to snap out of my thoughts. It’s been a few weeks since giving Dove the news, and I can’t fucking stop thinking about her. The cameras I placed around her family’s house didn’t help either. I keep wanting to check them over and over to make sure she’s safe and not a target for the EFW... but also just to see her. To know her.

The need is fucking irritating, like an itch I can’t reach to scratch. All the years of training in the military should be able to keep my thoughts and impulses under control. But when it comes to her, my mind isn’t cooperating.

“Sir?” Secretary David Foster asks, visibly confused.

It’s not every day that I’m called into the White House, especially since Maddox isn’t president yet. Not only that, but to be summoned here together with the Secretary of Defense is unusual in its own right.

“You heard me,” the president tells him. “Get out. Rowan, you stay.”

A pause, and then, “Sir, this is a very delicate situation. You can’t possibly consider handing it over to—” Secretary Foster stops mid-sentence, and I almost smile at the gesture. If he doesn’t have the balls to insult me, he most certainly shouldn’t be advising the president on anything. Ever. “We’re in the middle of a full-fledged war. A special ops commander isn’t trained for this sort of—”

“And you are?” Sebastian asks, approaching him. “Look.” He sighs. “You’ve been helpful so far, but you’ve got to admit this is way beyond your skill set. Besides, if it weren’t for Rowan recognizing the trap, the troops you sent out last night would be dead. Dead, Secretary. All two hundred of them. Do you understand?”

My eyes flash in Sebastian’s direction when he says that. I didn’t think he’d go with my suggestion on last night’s attack. All our previous interactions prove he doesn’t exactly like me very much. Not that I care too much for him, either.

“I shouldn’t have to remind you we lost a quarter of the Ridge last month. We’ve been making no progress of our own,” Sebastian continues. “People are rioting. The country is scared, and we’re running out of goddamn time here—”

“Sir, if I may—” Secretary Foster cuts him off.

My lips tilt upward at this point, and silence fills the Oval Office, announcing his demise. He stutters, looking between the president and me, defeat coiling around his tongue.

It’s pretty clear that despite our differences, the president has decided to put me in charge of the military operations for the war. I kind of expected to be called in at some point, but not now. And to be completely honest, I wouldn’t give a fuck about involving myself in this shitshow if it weren’t for two things and two things only: one, making sure Cole’s death wasn’t for nothing, and two, getting a favor from the president himself.

Losing Cole made Maddox and me drastically change the way we've been approaching our plan. It put things into perspective, too. And so, instead of advancing on our own, we've been seeking more allies than ever. The bigger, the better. And you can't go any bigger than the fucking president himself.

Two pairs of dark-circled eyes turn to look at me when I'm the first to speak up.

"I assume none of us have all day to fuck around."

Secretary Foster points a finger at me as he walks toward the door, his Adam's apple bobbing above his blue tie. A light layer of sweat shines from his grizzled temples, which he wipes away with the handkerchief he retrieves from his chest pocket.

"Careful, Commander. You keep burning bridges like this, and you'll be left with no bridges to cross when the time comes. And make no mistake, the time comes for all of us. You want to be in politics? Well, here you are. It is cold. And it is ruthless. And—"

I dip my chin, not turning to meet his gaze. "Far from my intention to burn any bridges, Secretary. In fact, I am more than happy to discuss my plans with you later today. Whatever the president and I decide on, that is."

"I'll see you next week," Sebastian tells him. "And I hope it goes without saying that you won't be mentioning this to the press. I'll make an official statement when the time comes."

The secretary sighs behind me, and I almost get the impression he's secretly glad to be relieved of this job. I wouldn't blame him.

"Yes, sir," he says. "Though if I may—how can you be so certain this is the right move? What if it's not?"

A muscle feathers in the president's jaw, as if he doesn't appreciate the question. He's a proud man, Sebastian Delaney. He doesn't like being put under the question mark, and I suspect it's because it makes him doubt himself to some extent. The press hasn't exactly been kind to him lately, blaming him for the war and everything. "It's my job to be certain of things. Now, please..."

Not another word spills from David Foster's mouth as he opens the door and leaves the Oval Office. The buzz from the busy hallway seeps into the room for a second, followed by more silence.

Sebastian runs a hand through his hair and glances at me sidelong.

"So? Can you do this?" he finally asks.

I lift my chin. "You wouldn't have called me otherwise."

"Yes, yes, I know that. I'm asking if... ah, I don't know what I'm asking. You bring a lot of trouble, Rowan. Unauthorized raids. Broken protocols. You rescued those civilians in the middle of enemy lines without clearance. I know that's how you play, and I know we'll win this war with you in command. But..."

"But you're afraid I'll draw too much attention. And not the good kind."

He nods.

"Except you're forgetting something," I say. His eyebrows rise. "The public. They don't have to know we're in this together. Sure, you'll have to be the one who nominates me, but we can make it look like you had no other choice."

"I don't have another choice," he emphasizes, holding my gaze.

I press on, ignoring the remark. “In the public eye, they can paint us as enemies. It doesn’t matter. When this war is over, you’ll keep your name clean, and I’ll have helped you win behind the scenes. I can be the monster you’re looking for. You won’t be able to fire me no matter how upset the public might be with my decisions. Not with the National Defense Continuity Act . Assuming the bill gets approved, of course. Which I imagine it will.”

He considers it, then narrows his eyes at me.

“And why would you be fine with dragging your name through the mud? That would be political suicide, and I thought you wanted to get into politics. What are you after, really?”

I shrug, my lips turning upward fully this time. “I’m just a simple man serving my president.”

“Ah.” He smiles back, taking a step forward as he shoves his hands in his pockets. “However did I get so lucky?” He smacks his lips, then says, “Here’s the thing, though. I don’t offer favors for anyone, Commander, let alone a man everyone tells me to stay away from.”

“Well, Mr. President...” I look to the side, then back at him. “If you wanted to stay away from me, perhaps you shouldn’t have fired your Secretary of Defense. I imagine that would make things rather... difficult.”

Sebastian takes a deep breath as he nods slowly, a tacit agreement floating between us. When the time comes, he’ll grant me that favor. And there will be no questions asked. Just like there aren’t any asked by me right now. Except, perhaps, the only one that matters...

“Whatever it takes?” I say.

He extends a hand in between us, and I lower my gaze to see it before making eye contact again.

If I'm going to do this, I need free rein over the operations. He won't grant me that, obviously, but I can force his hand and see where it takes me. As president, he is in a precarious situation with this war. And not because he cares about this country—fuck no. But because he wants to run for office again, and he knows the votes will be scarce if he doesn't figure out a way to settle the pressing conflicts. All the more reason to grant me a favor as big as this fucking house whenever I need it most.

“Win me this war, Commander.”

I look up to the right, where I know the cameras in the Oval Office are recording this moment. My right hand reaches out, gripping his, sealing our fates—and the fate of the country—in one simple handshake.

Someday soon, the press will write about this. And Dove will see it. Or, if she doesn't, she'll at least hear about it. And every time my name pops up on the news, it will remind her of the monster she met that day. She'll hate me, just like the rest of the country, and my name will only mean peril and despair. But that's fine with me. Because unfortunately, it might be the only way I can make sure I stay away from her.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 2:59 am

three

Rowan

Three years later

Red light cuts across my face as I peer through the thick cigar smoke curling through the shadows. Men in black tailored suits lounge in leather chairs, drinks in hand as they exchange words between puffs of deadly nicotine. I've never been here before, but Maddox has. He knows where we need to be.

Many government agents frequent this club often, but the list goes far beyond public servants. Mafia heads, billionaires, men with influence, they all come to The Hive for one thing only: to hire honeypots. Young, attractive people trained to seduce, spy, and annihilate their clients' rivals in ways so subtle you'd fall to your fucking knees and thank them for the honor.

On the inside, the place doesn't look much different from a gentlemen's club. There's a bar, subdued music, and private booths where no one dares question what you might lay on the table. It's all a facade, though. And a pointless one, if you ask me, since no one gets to come here without an official invitation, anyway. But I guess they can't be too careful.

Maddox stops in front of a black curtain, where a single goon is guarding whatever is on the other side.

"We're here for Shalone," he says.

The goon doesn't answer. Instead, he inches closer and starts patting him down, looking for anything that might put the Matron's life in danger. They already searched us twice when we arrived.

When he's done with Maddox, I'm next. I clench my jaw and jerk my shoulder free from his grasp when he sees I have nothing on me either. The curtain is drawn back and I follow Maddox inside, where a long corridor leads us into a much larger and darker room. It almost smells like a fucking church in here—there's a cool earthiness wafting from somewhere in the distance, mixed with the faint scent of old wood and spices of some sort. The Matron's honeypots are well known for the strength of their handmade poisons, which I assume is what my senses are picking up.

“How do we find her?” I ask him, dusting myself off. “This place looks like a fucking maze.”

“We don't. She'll come to us.”

I don't like that answer. Maddox is already campaigning to become president from his current role as a senator. I've just won the war in the Ridge for President Delaney, and more people want us dead than I dare to count. But if you're here for business, you come alone—no security, no team, no nothing. It's the Matron's only rule and a risk we had to take, according to our plans. Still, I want to get Maddox out of this shithole as fast as possible.

Fortunately, it doesn't take long before we're approached by someone. Man or woman, I have no fucking clue. They're wearing a long, red cloak with a hood and a plain white mask with two holes for eyes. What honeypot we might hire and the assignment they're given is never to be disclosed to the other club members. Privacy is a priority for everyone who comes here, and Shalone understands that.

Except... we're not here to hire anyone at all. But that's not what we told her.

“Gentlemen,” the person says, the voice warm and smooth like melted chocolate.

So a woman, then.

She walks right past us, and I follow Maddox, who starts moving in her direction. We’re then led through another corridor until finally stopping in one of the empty rooms. The gentlemen’s club feels so far away already, as if we’ve entered a completely different building.

I let the woman go through the doors, but Maddox and I share a quick look. They could corner us right now if they wanted to. I’m already looking around and thinking of ways to take us out of here if need be.

“If we wanted you dead, we would’ve come to you, Commander,” she says, jerking her head toward the door. She wants it closed. “We don’t hold corpses here to sully the place.”

As if.

Before either of us says anything she unbuttons her cloak, revealing a sleek, figure-hugging silk dress in black. The fabric shimmers under the dim lights as she takes off her hood, her blond hair swaying behind her like a golden veil.

“You’re not Shalone,” I say, not letting her out of my sight.

“Perceptive,” she answers with a smile in her words, the ebb of her voice trained to perfection. Not too soft, not too bold either. Just the right amount of tease that she can easily reel back if she wants to.

I admire her precision, I really do. But if she thinks that will work on either of us, she’s mistaken. The more I look at her, the more restless I grow for checking my

phone's live view of Dove's cameras in her new apartment.

She's moved out of her parents' house. She's studying to become a lawyer in Washington. I'm so fucking proud of her, but I never get to tell her that in person. I've been watching her for so long while the war was ongoing... and as soon as I'm out of here, I plan on going there to see her. Only for a few minutes—she won't even know I'm there.

Just this morning, the image of her spreading herself out on the bed and calling my name when she touched her own cunt drove me fucking insane. To think that after all these years she still thinks about me baffles me. I've given her no reason to. And it seems my drastic war campaign didn't change her mind about me like I hoped it would. Part of me feels relief, while the other part continues to shout into my brain that I can't touch this woman. I know I can't, I just...

I sigh, the recording flashing through my mind one last time. It's perfect. She's perfect.

"We're leaving," I say when I realize this woman still hasn't told us who she is.

"Your friend here looks like he'd like to stay." She cocks her head toward Maddox, the mask still covering her face as the curtain of blond hair drapes over her shoulder.

"Who the fuck are you?" Maddox asks, as I hear him close the door behind us.

But she doesn't answer. Instead, her manicured fingers wrap around the edges of her mask as she drags it away from her face. Inch by inch, she reveals herself to us, her high cheekbones and elongated eyelids leaving no room for interpretation about who she is.

We know this face.

We've been searching for this face.

Fuck knows how many hours Maddox and I spent looking at her files, trying to locate her. In the end, we found out she's a honeypot, so we came here. But we're not looking to hire her. We're here for information, and this woman might just be the key to everything we want to know.

Which begs the question... how did she get to us without the Matron knowing about it first?

She takes a few steps back until her hips meet the edge of a table and she leans against it. I don't have to look at Maddox to know he's just as stunned as I am.

"You may call me Cam. But before either of you does that, let's get one thing straight," she says, clicking her tongue. "I know you've been looking into me. But you do not summon me, gentlemen. Not now, not ever. The only reason I've met you is because I want something you have. And you're going to give it to me."

Camelia Adelstein .

Daughter of Salister Adelstein.

And first-class member of the EFW.

Her father leads the organization, and from our research, she's been used as a puppet to carry out his dirty work, just like anyone else in that hellhole. Salister is not the man who makes exceptions, not even for his own kind. But to force his own daughter to train under the Matron is another level of fucked up.

"Camelia," Maddox draws out her name, the word bitter on his tongue as he takes her in. He hasn't been the same after Cole's death. Neither have I. And facing any

member of the EFW since then has pretty much ended in a bloodbath. But this time, we're supposed to talk. This time we're supposed to be fucking civilized.

If Cam is bothered by the way Maddox says her name, she doesn't show it. And when he takes a step toward her, she doesn't falter, either.

"You're a hard woman to find. And yet you show up here, all alone, with two men who aren't particularly happy about you being alive. I didn't take you for an idiot, sweetheart."

She scoffs, inspecting her nails.

"Women have been misjudged from the beginning of time, Senator. And you give yourself too much credit. I have no reason to fear you." She lifts her chin in defiance, her eyes shifting between the two of us. "I need one of you to do something for me. In exchange, I'll give you information that will both advance your presidential campaign..." She glances over to Maddox. "And keep you in charge of the military from here on," she then says to me. "That's why you've been trying to find me, isn't it? To get information? Well, I have it. The question is... what lengths are you willing to go so you can get it from me?"

"Torture comes to mind," I say, cracking my neck. "Wait for you until you leave the club, press some chloroform over your nose and mouth, that kind of thing."

"Might I remind you it took you months to figure out I was a honeypot? I'm always two steps ahead of you, gentlemen. From the moment my name popped up on your search results, I knew. And I made sure you wouldn't find me until I wanted you to know where I was. Now—"

"What do you want?" Maddox growls. "And since you seem to be so damn resourceful, why are we even having this conversation? You seem quite capable of

doing your own dirty work.”

A flicker of a smirk flashes on Cam’s face before she crosses her arms.

“Capable, yes. But contrary to your assumptions, I’m not an idiot. As a honeypot, my hands are tied. We’re not permitted to dispose of people outside of the jobs we are assigned. If we do...” She breathes in as her eyebrows rise. “The Matron disposes of us next.”

“We’re not murdering anyone for you,” Maddox deadpans.

Aren’t we? I don’t fucking like it, but if her intel is good enough, we might. Classic Maddox, though, to shut down the idea before hearing out the rest of the details. Can’t say I blame him—he is running for president, after all. He can’t get his hands any more dirty than he already has.

But I can.

Cam smiles as if she doesn’t believe him. “The deal is... you get rid of Governor Castillo for me. And I’ll give you your intel. It’s big. And without it, you’re screwed. Both of you.”

A moment of silence passes between the three of us. I can’t help but notice the way she holds her breath in anticipation of our agreement, as if she’s scared that we’re going to refuse. As if she needs us more than we need her. The question is—what for?

“Tell me this, Miss Adelstein...” I say.

“Cam,” she corrects me. I ignore it.

“Why would the famous daughter of the EFW leader give us any intel at all? Why are you here, and not asking your daddy to take care of things for you? Hmm?”

She pushes herself away from the table she was leaning against, pulling the cloak back on her shoulders.

“That’s none of your concern. Get it done by the end of the week. When I see it on the news, I’ll call you with the rest of the information.” She leaves an old phone on the table, then moves to walk past us, but Maddox doesn’t get out of her way. Which is perfect, because I wasn’t going to agree to this deal without proper negotiation.

“No,” I say.

“Excuse me?”

“Give us the intel now, and we’ll take care of it. Otherwise we don’t have a deal. There are plenty of other EFW members we can hunt down instead of you to get the answers we need.”

“Wow, you two really think I’m an idiot.” She laughs, then crosses her arms, considering it. “I’ll give you half. Half now and the other when it’s done. And trust me, you’ll want to hear the rest of it.”

“I don’t trust a fucking thing that comes out of your mouth, Camelia,” Maddox says. “Give us the intel. Then we’ll consider your proposal.”

And maybe it was because she thought she still had some kind of upper hand, or because she really was desperate, but the next words that spill from her lips were exactly what I feared she would say.

That the war in the Sylvestrian Ridge isn’t over.

That her father had been meeting with Sergeyevich Kozlov, Russia's president, and they might join forces to aid the coalition I fought to get rid of for the past three years.

That they're planning an attack somewhere within the next few weeks.

And that it's going to be big—big enough that if we're not ready, we'll lose the Ridge, our economic power, and the trust of the entire nation.

"Where?" I ask, my blood boiling with annoyance and restlessness. "Where is the attack going to be, exactly?"

"I'll tell you when you've disposed of Governor Castillo for me. Have a good evening," she says, putting her mask back on and covering her blond hair with the hood.

The click of her heels gets more and more distant and Maddox looks at me with his jaw clenched.

"We'll find another way," he says.

I shake my head. There is no other way. And I won't go through this whole thing again for fuck knows how long. I've got somewhere else to be tonight. "I'll do it."

"We've gone too far already. We don't even know why she wants him dead."

"Does it matter?" I ask. "Castillo is a degenerate who beats his wife and children on the regular. We'd be doing them a favor."

"All these lines we're crossing, Rowan... they're going to come back on us. What then?"

“That’s a problem for the future. Right now we need to defend ourselves. Then I’ll figure out a way to push back the coalition again. If they win this war—”

Maddox squeezes his eyes shut, not wanting to hear it. This is all because of what happened to Cole. Instead of pushing forward, he’s backing out. But I won’t let him. He’s worked too hard and we’ve come too far.

“I can’t let you take another hit for me,” he says. “For us. This plan we’re chasing... it’s going to take our fucking souls. Are you prepared to lose that?”

“Can’t lose something I’ve never had.”

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 2:59 am

four

Rowan

Two weeks ago

I lie awake next to a warm, naked Dove in our colonial house in Washington, DC. The big willow tree in front of our bedroom whips shadows against the walls, and the midnight breeze seeps through the cracked window, entering my lungs. Dove's leg is draped over mine, her ash-brown hair spread across my chest as her chest raises and lowers with quiet breaths.

My thumb swipes absently across her bare thigh. I've missed her. She's always here, in our home, like she's supposed to be. But after her apartment got broken into, I've spent most of my nights in the office downstairs, trying to figure out who the fuck is onto her. Whoever did it covered their tracks too well when they deleted that day's footage from the security cameras.

Not to mention the orange she found on her glass table when I was away in London. I keep thinking about it, driving myself insane because there's only one person I know who peeled his oranges like that when we were in the army together. But Cole is dead, and I feel fucking crazy for even considering the alternative. The only other option is that someone's trying to mess with us. I just need to figure out who.

A soft whimper gets my attention and I realize two of my fingers have dipped inside Dove's pussy. She's wet, and the silky feel of her wrapped around my skin makes me hungry. I've already fucked her twice before she fell asleep in my arms, but it's not

enough. It never is.

The way this woman owns my heart is in no way normal or sane. One minute she's Cole's little sister and I leave her crying in front of her house, and the next I'm on my knees for her. She's my drug. And my fucking kryptonite. She could ask me for anything, anything in this world, and I'd give it to her.

I nuzzle her hair out of her face and she nestles deeper into my chest. My body roars to life, my cock already straining against my gray boxers. Fuck, there's nothing prettier than the sight of her naked next to me. The juicy crease of her toned thighs, the taut abdomen peaking with her soft and shaved pussy lips, her raspberry-colored nipples and the plump breasts rising up and down with her breathing... my mouth waters, begging me to have another taste.

"I'm going to need to use this pussy again, angel," I whisper. "Awake or not."

I wore her out earlier, so I don't expect her to wake until I work her body. But I don't mind it at all.

I pull on the sheet that covers her ass and leg, revealing her to me fully, then push her onto her back, her body limp with exhaustion. My thumb drags over her pink nipple as I cup the softness of her breast. I lower my head, taking her nipple into my mouth.

My teeth rake over it and my tongue wraps around it, pulling it away from her body. A moan slips past her lips, and I feel her hands digging into my hair. I smile with her nipple still in my mouth as I work one hand between her legs, putting pressure on her engorged clit.

I let her nipple pop out of my mouth, her breast swaying softly back into place. My tongue darts out, licking the side of it, eating her up like it's my last meal on execution day.

“Rowan...” she mumbles, her body gently squirming under my shadow.

I pause, but only to grip her slender wrists and pin them above her head with one hand. She gasps, her big hazel eyes fluttering open before they melt into mine. I bring my finger to my lips, tapping them, asking her to be quiet. I love hearing her moan, but right now her voice is mine. And she understands that.

“Good girl,” I whisper the moment her lips close again. “You won’t need your voice until I give it back to you.”

I push my free hand between our bodies, shoving down the front of my boxers and pulling out my hard cock. Stroking it a few times, I then glide it up and down her warm pussy. Her knees bend in the air, giving me full access and a close-up look at the way she coats me with her wetness.

She feels like fucking heaven, and I’m not even inside her yet.

Her lips part, showing me a flash of pink tongue and white teeth, but no words come out, just her scattered breaths. I ease the tip of my cock into her hole and feel her soft muscles clench around me. I pump in and out of the entrance, not going any farther than that. Not yet.

Her eyes roll back, and honestly, so do mine. I’m high on this tight cunt, and nothing, nothing has ever come close to what I’m feeling now. The wet sound of her arousal fills the air, mingled with cute little whimpers that tell me she wants more.

My needy little slut.

Cock in her sweet pussy, my hand grips her hip as I work myself deeper inside. Her face scrunches as she’s still adjusting to my size. She’s so small there’s barely any room inside, but she can take me—she knows she can.

I give her one harder thrust, losing myself in her soft body and the smell of sugared strawberries and summer rain. Her bent knees part more, giving me the sight of her small asshole. I stare down between us, seeing my cock go in and out of her soaked cunt. It grows harder and is on the brink of being painful.

How can I want something so much when I already have it?

“ Fuck .” I let out a ragged breath, fucking her hard. Her breasts bob up and down. She whimpers and bites her lip, wanting to be a good girl for me and stay silent. Her eyes are hooded and glassy, and she tries to move her hands again and again. I keep them pinned down, not giving her the chance.

“A good little cum hole. That’s what you are, angel,” I whisper while panting.

My words spread from her ears down her spine and into her cunt. I can see it in the way she writhes and feel it in the way her muscles clench around my cock. I watch her squirm and plead with her eyes, savoring every second of knowing she’s mine.

I let go of her hip and use my now-free hand to push one finger into her ass. Instantly, her head turns and she hides her face in the mattress. She gets so embarrassed, but she can’t hide her body’s reactions from me. She loves having her ass filled—with toys, my hands, my cock—it doesn’t matter. One day soon, she’ll learn to beg me to fill it with my cum.

“Please,” she cries out, her voice husky from sleep.

I stop fucking her, leaving my cock unmoving in her cunt as I pump my finger in and out of her ass.

Her head tilts back, her body tenses, and her eyes squeeze shut.

There you are.

“Rowan—” she breathes out, her cunt and ass clenching around me at the same time.

I ram myself into her a few more times, feeling my cum spill inside her, claiming her for the thousandth time. I groan at the force of my release, making me loosen my grip on her wrists for a moment too long. She frees herself and brings her hands back into my hair, tugging hard.

I pull my cock out, slick with both my cum and hers, our breaths flowing together as I stare her down.

“Don’t move. Stay just like that,” I say, pushing myself away from her body.

She looks at me, confused, but she does as I say, her body spread out on the bed like a butterfly. I kneel in front of her cunt, loving the way it glistens in the moonlight with the residue of my claim on her.

“What is it?” she asks.

I don’t fail to notice the worry in her voice. As if she still fears I could change my mind about her. I stay quiet, tracing the lines of her pussy with my mind’s eye.

“What is it? Did something happen—”

There .

I bring both hands on either side of her pussy, spreading it more.

My cum slides out of her in gentle waves, dripping down to her ass. She gives me a few little whimpers at the sensation, her cunt pulsing through the coating as if it’s

trying to pull it back inside.

Mine. Mine. Mine.

Present Day

One second. I turned my back for just one fucking second, and they took her from me.

Like a demon fresh out of the gates of hell, I haunt these empty hospital halls, looking for her. But with every door I slam open and every corner I turn, my blood only boils stronger and my rage simmers under my flesh and bones.

She's not here. Not anymore.

I slam my palm on the receptionist's desk, heart pounding against my ribcage, threatening to break bone. Her eyes snap to mine as she jolts upright, followed by a deep frown.

“Security cameras from this floor. Show them to me. Or lose your fucking job.”

I didn't work my way up to this position to scare civilians into doing what I want. But at this moment, nothing else matters. Nothing except finding the soon-to-be-dead bastard who took what's mine.

A few seconds pass—too fucking many—before she slides her chair over to the computer and starts looking for what I need. I rush around the desk, eyes shifting rapidly across the screen, searching for her.

Where are you, angel?

“ Stop ,” I tell the receptionist, pointing my finger at the screen. “Right there. Who the fuck is that?”

She leans in closer, narrowing her eyes at the video in which a man is walking toward the waiting area, where Dove and I were talking just minutes ago. A sharp pain tugs at my heart even saying her name in my mind. My fingers itch to touch her, to hold her in my arms like I did before I brought her here so she could see her dying mother.

“I’m not sure,” she says. “A doctor, but I’ve never seen him before. Could be a replacement.”

I step back, dragging a hand down my face as the realization dawns on me.

They got me.

After all this time, after all the efforts at being one step ahead, the EFW got me when I least expected it. Probably orchestrated it all while they distracted me with things I could never account for. Dove’s apartment break-ins. Her mother’s accident. The distressing news I got on the phone just now. And this fake-ass doctor pretending to be someone he’s not.

“Should I keep going then?” the receptionist asks, visibly annoyed. Her voice snaps me out of my thoughts.

“Yes. Follow him around. Show me where he went. Show me where he is right fucking now.”

She clicks around with her mouse until her head shakes and she turns to meet my eyes.

“This is where the recording cuts off.”

Of course it is.

Fuck!

I make her look up the security footage from every way out of the hospital, but once again, they're all cut off. All of them—so that I don't even get to figure out which way they took her. For all I know she could still be in the building, with the EFW hiding her until I leave so they can move her out.

I pull out my phone and bring it up to my ear, calling the one person I know I can trust.

“Say it quickly. I have the Prime Minister of France on hold,” Maddox Thorne, the President of the United States of America, answers almost immediately.

I don't call the president very often. He and I both have a clear understanding of what needs to be done. Of what each of us expects the other to accomplish on our own. So when one of us reaches out completely out of nowhere, we drop everything and answer the fucking phone when it rings.

“They took her,” I say, spitting out the words.

The president pauses, cursing under his breath.

“Where are you?”

“St. Francis. Security footage is wiped out. I have no way of knowing if she's even in the building anymore.”

“What about the attack on the Ridge this morning? Is it connected in any way?”

“A fucking ploy to distract me. How fast can you get a team here?”

“I’ll talk to Reid to see how we can do this quietly. But Rowan—” A plea of sorts emanates from his voice, and a feral, anger-filled smirk spreads on my lips at hearing him say my name like that.

This is the side of me he’s been afraid of from the very beginning, when we were training in the army together. The side of me that every tabloid across the country painted as a monster more times than I can count. The side of me I keep on a tight leash until it tugs so hard I’m forced to let it loose on the world, leaving dead, rotting bodies in its wake until I get what I want.

I sympathize with my friend, I really do. So when I go to war for my woman, I’ll do my damndest to keep his presidency away from my crimes.

“Don’t worry, Mr. President. You know I hunt best when the lights are off.”

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 2:59 am

five

Dove

Present Day

A wise philosopher once said the angel of death sits on every word, and that when your breath runs its course, it comes down on a cloud of ashes to retrieve your heart. Though I can't see anything past the darkness of the four walls surrounding me, that's exactly what I'm feeling right now: my chest being broken in two, violated by a pain so sharp that my body shakes with rage, fighting to contain it.

I don't know how many days have passed. They won't bring me light. They won't give me air. Just a piece of stale bread and water at infrequent intervals to keep me on the threshold of life. I stare into nothingness and pieces of me flash before my eyes. Faces I know, faces I love...

My mother in the hospital bed. My brother. My best friend, Sterling.

And the man who owns my dying heart...

I see Rowan's face in my mind and my limbs ache to run into his arms. To be held tight to his chest, where all is right with the world. Where I'm warm and safe and nothing can touch me. But the more I think of him the worse I feel when his image fades away.

The echoing sound of the chains wrapped around my ankles brings me out of my

memories, and I fall apart.

They remind me I'm here, and that all is lost.

My brain loses focus, and his face vanishes completely like a leaf swept into a powerful stream. They drugged me again. The same syringe sinks into my neck every day whenever they want to numb me. It's been like this since they took me and questioned me about everything. They asked about Rowan—about where he lives, and what his plans are with the war in the Ridge. They asked so many things, and my answer was the same every single time— I don't know .

I know nothing at all, and I finally understand why Rowan kept so much from me.

Where is Cole? Where is my brother? Why isn't he helping me?

The thought of him knowing I'm here and doing nothing about it hurts almost the same as knowing he was dead. I keep thinking maybe he's not here at all, that maybe seeing him was just another hallucination from the lack of oxygen in this cell.

But... I know... I know what I saw...

I sit on the hard cement with my head between my knees, drawing circles on the floor with my finger. I'm cold... so unbelievably cold. I've stopped fighting it. I've let the cool air run freely down my spine, bringing a sharp sting into my throat that I can only guess is the start of an infection.

I pray that the illness takes me out faster than these monsters. I often hear people screaming outside these walls, waking me up from when I give my eyes a rest in the dark. I don't know what's out there, but I'm not at all interested in finding out.

A man's voice closes in, and it takes everything in me to lift my head and push

myself farther into the wall behind me. The metal door at the other end of the room creaks, and a light flashes in my face. My eyes burn and a throbbing headache sets into the back of my skull.

Big combat boots walk inside, their owner stopping and crouching next to me.

“Look at you, poor thing. You’re freezing,” the man says, his voice low and not at all endearing. A shiver runs along my nerve endings, and this time I know it’s not from the cool air. Whoever this is, he doesn’t give a damn about how cold I am.

Please... I plead with my eyes, knowing full well it won’t matter to him. That I don’t matter.

His hand goes to my hair, then to my chin, forcing my face up to look at him. My whole body shakes with quiet sobs. I try to get a look at him, but my eyes snap to the door that opens again. Another man comes in, bringing a wooden chair and dropping it close by.

“Have fun,” he laughs, shaking his head in amusement. The door barely closes in his wake, letting a trail of dim light from the hallway seep into the room. I look back at the man touching my face, seeing him smile. The lines under his eyes and the sagging skin covering his cheeks tell me he’s older than the rest. He smells like burned hair and gasoline, and it makes me gag instantly. A knot twists in my stomach, and I push myself deeper into the wall until there’s no more space in between.

“Now, now,” he says. “That’s not how it’s going to be. I’ll give you a few seconds to pull yourself together. And then I want you on my knee, right—” He gets up, only to take a seat on the chair in front of me. Patting his leg, he continues, “—here.”

He’s going to put his hands on me. He’s going to rape me, right here, right now.

Tears drip down my cheeks as I choke on another sob.

“K-Kill you,” I whisper, shaking my head. “Rowan will kill you.”

His voice comes out ragged as he laughs, throwing his head back.

“I take it you haven’t watched the news in a while, have you?”

What the hell does that mean?

“Out there, he couldn’t protect you. But in here... I can. I can keep you warm. Fed. Rested. Maybe even move you into my bed upstairs. All you have to do is sit on this knee.” He leans back in the chair, parting his knees as he looks down at my trembling figure. “I’ll give you three more seconds to decide, and then we can do it the hard way if you prefer.”

I hear him and the threat registers, but my thoughts go back to what he said before this. What did he mean about watching the news? My mind conjures up the most horrific situations I can think of, and all of them result in Rowan being dead.

I shake my head, not willing to accept it. He’s messing with me. He has to be.

“Three...” He starts counting down, pulling me back into the present. My heart thrashes in my chest, and desperation spreads through me like lightning.

I could run, and maybe I could make it far enough to scream so the others can hear me. If what Cole said is true... if they really are celibate, then this shouldn’t be happening. This man shouldn’t be allowed to touch me.

My eyes land on the cracked door, and the decision is settled.

“Two.”

I get up, a wave of dizziness washing over me.

I walk toward him, the chains around my ankles dragging across the concrete.

“Come on, pretty girl.”

Breath shallow and knees buckling, I inch toward him, keeping my face down so my eyes can watch the doorstep. And then... I bolt toward it.

The chain keeps my legs from spreading wide, so I make tiny rapid steps until my palms push against the metal frame, and I bask in the golden light waiting on the other side. I open my mouth to scream, gasping violently when my hair is pulled back. Pain ripples through me, and a hand comes over my lips, keeping them shut.

“Come here, little bitch,” he sings in my ear. My eyes throb with tears I can’t control.

I mumble into his hand as he pulls me back, back into the darkness, sitting me down on his damned knee.

Then he gropes me, tugging at my jeans and fumbling for the button. “Let’s take these off. Get you more comfortable. Let me see what the commander loves so much about this cunt of yours.”

I cry out for help, pushing into his chest to set myself free, but the arm he wraps around me combined with the numbing drug in my system are enough to keep me in place.

“Yes, yes, scream for me. That’s how I like you best.”

My jeans split when he releases the button, and his fingers dip down below my belly button. The stench emanating from his breath is everywhere. I can't breathe .

I tense up, feeling his foreign skin on mine, waiting in utter horror for what I know I'm about to experience. I pull myself away from this world, sinking deeper into myself where everything else he says becomes a sound too far away to register.

Fear like I've never known it courses through my veins, immobilizing me. Paralyzing me like a deer in the middle of the road, blinded by a passing car's headlights.

And then—

“What the fuck are you doing?” a voice booms into the room from behind us.

The man tenses against me, groaning in annoyance.

“I'll be done in a few.”

“No, you won't. Get the fuck out. Salister is here.”

“For fuck's sake, Magnus, I said —”

Magnus approaches us, his boots hitting the concrete with every step. Then his arm sprawls forward with a sharp knife in his hand. My vision stutters as I watch them with my breath held tight in my chest, my eyes clenched with fear.

“There are times when we're partners, Ren, and times when I'm your boss. Right now it's the latter. You get me into any trouble with Salister, and I'll spray your blood all over these fucking walls. Got it?”

Ren smirks next to my face, his hand tapping my skin a few times too many before

exiting the front of my jeans. Vomit rises to my throat and I swallow it back down, relief washing over me when I'm set free from his grip. I stand up as quickly as I can, moving back toward the corner of the room.

"You got it, boss," he drawls, then stands up and looks at me, his face telling me this is far from over.

The cell falls silent. I wrap my arms around myself and look down, seeing more light spread out on the concrete when Ren opens the door to leave.

The other man—Magnus—is still here, and I don't know that I should feel any better.

"P-Please," I say, my voice dying out. "Let me go. I don't know anything—"

He steps closer, knife in hand, but there's nowhere else for me to back up. His body traps me, heat emanating from him and seeping into my cold clothes. Something touches my hand, and I realize it's the handle of his knife turned toward me.

"Have you ever killed a man, Dove?"

The question takes me aback.

I open my mouth to answer, but pushing out words is suddenly too much of an effort.

"If you want to stay alive, you're going to have to. Don't let anyone see you with this," he says, pushing the handle into my hand. I wrap my fingers around it, my heart beating too fast for my own good.

Who is this man? Why is he helping me?

I cling to his words, nodding at everything he says, even though I have no idea how

I'm going to do what he's suggesting. Because it's insane. Every word coming out of his mouth sounds insane .

"Go for the jugular if you can," he tells me. I flinch when his finger taps the side of my neck. "Under the collarbone." He lowers it down to show me where. "The lungs. Or the kidneys. Any of these should give you an upper hand. Do you understand me?"

I nod, swallowing into my aching throat. He backs away, wanting to leave. But he can't leave. Whoever this man is he's showing me I can trust him, and that he might be my only hope to survive in here.

"Who... who are you?" I whisper, clearing my ragged throat. "Why are you helping me?"

He doesn't answer and doesn't show any sign of wanting to talk to me.

"Don't go. Please... why are you helping me?"

Just then he turns toward me, and I see a flash of his cold eyes as he speaks.

"I'm not. I'm doing Cole a favor, and nothing more."

Then he's gone, and the door locks behind him. I'm left alone in the dark, more questions surging in my head than before I got here. What did that Ren guy mean about watching the news? I curl up in a ball against the wall, and the only conclusion my mind comes to is that Rowan is either badly hurt... or he's truly gone.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 2:59 am

six

Rowan

Present day

I look ahead at the city before me, the dark skyline flashing with life—people going on with their evenings, fucking, heading out for dinner, or doing whatever they do at this time of night. The faint hum of their world drifts up the hill, mixing with the scent of dirt, sweat, and fresh blood. They keep on living, completely oblivious to what’s about to happen tonight.

I clutch my skull mask between my arm and my left side. Behind me, the EFW members we caught spit out curses while my right-hand man, Hawke, lines them up. I don’t need to look to see that they’re naked and kneeling with their limbs tied up and that the other men we brought with us have their guns pointed at their heads.

This isn’t an authorized mission, far from it. I had to get creative with the way I sourced my team for this hunt, reminding me of the night I went out and killed for Cole five years ago. To think that I’m now doing it for his sister fills my veins with the venom I’m about to spill down these motherfuckers’ throats.

My perfect angel. My obsession. My ecstasy.

She’s out there somewhere, waiting for me to get to her.

The invisible punch in the gut comes back, so I shove down the guilt, knowing full

well she was never supposed to be in my life. For five years I made sure she was safe, and she had nothing to worry about. Then I came in and claimed her, because I couldn't get her out of my mind. Now the EFW took her, and all I'm left with are the intricate details of how I'm going to end their lives.

"They're ready." Hawke's voice gets my attention.

I close my eyes for a second, reeling back my restlessness so we can tackle this thoughtfully and get what we need. For the past few days, I've been going from one outpost to another, searching for her. No one tells me anything useful, so I slash through bodies like the fucking grim reaper, leaving their buildings in shambles in my wake. Which is why, unfortunately for the men we brought here, my methods are about to drastically change.

I turn away from the skyline and my eyes land on five silhouettes watching me with disdain, as if I'm the one standing naked before them. My lips turn upward as I take in the big hole we dug behind them—five wooden boxes wait for them, all empty and as cozy as a hastily dug mass grave can be. The moon casts long shadows across the small cemetery, making the hole look deeper, darker. Hungrier.

"So," I say, targeting no one in particular. Not yet. "Which one of you fuckers wants to live to see another day?" One of them laughs, and my eyes instantly dart to him, all the way to the left.

"You've been quite the talk of the town, Commander," he says. "Salister is frothing at the mouth at the thought of having you work for him."

I take my gun out of the pocket of my combat uniform and fire it at his feet. He barely dodges it, falling on his face in the mud in front of him.

"You have something that belongs to me," I say, ignoring his remark or anything else

he might want to say. “Where is she? Which outpost do I need to go to?”

No one speaks, and my patience is running low. These aren’t average men, after all—they’re way too accustomed to torture and the thought of their impending death.

“Very well, then.”

I glance at Hawke, who steps past me and, without hesitation, lifts his leg to push the first man into the hole.

“What the fuck are you doing?!” another one cries out, looking over his shoulder.

The one in the hole screams for help. I ignore it.

Some might say I’m psychotic for burying these men alive, and I very well might be. But who’s going to stop me? And why should I stop when the woman I love is suffering tenfold more than these assholes are? I can’t even begin to imagine where they’re keeping her right now. I think about it every second of every day, and it sure as fuck helps in fueling my rage. But rage isn’t the only feeling passing through me. My heart, my lungs, my bones, and flesh... they’re crushed by a force so strong, so powerful, that it sometimes brings me to my knees, completely overpowering me.

I crack my shoulders and neck, waiting for the pain to pass, telling myself that this is it—that they will tell me where she is, and I’ll barge in there with my team before the sun comes up. But hope... hope is a dangerous thing for a man like me.

“I’m giving you one more chance to say something actually useful,” I say. “Then I’ll simply move on to another bunch of you. And another. And so on, until I have it my way. No one will remember your names. No one will look for you. They wouldn’t even know where to begin.” I pick an invisible speck of dust from my jacket.

“You know, I truly wonder, Commander,” someone else says, “what kind of deranged woman would love someone like you.” He means to taunt me, I know that, but his voice cracks at the edges when he says the words out loud.

He’s the biggest of them, muscles straining against his dirt-streaked skin. A man who looks like he could split my head in half if given the chance. But strength means nothing without nerve, and his is already breaking. Sweat drips down his temples, tracing filthy lines along his neck. His eyes dart too quickly between Hawke, me, my men, and then back again, as if one of us might hit him any second.

“You’re fucking crazy,” he spits out, louder this time, hiding his fear behind the volume.

I shrug, unbothered. “So what if I am? What are you going to do about it, Gale?”

His jaw locks at the mention of his real name, and a muscle ticks along his cheek. The others stay quiet, listening with detached resignation. One stares at the ground like he’s already accepted what’s coming. Another shifts his weight, shoulders tensing, but keeps his mouth shut.

Only Gale falters.

His chest heaves, his knuckles white as he clenches his fists. His gaze flickers to the hole behind him for a moment.

“You know where you’ll end up if you don’t talk,” I say, voice calm, like it’s a foregone conclusion.

He flinches, just barely, but enough for me to notice. Enough for all of us to notice. “Don’t do this.”

I crouch in front of him, lifting his chin with the barrel of my gun.

“What’s that?”

He deflects it, his cold eyes boring into mine.

“I said... don’t fucking do this. You looked into me. You know.” He bares his teeth.

“I do know, Gale. I know all about your irrational fear of being buried alive. I know about your recent regression in Salister’s ranks. What are you fighting for here? A cult that played you from day one? That doesn’t give a fuck about where you are right now? Hmm?” I look back at Hawke. “Wrap this up and cover the hole.”

Combat boots pass me from behind. Hawke and the others finish the job as the screams get louder, and Gale’s panic grows deeper by the second.

“You can feel it already, can’t you? The wood trapping you inside. The darkness seeping into your pores, clinging to your lungs, and chipping away at your sanity,” I tell Gale. He grunts, squirming into the ropes we tied him with. “The roaches. The snakes. They’ll crawl all over you. Into your mouth, nose, and ears. They’ll eat you up from the inside out, and you’ll be awake to feel it all.”

“Shut up! Shut the fuck up, you sick son of a bitch!”

“Give me what I need, Gale, and I won’t bury you alive with the rest of them. You have my word.”

“Your word means nothing to me!”

I’m so close. He’ll talk. He has to.

I keep silent, watching the deliberation unfold on his face.

He glances at the hole behind him for the second time, then back at me. His breath comes faster now, shallow, ragged, but the next words coming out of his mouth are nothing like what I expect him to say.

“I don’t... I don’t know where they took her.”

I close my eyes, defeated, feeling my rage flicker inside me like the start of a wildfire before it burns the forest down. Standing up, I’m this close to pushing him into the last empty casket when he speaks again.

“... all I know is who did.”

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 2:59 am

seven

Dove

The groan of metal against concrete jerks me awake. My breath catches and I scramble back, every muscle in my body screaming in pain. My hand darts to my shoe where I hid the knife—the one Magnus slipped me, the one he said I shouldn't hesitate to use. Go for the jugular, he told me, like it's supposed to be easy.

I want to believe I can do it—that when the time comes, adrenaline will take over and I'll fight to survive. But whenever my fingers brush the handle, I freeze. The thought of sinking it into someone, of watching them bleed because of me... It makes my stomach churn. At best, I could slash them just enough to get away. Anything more and I'd be the one collapsing on the floor, knife in hand, paying the price for what I'd done.

Still, I wrap my hand around the handle. The cold metal grounds me, forcing my trembling body to still. Slowly I shift into position, readying myself for whatever's next.

“Wakey, wakey, little bird.” An unknown voice reverberates against the walls. “Time for your next shot.”

The man's shadow hovers above me as the cap of a syringe comes off.

Not this again.

I tighten my hold on the knife's handle, waiting for him to get close. If I can get past these doors, maybe I can find Cole. He told me to stay put, but does he even know what they're doing to me down here? Can I even trust him anymore?

The man stoops and grabs my hair, tilting my head to the side.

"No," I croak out, my throat rough and pulsing with the pain of my infection.

He scoffs, squirting a bit of the liquid out of the syringe. It splashes on my skin, and my body moves of its own accord, taking out the knife and shoving it down into his shin. Almost immediately I drop it, my hands shaking after I stain them with tendrils of his blood.

"Fucking bitch !" he cries out, his grip on my hair loosening. My legs barely cooperate as I push off the ground and stagger toward the door. My fingers fumble with the latch, slick with sweat.

But the second I wrench it open, hope dies in my throat.

Someone else is here, hidden in the shadows of the hallway beyond my cage. We briefly make eye contact, and I see his expression. There's no surprise there, as if he's been expecting this. As if he's been expecting me . He grabs me before I can even think to scream, his arms wrapping around my waist and hauling me back inside.

It's pointless. Pointless. Pointless.

I can never get away.

"If you let this weak-ass girl stab you and run, you really shouldn't be on this job."

"Shut the fuck up," the man I stabbed says, hissing in pain. "Bring her here."

I fight against his grip as best I can, but I know it will just be another lost fight.

My body gives out, and I feel the pinch of the syringe somewhere in my neck before the fight drains from me completely. I want to curl up in a ball and cry, like I always do after they inject me. Only this time, I can't. For the first time, I'm dragged out of the room like a fish out of water, granting me my wish. But this is far, far from how I wanted things to play out. I'm terrified of what—or who—might be waiting for me outside.

Low voices hum around me, silhouettes in red robes walking the dimly lit hallway. I'm dragged through a maze of long, cold corridors with a faint smell of church incense, then hauled up a bunch of stairs. Up and up we go, and more light—and fresh air—welcomes me.

Then I'm in a large, modern room with open windows overlooking a town. It looks pristine, a stark contrast to the dark basement where they've been keeping me. I'm placed into a soft armchair, my feet tingling from the change in temperature. It's so warm in here.

“Do anything stupid, and we'll throw you right back into the basement. Understand?”

I think I nod faintly, but I'm not sure. Behind me, heavy footsteps walk in—not just a pair, but many, enough to make me wish I'd used that knife on myself instead. Tears streak my now-warm cheeks. A hand slips beneath my chin, but I keep my eyes closed.

“What is this?” a stern voice asks in front of me. “Why is she this weak?”

There's some shuffling behind me before someone says, “Someone probably gave her an extra shot...”

The hand under my chin retracts so abruptly that I have to keep myself from falling forward. And just then, just when my eyes glance aimlessly for a brief second—I see him.

My brother stands upright, wearing the same long crimson cloak I've seen on others, his buzz-cut hair and eye scar the same as when I last saw him.

So it was all real, then.

I look at him, but his gaze is trained ahead—void of any emotion, still, and unbothered. He doesn't seem to care that I'm here, that I'm hurting so much. My heart feels like someone pulled it out of my chest, and I whimper in pain, with my aching throat and all.

“C-Cole,” I say, my voice broken.

An even sharper pain spreads across my face when the heavy back of a palm hits my cheek. My head twists to the side, hair sticking to my wet face, obstructing my vision. I look into the void, shocked, but the adrenaline makes me come to my senses quickly.

“No one asked you to speak.”

A low hum of approval rumbles from the man in front of me. I look down at his expensive shoes and the crimson cloak that covers half of them. Swallowing, I force myself to glare higher, tracing his body until I have to crane my neck to see his face. A white mask hides it, save for the two holes showing his ashy green eyes. Not as bright as Rowan's, but muted, like they're mixed with gray specs of dust.

Where have I seen them before?

There's nothing warm about them—just a cold stare that makes my skin crawl, a stare that pins me in place, making sure I know exactly who holds the power in this room. He watches me in eerie silence and I watch him back, completely oblivious to who he is and what he wants from me.

“Find out who gave her the extra dose and chain him downstairs,” he says, then leans against the desk, cocking his head to the right. Observing me. “Welcome to my town, Miss Finnegan.”

His town.

“We don't have many females here, so you must excuse my men for being a little too... enthusiastic.”

I fist my hands in my lap to keep from shaking. “Your men are animals.”

He chuckles lowly. “They are, when they need to be.”

I swallow hard. “I already told them everything I know. You're wasting your time with me.”

He ignores me, gesturing toward someone in the back. My brother approaches, pouring water into a tall glass. Following his commands like a loyal dog. I wince, hyper-aware of his presence around me, and this man—his boss—sees it, as if he wanted to get this reaction from me. Or to see if Cole is going to display any, but of course he doesn't.

“We didn't bring you here for information. I made the mistake of underestimating Rowan once, and I won't make it again. It's pretty clear he kept you in the dark intentionally.”

Salister. His name is Salister , my mind screams at me, conjuring up information I heard in passing between the men who came to my cell. And those eyes...

He's... Cam's father.

“Why am I here, then? Why are you forcing my brother—”

“Oh?” he asks, amusement sounding in his tone. “You think I’m forcing him? I’m afraid we’re well past that point now. Aren’t we, Cole?”

I fight back tears as I hear him say, “Yes, sir.”

The way he says it—coldly and with precision—hits me like another slap. There's no hesitation, no flicker of doubt. He's learned to play their game, wearing Salister's collar with pride. My heart tightens, struggling to understand what they could've possibly done to him to make him this way.

Salister's eyes flicker with satisfaction. “I’m sure you two will have time to talk at some point. If he wants to talk to you, that is.” Pushing himself away from the desk, he casually walks over to the window, looking out at his town. “Tell me now, Miss Finnegan, have you ever been touched?”

“W-What?”

The question—so perverse, so invasive—takes me aback. My cheeks burn from shame and when I hear laughter behind me, they also flush with rage.

“I imagine Rowan fucked all your holes by now. Allow me to rephrase: have you ever been touched while being here ?”

I hold my breath tightly in my chest, not knowing what to answer. So he answers for

me, staring out at the town with his hands behind his back. “It will happen again. And again. And again. Until you’re a shell of a human and you can’t make out where you belong in this world anymore.”

Knots twist my stomach and I whimper, leaning forward so I can get up and leave. Where, I don’t know, but I can’t stay here and listen to this. A sturdy hand pushes me back down from behind.

“The men who work for our cause are all under a celibacy oath. They can’t fuck you with their cocks. And they can’t make you suck them. But who doesn’t enjoy touching a warm, wet cunt from time to time? Hmm?”

Oh my God.

“Why are you doing this?” I push out the words between shallow breaths. “What do you want from us?!”

His fingers twitch as if itching to move, but he keeps his hands clasped behind his back, never wasting a breath or a motion without a good enough reason behind it. The calmness with which he explains things only makes his words that much more chilling.

“When people are allowed to govern themselves, they destroy things—destroy each other. We’ve seen it time and time again throughout history. Contrary to what you might think of us, all we want...” He saunters over to his desk. “Is peace. Order. And this system we have now has always, always led to chaos, Miss Finnegan.”

I tense. “If history has proved anything, is that democracy is the only way to—”

“Democracy is a lie.” He snorts. “It’s inefficient. Corrupt. It gives you the illusion of choice, then slaps you in the face with the same system. It was built for the masses to

comply—but that’s exactly the issue. They’re now going against it.” His eyes darken. “We have a plan for this country. A plan that might start with you and me—but one that will last for centuries. And if giving my men your cunt is what it takes to keep them motivated, I won’t hesitate to do it.”

I shudder at his words, finally understanding just how deep this nightmare goes. Rounding the chair I’m on, Salister disappears behind me. When he comes back, the knife I used in my cell this morning rests in his hands. My eyes bulge in shock.

“Every man must earn his keep here. And since you’ll be staying with us for a while, you’re expected to pay your dues. The question is, how will you be paying them?”

I grind my teeth, panic quickly growing inside me.

“Either give my men what they want, when they want it,” he says, “or kill the man who gave you this knife.”

The room is spinning. A rush of heat squeezes my chest, anxiety churning in my gut like stormy water. Kill Magnus... or let them use me, degrade me. Murder the only person in this shithole who gave a damn about me. In cold blood. To save myself. I want to scream, to claw at the smug, masked face staring me down and make him feel the same helplessness that’s eating me alive.

I shake my head, but I’m too terrified to give him my words.

I don’t want to make this choice. I sob, but he doesn’t falter.

“You want answers. You want warmth. And fuck knows you need a shower. All these things come at a cost. Give us something in return, and you can have them.”

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 2:59 am

eight

Rowan

Nine days, eight hours, and twenty-three minutes. That's how long she's been gone.

My body winces with exhaustion, never being able to rest for more than one hour at a time. If she's not sleeping peacefully in our bed, how could I? I've never been a religious man, but this is the first time in my life when I pray to God. I pray that she's still alive, because as much as I don't even fucking want to consider it, I know she could be gone by the time I find her. They'd kill her just to spite me... just to break me and take control of the entire political plan I'd no longer care about. Without her I'm nothing, and now they know that.

"You know you have to stop doing this, right?" Maddox asks.

We're parked in my car, in front of Dove's apartment building, late at night. My combat boots are drenched in mud from when I buried Governor Castillo's body after murdering him in his hotel room. By the time I finished the job, Maddox tracked me down and got in the passenger seat so we could talk.

"Do what?" I say, though I know exactly what he's referring to.

"This. Coming here every night. She's not... You know we can't involve her in this kind of life."

I won't, so there's no point talking about it, but the pain of knowing I can't have her

is better than feeling nothing at all. I look out toward the apartment block at the lit bedroom window on the fifth floor. She's in there, and I know she smells like sugared strawberries and summer rain. And that she smiles... a lot. She wears pretty dresses and keeps her wavy hair long, sometimes wrapped with cute little ribbons. She drinks her coffee no earlier than ten so she can let her natural cortisol wake her up.

I know all these things and I shouldn't because this girl simply can't be mine.

"She has a big case tomorrow with her boss," I say absently. "That's probably why she's still up."

He sighs. "Fuck, Rowan, why are you doing this to yourself?"

The corner of my mouth goes up into a bittersweet smile.

"Because Dove is going to change the world someday. And I'll be damned if I'm not here to watch."

I open my eyes and tilt my face to the morning sky, the memory of that night fresh in my mind. Guilt presses down on me, and it's getting harder and harder to push it aside. I'm in front of the Operations Center, a place I haven't visited since I took over the military and gave up my special ops role. But now that I have the name of the asshole who took Dove, I finally feel like I'm getting somewhere.

My phone buzzes in my hand, and I glance down before answering.

"Fuck," Maddox mutters, an afterthought of the last text message I sent him earlier.

Fuck is right.

Turns out, finding out who Dove's kidnapper is wasn't the hard part. The real

problem is that to get to him, I need someone on board who's hated my guts ever since I pulled him out of his job five years ago.

I grind my teeth as I pace around the special ops garage. Former Secretary of Defense David Foster will never agree to helping me with anything, let alone setting up a meeting on my behalf. Talk about burning bridges...

"Everybody wants something," I tell Maddox. "Call him. Give him back the job Delaney fired him from."

"That would mean firing you ."

I swallow hard, the weight of it settling in my chest. Everything I've worked for, everything I've built in my career, gone with one call. But they can take it all—rip it apart like a carcass tossed to the vultures—as long as Dove is back in my arms.

I grip the phone tighter, my knuckles white, my pacing frantic. My breath comes fast and uneven, and I have to let out a long sigh before I say, "Do it if it comes to that. I need to get to her, Maddox."

Desperation must be pretty clear in my voice, judging by his response.

"Major Nathaniel Rourke," Maddox deadpans. "Foster wants him pardoned for the war crimes he committed last year. He's already expressed that plenty of times."

I shake my head, turning to look at nothing in particular. "If you do that, you won't get re-elected for a second term. Nate was found doing illegal arms deals with factions of the CCSI."

"I know what he did."

“Then you know I can’t ask you to do that. Give him my job, and that’s that. He’ll take it.”

A pause settles between us. My mind goes back to Dove, and it hurts. It fucking hurts to know I failed to protect her. Just like I failed to protect Cole. Just like I failed to protect my mother when my father used to beat her. Everyone I love ends up either broken... or dead.

I’m in our cramped living room, holding my breath as my father looks over my report card. Straight A’s, just like he wanted, but the look on his face makes my heart beat fast.

“I bet you think you’re the shit right now.” He scoffs. “But a piece of paper doesn’t make you a man. You’re still weak, Rowan. Everyone can see.”

Weak, he says. But I know I’m not weak. I’m fourteen and training harder than kids twice my age. I’m on track to be valedictorian. I run faster, hit harder, study longer—but it’s never enough.

The memory shifts.

I’m nineteen, bruised and aching everywhere, standing at attention in my army uniform. I’ve just been named the youngest squad leader in my unit. Everyone sees me for who I am, except him.

“Still a kid playing soldier,” he muttered when I told him. “You won’t know true power until you push yourself to the limit, then jump the fucking line.”

Maddox’s voice breaks through the haze of my memories, pulling me back to the present.

“Tell me what you need, and I’ll make it happen.”

“Get Secretary Foster to arrange a meeting between me and Mason Fletcher. That’s the name I got, and I know they know each other well enough. Tell Foster I want to strike some sort of deal. I was told Salister wants to work with me, so maybe I can bait him with something like that.”

“You think Fletcher would go for it?”

“He would at least meet with me to find out what I can offer them. That’s all I need, really. Just ten minutes in the same room with him.”

“Consider it done. And Rowan, anything else you need—”

I nod, even if he can’t see me. “I know. I’ll text back later.”

I pocket my phone and rush to find Hawke in the garage. If Foster agrees to arrange the meeting, we need to move fast. But first I need to get to the White House for one last stop.

The next day, I’m standing in front of an old liquor bar in the suburbs of Washington. I don’t know what deal Maddox and Secretary Foster landed on, but none of that matters right now. My fingertips flinch with all the rage flowing through me. I’m about to meet the man who did all of this for the first time.

Mason picked the hour, the exact booth where he wants to sit, and hand-selected his best men to come with him. Me, however? I’m only here with Hawke for now. Not because we’re cocky, but because our plan is much more intricate than simply drawing our guns.

Hawke and I scan the perimeter, then make our way inside. My eyes go around the

almost empty room, locking with some tattooed guy in the back. Compared to the old, lonely men drinking at the bar, he stands out like a bull in a china shop. The frail twenty-something server wipes beer off the counter with quick, nervous motions. He knows some shit is about to go down.

Approaching the back of the worn-out room, the guy with the tattoo jerks his head as if to summon me to follow him into a private booth separated by a door. There are three men inside, all marked with the same EFW symbols I've come to know like the back of my hand. And there in the middle, at the crooked table, sits Mason Fletcher with a toothpick in his mouth.

Only one chair sits across from him, and I know it's for me. Not wasting any time, I drag it with a loud screech and plop down, placing both arms on the table in front of him, my fingers interlaced.

Easy. Easy, I command my mind.

I want to rip his throat with my bare teeth. I want to break the fucking hands that touched Dove, and make him scream until his vocal cords snap. I want him down on his knees, begging for his life.

But first, we talk.

I clench my jaw, forcing myself to remain calm.

"You want something from me. What is it?" I ask, my voice a thunderous break in the silence.

He chews on his toothpick, taking his sweet fucking time.

"Glad to see we've got your attention," he says. "After all these years, who would've

thought a dumb bitch would be our bargaining chip with the country's greatest commander?"

Easy.

Take it fucking easy.

I keep silent and so does he, watching for my reaction, but I give him none. He turns to the men behind him and laughs. The others smirk back, as if to stay in his graces.

"No, no, I apologize for that," he says, turning back to me and waving a nonchalant hand in the air. "She's your woman, after all." He takes the toothpick out of his mouth. "You did well finding me. I swear, I keep asking myself if maybe Salister isn't testing you right now. He knows you're great in combat and that you've got a brilliant mind. But how well you hunt, well, this is the first time we get to see it in action."

"Is that what you want? A hunter?"

"Nah. We've got plenty of those. You know what we want." He looks to the side, then back at me. "A place in your party. We had it with President Delaney, and then you stole it from us. It's only fair that you give it back."

The door opens behind me and the server comes in with a shaky tray, two glasses, and a bottle of whiskey. Mason and I stay quiet, watching him place the glasses in front of us. Quickly, he opens the bottle and pours two fingers' worth of alcohol into each glass, staining the table with a few drops as he rushes to back away.

"I-If I can bring you anything else—"

"Leave the bottle. And get the fuck out," Mason says, his eyes trained on me.

Before he has time to react, one of his men snatches the bottle from the server's hand. He leaves as quickly as he appeared, not making another sound.

I ask, "Speaker of the House?"

He shakes his head slowly.

"Chief of Staff, then."

Another shake of his head. I wrap my hand around my glass, scoffing as the answer dawns on me.

"You want one of your men as vice president."

He shrugs. "It should've been Camelia—she would've been Salister's first choice. But that bitch turned her back on us. To become... what? The First Lady?" He lets out a short laugh. "She's never been more powerless than she is now."

If only he knew how much power Camelia Thorne holds over the president of this country. Maddox would fall to his goddamn knees for her, but they don't need to know that.

I take a sip of my drink. "I'm in charge of the military. What makes you think I have the power to appoint a new vice president?"

"Ah, come now, don't play dumb. Everyone here knows you and Maddox work together."

I lean back in my chair, watching him. "I need proof that she's alive."

He chuckles. The laugh is low, and it makes my anger flare stronger.

“She’s alive. She’s been asking for you, in fact— ‘Rowan, Rowan, where is Rowan?’” he mocks in a high-pitched voice. “Don’t worry. She’s all yours when you get things done.”

She’s all mine now, you fucking rat.

His hand wraps around his own glass, bringing it up to his lips. I look away, frowning as I pretend to consider doing what he asked. “That won’t be enough. I need a video of her saying today’s date. Give me that, and I’ll convince Maddox to—”

His glass suddenly hits the table, empty and with his lip marks on the edges. He motions to the men behind him to fill it back up. “I don’t think you understand. This isn’t a negotiation. You asked me what I want, and I told you. Get it done, or don’t. Let’s see how much you actually want her back.”

I drum my fingers on the glass that’s still in my hand, looking into the void. Mason clears his throat, then puts the toothpick back in his mouth.

“Ah, isn’t this a nice sight? Rowan King, finally coming to terms with his place in the world. The EFW has been here for far longer than you’ve been alive. It was time you got a fucking taste of who we really—”

Cough.

Cough.

He bends over along the table, holding onto the edge as his coughing intensifies.

I only raise my eyebrows, watching him patiently.

“W-What...” Cough . “What the fuck did you do?”

The men behind him give each other looks as they stare at the bottle they took from the server, now depleted by their own thirst. It's only a matter of time before they start coughing, too.

"The First Lady sends her regards," I say, tilting the glass forward and spilling the poisoned whiskey on the wooden floor.

It's why I stopped by the White House earlier. Not to meet with Maddox, but to get what I needed from Cam. She used to prepare this exact poison when working for The Hive. It's fucking brutal on the human body. It kills you slowly over time, while your skin decomposes and you can't move anything from the neck down. She also gave me the antidote, which I drank before getting out of the car. After that, all it took was to bribe the server to pour it in the whiskey, which Hawke did as soon as we all sat down.

"You motherfu—" Mason coughs blood on the floor, and I scrunch my nose at the sight.

"Now, now," I say, eyeing the goons he brought with him. They make a move toward me, but they're already weakening. Hawke steps in and knocks the first one down. "No need to be so upset. I brought the antidote, you see." I take the half-empty vial from my chest pocket, flaunting it in front of him. "You might not get your vice president in the White House, but you can win back your life. Fair trade, don't you think? A life for a life."

I stand up and go around the table between us. Mason struggles to get up, but I kick him with my boot in the back, and he falls on his trembling arms.

"Where is she? Where the fuck did you take her?!" I shout, fisting his hair and pulling his head back while my boot still presses his body down onto the floor. "You think Salister gives a fuck about any of you? All he's ever cared about is pushing his

plans—his father’s plans, and his grandfather’s plans. Your loyalty means nothing to him. He sent his own daughter—his only child —to The Hive for training. Do you have any idea what the Matron puts those girls through? Or what happened to Gale Traveski? The man worshiped Salister like a god, only to end up demoted and buried in a box like a dead animal the moment he outlived his usefulness.”

He listens, no longer coughing but wheezing. The smell of burned flesh enters my nostrils.

“You’re a proud and hungry man, Mason. You’ve worked your ass off to get to where you are. If you die, all that hard work dies with you. But if you live, you might still be able to salvage it.”

I take my boot off him and let go of his head. I go around him, crouching, then uncup the vial.

“Open up. You only need a bit of this to stop your organs from failing.” He parts his lips, albeit slowly, and I pour some of the liquid in his mouth. I don’t actually intend to let him live, but I also won’t let him die from this poison. Hawke has already arranged for a special ops truck to come and pick him up. I’ll have him chained in my basement, where I get to torture him for as long as I fucking want.

“Already feeling better, aren’t you? Cam said you’ll need the whole bottle to recover. Will you take it, Mason, or will I have to dig a hole in the ground for you tonight?”

“W-West,” he wheezes out. “Westh-haven.”

Think. Think. Fucking think.

“Westhaven... in Montana... or in Maine? Where ?”

He chokes on the words, but I make out the sound Montana .

I stand up, noticing the rest of our crew come in to clear the room. I reach for my phone, making a call that's been long overdue. It gets answered after two beeps, and I exit the old bar while I speak.

“President Delaney,” I drawl. “You owe me a favor. And I’m coming to collect.”

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 2:59 am

nine

Dove

I lie on my side, cocooned under the warm blankets of a small bed. They moved me into a room—I'm no longer down in the basement—and I even have a window now. But the thought of seeing the light of day makes me want to die.

The slick feeling of blood lingers on my hands. I've washed them in cold water and rubbed them raw. My skin is burning, but the pain doesn't come close to what I'm feeling inside. If I was hanging on to any hope of Rowan finding me and getting out of here, all of that is now gone. My body begins to sing the song of death, and my mind is finally coming to terms with it.

The same memory plays in my head like a broken record that I can't seem to stop. It screeches against everything good left in me, bringing me down, down, down into a bottomless pit of despair.

"I c-can't. Please don't make—don't make me do it."

Magnus, the man they want dead, is chained to the wall in the basement, bruised, and bleeding, and barely conscious.

"I'm not making you do anything, darling," the guard tells me. "You chose this when you asked us... no, begged us not to touch you. Remember?"

I shake my head, sobbing. My body isn't worth more than the life of this man. I don't

know him, and I don't know the things he's done, but I can't be the one who brings him his punishment. I'm just a girl. I'm just—

“Do it, Dove,” Magnus whispers, hovering between life and death. “I'm as good as dead, anyway.”

The guard kicks him in the face, then Magnus grins— grins , showing his bloody teeth. As if he's accepted his fate ever since he stepped into my cell yesterday morning. My body is pulled forward, the knife shaking in my hand. I don't want to do this. I can't. But the guard's hand wraps around the handle next to mine, giving me a strong enough nudge that Magnus's blood splatters on my face, and his eyes lose their spark.

I blink fast and hard, tossing to the other side of the bed as I try to stop the scene from haunting me again. And it's my stomach—empty and sticking to my spine—that pulls me back to the present just enough to shift the trajectory of my thoughts.

My skin tingles with the ghostly feeling of Rowan's touch. I ache and think of him, conjuring soothing words in my mind... words that he'd say to me if he were here right now. I stretch my hand out, clutching the sheets, imagining he's next to me. I imagine I could pull his arm over my body to hide. Only that... only his presence might pull me out of the hole I'm falling through. But he isn't here, and I'm exhausted from hoping otherwise. Loneliness presses hard on me, and the thought of breaking that window and picking up a shard of glass grows larger and larger in my mind.

Someone calls out my name, but I'm too far away from the present to register the intent or the voice. A hand lands on top of my body above the blanket that covers me, and I shudder. Why is it gentle? Why is it not hard and demanding, like every other hand that touched me since being here?

“Dove,” the voice says. “It’s okay. It’s me.”

My eyes open in the dark, but I don’t make a sound. I know Cole is in the room, but I don’t know what to think about him anymore. He’s here, he’s alive, and he didn’t protect me. He walked away, knowing full well what they were planning to do to me.

“I’m so sorry, Dove. There was nothing I could do about Magnus. But I’m here now. Talk to me.”

He pulls the covers down and light inundates my eyes, making my eyelashes flutter and my body tense up. Something falls from his hand, but I can’t see it clearly enough. It disappears under the covers.

“Please,” he says. “I know it hurts. Believe me, it hurts me just as much to see you like this.”

I pull away from his touch. “I don’t know you anymore.”

“No, you don’t...” He sighs, and the mattress dips down under his weight as he sits down. “You don’t.”

A pause settles between us, as if he’s trying to find the right words. What could he possibly say to me to make it all right? There’s no explanation, nothing he could say to fix this. Where was he all these years? And why is he working with the people trying to ruin us?

“This whole town is run by the EFW. We’re in one of Salister’s homes right now. He wants you here because... he’s going to lure Rowan in and make some sort of deal. Do you understand what I’m telling you?”

Alarm bells ring in what’s left of my sane mind, and I get up, finally seeing him.

“What do you mean, lure Rowan in? How can you let this happen? Don’t you know what these people do? I thought...” I let out a shaky breath. “I thought that’s why you, him, and Maddox started this. I don’t understand.”

“Come here. Let me hold you.”

And maybe because I’ve been deprived of affection for too long, or because I’m too broken to realize his true intent, I lean into him like I used to do when we were back home. His familiar scent brings back the tornado of memories—our childhood, my teenage years, the day he left... the day he died.

His eyes soften for just a second, and I remember this look. I’ve seen it countless times before, back when we were kids and he was the one taking care of me. Always there, even when he didn’t have to be, like that night when I wanted him to go out with his girlfriend and he refused to leave me alone.

He’d sat on the couch watching Titanic with me for the fifth time, his messy hair sticking out from under his oversized hoodie, grumbling about how annoying I was for insisting he just go. But he stayed anyway, even when I pretended I’d be fine on my own.

I glance at him now, and the memory twists in my chest. I used to think he’d always be there for me. But the man in front of me now... he feels like a stranger. Still, I fist his cloak and bury myself in his chest because just for a moment, I want to be held... to pretend he’s still my brother, and that he still loves me.

“You’ve grown up so much. I wish I could’ve been there to see it.”

Unshed tears clog my throat, but I get the words out. “Why weren’t you?”

Silence. I press against his chest, lifting my head so I can search his eyes.

“Who are you? What happened?”

A sigh. “I can’t give you all the answers you need. The truth is you’ll be out of here soon, and we will probably never see each other again. So right now, let me be here for you while I still can. I want you to eat, Dove. I want you to hydrate yourself, get some fresh air, and sleep. This is—”

“No,” I tell him. “No! You don’t get to show up after five years and all you have to say is that I need to eat. What the hell is this?”

His jaw clenches, and he lets out an annoyed growl, his true colors flashing before my eyes. “I am Commander Cole Finnegan of the Third Division of the EFW. I was brought here the day my death was faked and trained to run this division to the best of my ability. Don’t ask me why—there are bigger things at play. Bigger than you, and me, and Rowan, and everyone else trying to interfere with our mission.”

My body tenses at his words, and I move away from him, suddenly terrified.

“How could you... how could you let them bring me here?”

He stands up, heading toward the door. Hurt and betrayal flash through me, squeezing my heart, making me want to scream from the bottom of my lungs. My mind conjures up the words faster than I can stop them—it was better knowing he was dead.

“You can’t be dead when Rowan gets here,” he says as an afterthought. “Without you as a bargaining chip, they’ll kill him. And you’ll have both his blood and Magnus’s on your hands. Do you understand?”

I want to scream at him, but no words come out. The more he tells me, the more paralyzed I feel. Instead of calming me down, his presence stirs up more turmoil than I can handle. All I know is I want him gone.

“Get some rest and eat something. And don’t do anything stupid. We’re watching you.”

ten

Dove

I wake up to the smell of food somewhere around me. Real food. Bacon, eggs, and something sweet, like donuts. My mouth waters and I swallow into my still-aching throat, but don't get up.

I turn on my other side, my shirt riding up and exposing a few inches of my skin beneath the blankets. Something rough and foreign scratches that exact spot.

Blindly, I extend my hand behind me, halting when my fingertips feel the object. It's paper. Neatly folded, small, and thick. I take a sharp breath in, remembering it must be what fell from Cole's hand yesterday when he came into my room.

My immediate instinct is to get up and open it, but... why would he leave it like this and not give it to me directly? My eyebrows furrow as I think through it. Maybe, just maybe, Cole knows I'm being watched here, and he didn't want them to see what he left me.

"We're watching you," I recall him saying before leaving.

I know he said he's working for them now, but I wonder... did he even have a say in it? Is my brother plotting something the EFW can't know about? Magnus said the reason he gave me that knife was because Cole asked him to. Maybe all isn't lost. Maybe my brother isn't really who he showed me he is.

Slowly and as quietly as I can, I take the paper and open it in front of me under the blankets. It's a standard letter size filled with what I recognize to be Cole's handwriting, albeit rushed and more chaotic than I remember it. As if he didn't have time to write it, or... he didn't want to get caught doing it.

My eyes shift across the paper rapidly, confirming it.

"Don't get out from under the covers to read this. There are cameras in your room."

I cover my mouth with my empty hand, staying still like a mouse hiding in a long field.

"When you're done reading, scrunch this letter in your hand and flush it down the toilet."

I nod, a kernel of hope blooming somewhere in the depths of my pain.

I was right. Oh my God , I was right.

"I'm going to assume Rowan told you what I was really doing in the military and what we were striving for. All of that is true. I was going to climb my way up to a leadership role in the FBI. The reason is simple, though I know it will be hard for you to believe right now—but it truly was for you and Mom. All of it. I wanted you to have a better life in this country, and with the war looming over our heads, I didn't want you to worry about anything as you grew up."

I clutch the paper tighter, warm tears running down my fever-streaked cheeks. My eyes are hurting from the lack of light under these blankets, but nothing could stop me from finding out what really happened to my brother.

"Five years ago, I went out one night to take care of a loose end. I didn't think much

about it until I arrived and the EFW were there waiting for me. I tried fighting them off, but the trap had been set specifically for me. I practically ran straight into it and stood no chance to escape it. They faked my death—switched bodies with someone they had already prepared to imitate mine... my tattoos, everything. The only difference was my face, so they took care of that by crushing his until it was unrecognizable.”

The memory of that day hits me—of how they wouldn’t let us open the casket because of how disfigured Cole’s face supposedly was. My mom insisted on seeing it. They let her, and then she couldn’t sleep for weeks after that. I let out a shaky breath, and I keep reading.

“I was brought to one of their outposts—I couldn’t tell you which—and tortured almost to death. They took their sweet time to break me, and I was a stubborn motherfucker. For an entire year, I lived like a rat between pythons, beaten and brought back to life more times than I can count. There was no escaping. God knows I tried. I tried... and I couldn’t do it.

“And I was so mad, Dove. There was so much anger inside me for falling into their trap. No one knew I was here or that I was still alive. It was so lonely... and I kept shouting into the fucking void. They might as well have buried me alive. As time went on in that basement cell where they kept me, eventually I learned to turn that rage into something useful. I let them think they broke me, then used the next few years to start a rebellion behind their backs.”

Footsteps approach my room and I panic, folding the paper back into my hand. I spend a few moments in complete silence, holding my breath and only hearing my heavy heartbeat pound in my ears. I resume reading when I know they’re gone.

“I wasn’t allowed outside of their outpost at first. They had eyes on me everywhere. Every word I said, every breath I took, it was all under constant surveillance. So I

gave in... for a while. I figured if I proved myself, they would gain more and more trust in me. I've done things I'm not proud of, Dove. Things that I'd be ashamed to tell you about.

“But they all led here, to this moment, to this phase, when everything is about to come crashing down on them. It took me two whole years until I started going up in their internal ranks. The more things I did for Salister, the more he believed in me, and he started giving me a bit of free rein. I could go outside the walls... but I still couldn't come back to you, to the life we had.”

My heart is thrashing so hard against my skin, I can barely contain myself.

I slide the paper higher in my hands, continuing.

“They went with me everywhere. I tried fighting them off once or twice, which only landed me back in my basement cell for another six months, until Salister gave me another chance. This time, I took it. One, because I didn't see another way out, and two, because I figured out how to beat them at their own fucking game. I became one of them, hoping I could take them down from the inside.

“Magnus, the man I sent to give you that knife, was in on it, and so are many others. I've gathered a small army here, men who got played after being Salister's loyal dogs, men whose brothers have been killed for things so stupid, so simple that it didn't make any fucking sense. Anyone who is a liability to the system gets removed. But the system is crumbling, Dove. And when the time comes, we'll strike.”

“I love you, kid. And I'm so fucking sorry you and Mom got caught up in this. I tried to protect you, I always did. The day when someone broke into your apartment? It was me. I did that on purpose, because you still hadn't moved in with Rowan after he reached out.

“And God, I hated him so much for doing that. I asked him to watch over my family, not get my little sister involved in this kind of life. I hated him so much, and yet... in the end, I was glad. You make him so happy, like I’ve never seen him before, and he kept you safe for so long, even when you didn’t know he was in your life. It made sense that he would fall in love with you, that bastard. He’s a good man. And you... you’re perfect, Dove. I’m so proud of you for the woman you’ve become.”

A faint smile finds its way to my lips, the first one I’ve had in days. I swallow back tears, trying to stay quiet as best I can.

Cole looked after me... and he looked after Rowan. And he did his best to make sure we were okay when he was here, all alone, with no one to care for him. Wasting away while he was forced to see us all move on with our lives, thinking he was dead.

My heart breaks for him, and for a moment, I forget about my own pain. I want to wrap my arms around him and hold him tightly so I can tell him that I remember. That he was never forgotten, and I’ve never stopped loving him, even when I thought he was gone. I flip the page, going through the last paragraphs.

“It was crucial that you moved in with Rowan because I knew what was coming. They were planning to get to you, and I knew you’d be safe with him. My mistake was not being able to secure Mom’s safety sooner. That’s how they lured you out, and it’s all my fault. I’m so sorry.”

My entire body goes taut at the mention of our mother. I don’t even know if she’s still alive. I couldn’t see her that day. I was stupid enough to go after that doctor and out of Rowan’s sight. If I had known... if I had known it would be this easy to kidnap me, I...

“I might not make it out of here alive, Dove, but I’ll get you out. I need you to be strong. I can’t talk to you, can’t even look at you. To them, I’m no longer someone

with a consciousness. I'm only the monster they created, and I intend to keep being one until I'm confident we can strike back and win. That's why I'm writing this letter. You're a key piece of the puzzle in all of this, and you need to stay alive. You're the only bargaining chip Salister has against Rowan. If you die, they'll shoot him on the spot when he gets here, because there's no way he'd agree to working for Salister unless he'd be doing it to save you. They'd much rather get rid of him."

"Today I was sent to comfort you so you don't end your life. They've been watching you... and they think you want to do it. If they don't see you get better, you'll end up back in that basement, tied up and fed by a tube until Rowan gets here. Don't let them win, Dove. Think about Rowan—he'd die for you. You know he would. I love you so much, kid. I love you..."

I clutch the paper in my hand, wanting to reread it. Wanting to hear more of what my brother has to say, of what he's been through... But I know better than to compromise his safety by being careless. So I fold the paper back into the small square that scratched my skin, hiding it in my fist.

"F-Fuck," I breathe out.

I slowly push the covers off me, clearing my throat as the swelling reminds me that I'm still sick. I drape my legs over the mattress and get myself up to stand. Dizziness takes over, so I lean against the wall, regaining my balance. I go into the adjacent bathroom, careful not to reveal the paper in my hands to the cameras watching me. I still haven't seen any, so they probably didn't want me to know I'm being watched at all. That must be how they found out Magnus gave me that knife.

After using the toilet and flushing the piece of paper down, I wash my hands, feeling the sting from when I rubbed them raw earlier. When I rise from the sink, I glimpse myself in the mirror above it.

The face of a murderer. And the face of a coward.

It's been days since I've seen myself, and I look so different. My face is thinner, cheeks hollow and sucked-in. My skin is pale, and I look sickly in a strange way. They haven't given me any antibiotics, and I haven't asked. I didn't think they'd care, but seeing that I look like this, maybe I should. If they care so much about keeping me alive, maybe they'd give me some.

I look into my swollen eyes, and the song of death calls to me again. I shouldn't be here anymore, yet I am. Cole's words come back to me in waves, knocking at the door of my reasoning, at the bit of sanity I've still got left. I don't want to keep fighting. I feel weak and useless and my entire body is begging me to go to sleep and never wake up. But my brother is right. For him... for Rowan... for my mother, I'll fight. These people are my whole world, and I will not turn my back on them.

It's then that I decide I'll no longer be a victim.

No more of this. I won't be afraid.

Page 11

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 2:59 am

eleven

Dove

Three weeks ago

I lie awake on the couch with my head in Rowan's lap and my lower body in another man's. He called his friend over again. Leon.

The man who licked my pussy while Rowan held me down and whispered praise into my ear. The man who made me come on his tongue, then said he'd like to feel me around his cock. I voiced my safe word then, because I didn't know what else to do. I thought it was wrong—so wrong, so obscene, so out of line. But Rowan showed me it wasn't.

How can I possibly want him even more than I already do, now that another man is fingering my pussy with his bare hands? But that's just it—this man, Leon... He feels like nothing more than a ghost, as if he's just another puppet, same as I am. And Rowan's strings pull our limbs together, making us do things and having the power to take it all away. Still, I hide my face into Rowan's body because I can't believe how wet I am for the two of them.

I can't believe what they're doing to me.

I whimper and wiggle in their grasp, well aware that my nakedness is in full view. They're both fully dressed, and here I am, open and needy for whatever they're willing to give me.

“Don’t mind her,” Rowan tells him while caressing my hair, as if I’m not able to understand them. As if I’m their pet and nothing more. “She’s being fussy. I edged her pretty much all day.”

He did.

My pussy jolts from the pleasure bolting through me when Leon’s finger puts more pressure on my soaked clit. Then he takes it away, and the sensation disperses like smoke into a gust of air. I have tears in my eyes from the way they’ve been playing with me. They’re the wolves and I’m the sweet little lamb they caught today.

Leon’s voice takes on a light, teasing lilt as he coos, “Ah, is your pretty pussy too overstimulated, little bird? Should we make her come?”

“P-Please,” I say, hissing and on the verge of sobbing from the lack of self-control I have left. I want to come, and come, and come, and never stop. That’s what I imagine my orgasm will be like when they finally let me have it.

“Just a bit longer, angel,” Rowan says, his voice cruel, and lovely, and carnal while he unbuttons his pants. His cock comes out, hard and thick and veiny from the strain, like a monster I’m somehow supposed to defend myself from when I’m all but a sloppy mess. “Open your mouth. Don’t suck, just keep my cock nice and warm until we’re ready to fuck you. Is that understood?”

I nod with his cock in my mouth, looking up at him through wet eyelashes. Leon does something to my pussy, but I have no idea what. All I know is it feels good and I’m on the brink of coming again. I take in a breath of air through my nose, preparing myself for it. But despair hits me once again when he removes his hand, and Rowan hushes me into submission while I cry, my sobs muffled by the size of his cock. My safe word is on the tip of my tongue, but I hold on for a bit longer, hoping they’ll take mercy on me and let me have my release.

“Look at her,” Leon says. “She’s doing so well. She’s got to be the sweetest girl I’ve ever played with.”

Rowan pets my hair. “Why do you think I’m so addicted to her?”

They’re having a conversation, as if... as if I’m not holding Rowan’s cock between my lips... as if I’m not showing Leon my pussy and wetting his fingers while he plays with it. I look up at Rowan, confused, but he isn’t paying attention to me. Or, at least, I don’t think he is.

It makes me that much wetter, feeling like their toy, feeling like they could do anything they want to me. And that I have the power to shut it down if I wanted to.

“You sure you don’t want to share this one?” he asks.

What does he mean by that? Isn’t he sharing me right now?

“No,” Rowan deadpans, his cock twitching in my mouth. “I told you from the beginning. She’s all mine, and all of this is for her. Look how fucking wet she is right now. Christ...”

Leon sighs and inserts a finger into my pussy, idly, and without looking at it this time. “Fair enough.”

I moan and whimper around Rowan’s cock as Leon accidentally forgets to release the pressure on my clit for a second too long. I’m not coming yet, but I am so close.

So close. So close. So close.

A sharp slap lands on my thigh. Rowan looks down at me and says, “I’m so sorry, angel, but no one told you it’s okay to come. You don’t want us to have to start all

over again, do you?”

I shake my head, pleading with my eyes. My pussy throbs and begs— begs them for mercy.

But the mercy never comes.

The two of them have wine and talk politics, each holding a piece of me and teasing me until my sobbing distracts them. Then I’m up on shaky legs, and Rowan bends me over the table in front of us with my arms sprawled above my head. He holds me in place, shoving his cock back into my mouth as Leon’s cock pierces through the entrance of my tight and very little-used ass. It’s the only hole Rowan allowed him to enter.

“Good girl, angel. You’re making me so very proud in front of my friend,” Rowan says while slowly fucking my mouth. Drool and tears fall down my face, my jaw hurting from trying to accommodate his length and thickness.

Leon inches himself forward, his fingers digging into my hips as he hisses through his own pleasure. He’s thick—just as thick as Rowan, and I’m scared it will hurt, but Rowan anticipates that, too.

“Easy. She’s very sensitive down there. I’ve only fucked her once.”

“Fuck,” Leon groans, and his cock stops midway while he brings his hand to my pussy and rubs it some more. I relax into their touch, the throb of my clit resuming with the force of a fucking grenade. And I just know I’m going to come with this man’s cock in my ass... while Rowan tells me how sweet I am and how much he loves fucking my little mouth.

I wake up thrashing in my sheets, sweat coating my forehead and running down my

spine. My pussy throbs as I gasp, fighting for air as the memory—the dream—vanishes as quickly as it enveloped me. I open my eyes, and I see it—the same room with the same four walls I’ve been locked in for days.

My prison.

I fall back on the mattress and curl into myself, trying my hardest not to lose myself in my memories again. I once read this book where the main character survived a prison much worse than this. He said the others lost their minds while being there because... because all they did when they were alone was think of the life they had back at home. The life that was stolen from them.

My memories are the only safe space I have left. But if I do that... if I make the mistake of hiding in them... I know damn well I’m going to lose my mind. So I settle on imagining all the ways in which I’ll get my revenge. Living in the past might be a dangerous thing, but living in the future? At this point, that’s just being one step ahead.

twelve

Rowan

W esthaven, Montana. In the cool, silent air of the forest, I can feel the drum of my heartbeat like an omen. I welcome it. One hundred soldiers stand behind me, armed to the teeth and hiding behind the same skull masks we all wear. Fifty more cover the outer perimeter. And the final ten are in the operation center—the only men I trust to take care of any...inconveniences.

Hawke comes to my side, looking ahead at the streetlights that cast a hellish glow over the houses in the area. The EFW owns this town. Everyone living and working here—the sheriff's office, the city hall, and everyone else—they all report to Salister. Through our Intelligence, I couldn't find any evidence of it being their main outpost, but it sure as hell is a big one. And Dove is in one of these buildings. If I close my eyes, I can almost smell it... the sugared strawberries... the summer rain. Her scent is sculpted into my lungs, and my body begs me to run toward it.

Easy. Easy.

I breathe in, reeling back my urges. I'm already late enough. It's been three days since I poisoned Mason Fletcher and he gave me the name of this town. That's how long it took for ex- president Delaney to help bring me the manpower I needed. It wasn't an easy task, that I know. Although he's no longer president, with his connections, he could source the numbers I needed from private mercenaries. Without his involvement, Maddox simply couldn't have allocated enough of the country's resources for a personal mission. Besides, I told him I'd keep my sins away

from his presidency, and tonight, I intend to commit enough to last a lifetime.

The capital kind. I believe Catholics call it Wrath.

“Ready when you are, sir,” Hawke says into the microphone beneath his skull mask.

I hear him in my headphones and nod once.

The air is thick with the veins of my control. Even the forest seems to hold its breath for what’s next. I’m very well aware that I might die tonight, but even if that happens, I’ve ensured Dove’s rescue with more than one plan. There’s Plan B. And C. And fucking D. One way or another, she’ll be back in my arms, and if I only get one second to hold her before I die, then I’ll die a happy man. She’s alive. I know she is. I can’t explain it, but I just know. I wonder if she can feel me too, being this close to her.

The soft murmur of the white doves we brought with us reaches my ears. I turn to look at their cages on the forest bed and my lips curve upward behind my mask.

“Handle them gently,” I tell my team. “Don’t waste any sulfur in the forest.”

Then they take the doves out, one by one, holding them softly against their armored bodies. The birds thrash in their grasp, cooing softly before they quiet down. It’s fucking poetic, really. They’ll fly all over the town, scattering the sulfur from the small pouches tied to their legs as they flap their wings. This entire place will burn in flames for what they did to Dove, and no one will be able to stop it.

I extend my right hand to the sky, flicking my wrist upward. Almost instantly, my team advances a few feet in front of me, and the flapping of wings takes over the silence of the forest. Their white feathers mesh with the color of the moon as they fly away—some go around the church bells, others above the main square. I follow them

with my eyes as far as I can see before they become minuscule dots in the sky.

It's time.

One by one, my team follows me out of the forest, rifles pointed forward in one hand and knives gripped tightly in the other, as we move through a broken fence on the west side of the town. My feet make contact with the gravel lining the streets. I keep my rifle up, scanning the perimeter.

From what I could drag out of Mason Fletcher's throat, Dove has been kept in a cell in the underground tunnels that connect all the key institutions. That could mean anywhere, basically, but he made one particular comment that didn't go unnoticed.

"Last time I saw her, she didn't look too good. If she dies down there, we won't even have to worry about her corpse. She'll be gone in seconds."

Bastard was so cocky I wouldn't find her that he unintentionally told me she's close to a cremation zone. So... the cemetery, then. Somewhere in those tunnels, close to where they bury their dead. She must be so fucking scared—they must have put her there intentionally to mess with her head. The thought sends pure rage trickling down my veins, my jaw clenching until I hear one of my molars crack.

But beneath the anger, there's something else. A faint pull I can't explain. Like a thread tied tightly around my chest, tugging me toward her. I can almost feel her fear radiating through the cold stone and stale air, like a silent scream only I can hear.

I'm here now. I got you. You're almost home, angel.

I halt, detecting a body in my peripheral vision through the infrared goggles attached to my helmet. I raise my hand, letting my men know. There, in the shadows behind the local distillery, a guy in a black hoodie takes his phone out to make a call. I

straighten up, making myself visible as I push the goggles back up. I want him to see my skull mask. I want to be the last thing he sees before he dies.

His eyes rise from the phone, noticing me. I tap a finger to my lips, signaling for him to be silent, but of course... he doesn't listen. They never do.

"What the fuck—" he shouts, pulling out his gun from a back pocket.

Hawke moves like a shadow, silent and precise, his knife already pressed to the guy's throat.

"Drop it," he orders, his tone low and controlled. The tension doesn't faze him—not many things do these days. He shifts slightly, applying just enough pressure with the blade to make the man's breath hitch. To Hawke, this is just another normal day at work. Then he gets home, fucks his girlfriend, and runs a few laps around the block to wipe the day from his body. I give him time off, and he shows up at work anyway, always wanting to prove something I can't quite put my finger on. He reminds me of me.

The guy doesn't drop the gun, continuing to pull it out until it's almost pointing at my head. I could shoot him, but I don't. If the sound alerts the town, they'll know I'm here, and they'll try to move Dove somewhere else. And fuck knows how fast I can get to her after that. Then his eyes widen in a flash of fear and disbelief, before his body sags against Hawke's, whose hands are now smeared in blood.

That's one.

The others drag the man's body into the shadows, and I focus on the next move. The plan is simple: most of my team will remain above ground, some in the forest, some around the city, and some right here, guarding the entrances to the underground tunnels. Meanwhile, Hawke and I will climb down and find her. I'll bring her out to

the surface, make sure she's safe, and then... fucking slaughter.

Moving from one building to another as stealthily as possible, we kill anyone in our way and drag their bodies into the shadows. The more we take down, the less time we have, but we're almost there. The tunnel to the cemetery is supposed to be inside the church, and the worn-out wooden door is straight ahead, only a dimly lit street keeping us away. We'll have to make a run for it and hope no one sees us.

"All clear, sir," Hawke says.

"On three."

He comes next to me, and a tacit agreement flows between us about what could happen. If I die, Hawke will be an extension of me. I never asked this of him, but I know he'll give his life to save Dove if he has to. That's the kind of man he is.

But I haven't died yet, and right now I feel more alive than I've ever felt. My blood is roaring in my ears. My thirst for vengeance scurries down my bones, tightening my hand on the rifle and pushing my legs forward. And the guilt... the fucking guilt is gone, even if just for a short while. It's like a veil of darkness has fallen down over my eyes, taking away my consciousness. The notion of right and wrong no longer exists for me. Only the raw, primal need of burning flesh and cutting the hands that touched what's mine.

After making sure no one is behind us, I enter the church after Hawke. Fortunately for the EFW, the altar is empty, and no one is sitting in the pews. A bunch of heathens, so... go figure.

We move quickly and veer to the left when we see the sign for the crypt. I hurry down the spiral staircase, my heartbeat pumping adrenaline into my veins.

I'm so close. I'm so fucking close, angel.

Round and round we go, climbing down until the air becomes thick and cool and the scents shift from scented oils to rotten flesh. The stairs are ending, and I look around through my night vision goggles, trying to locate the start of the tunnel.

But it's not here.

The crypt is a fucking dead end.

Up above us, the first gunshot reverberates against the brick walls, getting my attention.

"Fuck!" I shout. "Fletcher lied. We need to get out of here!"

More gunshots fly above us, and I turn back toward the staircase. Voices start pouring in with an echo.

"We've got you, motherfucker," one shouts.

I can hear heavy footsteps descending, and I position myself at the back of the crypt so I can shoot them as they come into view. But Hawke gets my attention in silence, pointing to the wall under the staircase. There's a hidden door there. I nod and pull the trigger. A body tumbles down, devoid of life. Another one jumps over him, as if he couldn't care less that he's dead, and I shoot again.

"Go. Go!" I shout, and Hawke leaves my side to figure out the tunnel entrance while I cover him. I'm not so lucky with the next fucker, though. He dodges my bullets and jumps in front of me, pointing his gun at my head. But by the time he pulls the trigger, I'm already behind him.

“Be faster next time,” I whisper into his ear. The sound of his skull hitting the stone sends a crack through the air. I turn around, sending another shot into someone else’s chest as he comes down. “Hawke, talk to me.”

“Almost got it. There’s a fucking code on this thing. It needs a fingerprint.”

“Oh, yeah?” I say, crouching down next to the man lying lifeless at my feet. “Cover me. I’ll give you what you need.”

Hawke takes over, and I focus on the simple task in front of me that brings me more joy than it should. His blood hasn’t cooled yet, seeping onto the cement as I work quickly. My knife moves up and down, and in less than a minute, I have what we need.

I wipe the blood on his clothes, and call out for Hawke, tossing the dismembered finger over to him.

“Here’s your fingerprint,” I say. At this point, there are so many corpses on the staircase that every new man trying to come down ends up cursing and turning back. They’ll meet us again in the tunnels, that I know.

But so will we.

A beeping sound tells me Hawke has unlocked the damn door. I pull it open, facing the long, dark corridor ahead. Torches line up the walls... it reeks of death... and a bunch of cockroaches scurry away from my combat boots when I step inside. Instantly, anger surges within me at the thought of Dove being kept in this fucking shithole. Her skin has touched these walls. Her feet have walked these hallways among the rats and roaches. My pure, perfect angel...

I start walking, pounding my feet on the concrete as I stare into the nothingness ahead

of us.

I don't care who hears us at this point.

I don't care how loud we are anymore.

Let them know Rowan fucking King has arrived.

Page 13

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 2:59 am

thirteen

Dove

F lashes of light streak across the ceiling like lightning in a violent storm, and the crack of bullets shatters the night. I clutch the sheets under me, my heart pounding fast. Somewhere close a window shatters, the sound cutting through the chaos, and a scream escapes my lips before I can stop it.

Are they fighting? Has Cole started fighting back?

The urge to look outside clashes with the fear freezing me in place. My warm blanket feels like the only shield I have, but hiding underneath makes me angry at my cowardice.

Get up. Get the hell up right now.

My weak legs obey, and the room tilts with me as I stand. I don't know if it's from the explosions outside or if it's my body giving out again. I lean against the wall, trudging to the door, my breath pressing against my lungs and making them hurt. They usually lock me in, but I still wrap my hand around the doorknob and twist. It doesn't budge.

"Hey!" I shout as hard as my aching throat allows. "Let me out of here! Let me out !"
I hit the wood with both palms, pushing into the door. But where there are usually lots of men walking in the hallway beyond, this time I can't hear them. They're not here. No one seems to be guarding my room.

Hope swells in my chest as I push my hair behind my ears.

“Okay,” I whisper. “Okay. Think, think , Dove.”

There’s nothing in this room that I could use to unlock it... but maybe I don’t have to. I hurry to the window, my pulse quickening the closer I get. My mind begs me to go back and hide under those blankets like the coward I am. I fight it as best I can, urging my legs forward until my hands are on the window frame and I’m looking outside.

My eyes take in the desolate scene. The air hangs heavy with an eerie silence, broken only by the now distant sound of gunfire and the acrid smell of smoke that stings my nostrils. Where is everyone? Either they left me here to die or... or my captors are already dead. I bring my hand to my mouth, the realization dawning on me. Could this be... could it be...

“Rowan.” I breathe out.

He came for me. Of course he did. He made it clear countless times that he protects what’s his, that I belong to him, that there’s no corner of this world where he wouldn’t chase after me. But coming into this wretched place... for me... My chest tightens as I consider the value of my life in the middle of all this mess. So many people will die tonight—and have died, probably—just so he can get me out. I know they’re not innocent, but neither am I. I stood there watching Magnus’s life drain out of his body and did nothing to stop it. What makes my life more valuable than theirs? There isn’t a logical explanation to any of this. Rowan acts by his own set of rules, never settling for less than what he wants. But what happens when he finds out? About Magnus... about how much of a coward I am? The world isn’t so black and white , he once told me. And maybe he was right. Maybe when I tell him about what I’ve done, he’ll understand.

Or he'll regret saving your life , a voice inside my head tells me.

Looking outside, I can almost taste the freedom on my lips. Feel Rowan's warmth against me, and his strength soothing my wounds. But guilt churns inside me like a restless sea beneath gray clouds, and I pull away, hiding my face from his ghostly presence in the town below.

Thud.

The door bursts in behind me, and I barely get a second to react. My hand goes through the window forcefully, so much so that it breaks and scatters glass everywhere. A brief stinging sensation tells me I've hurt myself, but adrenaline courses through me as I pick up a shard and point it at the man who walked in. He wears a mask, a white one with two small holes for eyes, just like Salister did the day I met him.

"Stay the fuck back." I say in a threatening tone, trembling as I glimpse the tendrils of blood trailing down my arm. I can't let him take me. If Rowan is here, he's walking into a trap. I have to find him before he finds me and warn him about everything Cole told me.

"Fuck!" The man—my brother —groans, taking his mask off.

I sag with relief, leaning against the wall, my head clouded with dizziness.

"Fuck, Dove, what have you done? What have you done?!"

As Cole rushes toward me, the sound of fabric tearing fills the air. The sight of my torn bedsheet catches my eye, its soft texture now turned into jagged edges. He wraps it tightly around my wound, the surrounding air carrying the faint hint of detergent mixed with the metallic scent of my blood.

“You’re okay.” He sighs.

“Is...is he here?” I ask, barely able to form the words, wanting to confirm my suspicions.

My brother nods, helping me back to my feet, though the room keeps spinning. “He brought a fucking army with him. They’re slaughtering everyone out there. I’ll help you find him, and you’ll be out of here.”

“W-What about you?” I shake my head as he leads me out of the room. “I won’t leave you here.”

He ignores me. “Come on. Let’s go.”

He walks ahead first, scanning the hallway. I poke my head out as well, but end up leaning against the door frame, exhaustion claiming me. Fire licks down my throat as I swallow, and I’m feeling hot, like a fever is nesting into my veins. Cole’s eyes meet mine, seeing it, seeing the state I’m in. Something has been seriously wrong with me since I got here, and by the look on his face, he knows it, too.

“What have they done to me?” I whisper.

Outside, the screams of the townspeople are so loud. They travel fast, following us around, some cursing, others pleading for mercy. I’ve never heard these people plead for their lives before—they seemed accustomed to the life of pain and torture they chose for themselves. But now... now they’re different. Whatever Rowan and his men are doing to them, I know seeing it would give me nightmares for the rest of my life.

Cole’s eyes flick down, focused and familiar. “Almost there. Can you still walk?”

Before I get to answer, a dark silhouette barges in between us and knocks Cole to the ground.

“Fucking traitor,” he seethes. He punches, and punches, and I fear Cole will never get a chance to get up. But then the man sags on top of him, and I realize he’s dead almost as suddenly as he showed up.

I suck in a little breath, bracing myself when spotting not one but three other silhouettes now heading toward us. “Oh, my God!”

Cole’s jaw clenches, and he curses under his breath. “Listen to me. We can’t both go at the same time. I’ll cover you so you can run. My men told me the church was empty, that Rowan blocked the way to the crypt, and there’s no way to get in from that side. But you’re small.” He looks me up and down. “You can climb over the bodies and go down.”

“T-The bodies?”

Cole steps forward, welcoming the new threat. “Head down into the crypt. There’s a tunnel. Go in and find Rowan, and I’ll be right behind you.”

That flicker of cowardice again.

The words tremble on my lips, but despite my mind screaming at me not to leave his side, I nod and say, “O-Okay. I’ll find him. Just please...”

My brother, tense and ready to fight the men who captured him, merely says, “I’ll be fine. Run, Dove. Run and don’t look back.”

And so I do.

I run behind the buildings, my heart pounding so hard in my chest I worry I might collapse. I keep to the shadows, following the huge church bells that stick out to the sky.

The idea of showing myself to Rowan's soldiers comes to mind, but would they even believe that Cole is on our side? Would they come to his rescue, or would they take me away before I can save my brother's life? If they went to him, I worry they might shoot him on sight, and I can't take that chance. So I keep running, whimpering, as I reach the church and pull the heavy door open with my unwounded arm. The place is empty, just like Cole said, and I slide across the thick stone pillars, turning to the sign that points to the crypt.

Please be here. Please.

My heart calls out for Rowan, conjuring up images in my mind of when I'll run into his arms and he'll hold me. And God, I need that so badly. I need his strength, and his soothing voice, and the possessive grip of his arms around me, silencing my worries and the chaos in my mind.

I climb down the spiral staircase, where the air gets cooler and the light slowly fades away. I'm so scared. My entire body feels as if it's hooked to a socket, bolts of electricity coursing through my veins. It makes me reactive and hyper aware, but not in a way that feels safe.

I halt, a stack of bodies blocking my way down to the bottom of the staircase. I recognize some of them from when I was locked up in that basement cell. Their eyes are wide open but empty of any sign of life. The abhorrent stench comes with my next inhalation, drawing out a groan through the length of my throat.

Jesus Christ.

Reluctantly, but knowing I have little time, I dig my fingers into their clothes, hauling myself up. Their bodies are still warm beneath my hands. Vomit looms in the back of my throat, but I hold my breath and make it to the other side and down, down into the cold, dark crypt.

I narrow my eyes, trying to adjust them to the lack of light. It looks like a dead end, but Cole made it clear that there was a tunnel somewhere around. The ghosts of the crypt breathe with me as I see the smallest red light flashing softly at the height of my head, behind an arch. I follow it, my vision finally adjusting enough to see the black metal door in front of me. It's unlocked and I pull it open easily, gasping when I see the tunnel spreading in front of me—so long that it doesn't seem to have an end in sight.

Swallowing, I step inside and make it to a crossroads, where every atom of my body comes to a halt.

“R-Rowan...” I whimper, pressing a hand to my mouth. “What have you done?”

Blood runs down from the ceiling and from the walls, leaking in soft, quiet drops into a bigger puddle. There are body parts... everywhere. And it reeks of death in ways no human should be aware of. I walk slowly through the remains, following his trail as if I'm chasing down a monster who hunts for sport. An insatiable one.

My body trembles with fear, even if I know in my right mind that he's doing this to save me. Still, I can't stop the hairs on the back of my neck from standing up.

Where are you? Where are you?

Page 14

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 2:59 am

fourteen

Rowan

She's not here.

I've shot and opened every goddamn cage in my path. I've called out for her from the bottom of my lungs. And I've slaughtered anyone who came near and interrupted my hunt. She's not here. And there's only one fucking explanation for it: Mason Fletcher lied .

Motherfucker!

My team has alerted me that a total massacre is happening above ground. The EFW knows we're here now. I can only assume they're already taking Dove away from this town. My heartbeat grows quicker, and a sharp pain bolts through my chest. I crouch down for just a second, breathing heavily through the skull mask. A sheer layer of sweat covers my skin, and for the first time in twenty-something years, panic whips against my body, leaving deep marks.

Everything stops. The tunnel ahead starts spinning. My mind is a vacuum of nothingness and... and this pain I'm feeling... it's unlike anything else I've felt before.

Hawke is saying something to me, his combat boots stopping nearby. I can't hear him over the high-pitched ringing blasting through my eardrums. I blink fast, forcing myself to come back, but the panic keeps pressing down on me. And I feel like I'm

going to lose my fucking mind.

Where are you? Where are you? Where are you?

“Sir.” Hawke touches my shoulder. I snap toward him like a rabid dog.

My rifle scratches the concrete as I drag it up and stand, looking at the ceiling with my eyes closed and my chest heaving.

“Rowan—”

And then... I hear it.

Cough.

Cough. Cough.

My eyes go wide in shock when, out of fucking nowhere, a small, almost inaudible cough breaks through my daze, bringing me back.

“Shut up,” I tell Hawke.

“Okay, listen, I know Fletcher screwed us up with his intel, but...”

I walk past him, accidentally bumping into his shoulder on my way back to the crypt.

Who the fuck was that?

I walk a few steps toward what I heard, then stop, hoping to hear it again. But I don’t.

Instead... a different faint sound echoes somewhere in the distance. Footsteps?

I freeze, straining to listen, but they fade into silence.

“What?” Hawke says. “What did you hear?”

Dove

Darkness presses down on me as I cling to the cracked walls, trudging forward. I stopped running, but only for a quick moment to catch my breath.

Thud.

Thud. Thud.

The sound of heavy footsteps spears through my web of anxious thoughts. My eyes snap toward it, holding my breath and covering my mouth with both hands, my muffled whimpers dying into the cushion of my palms.

It's not him , my logic tells me. Rowan brought an entire army with him. It makes no sense that he would be here by himself. Which means... which means it has to be someone from the EFW, and I can't let myself get caught. I can't .

Stay calm, I tell myself. They don't know you're here.

But my heart thrashes in my chest, loud and desperate to find a safe place.

I slide out of the way, pressing my back to the wall and hide.

Rowan

The sound I'm chasing quiets down. Whoever this is, they don't want to be found.

Attuning myself to the forced silence, I pick up a subtle movement as my prey shifts to the right.

It's quiet, and it almost went unnoticed, which only tells me they're trying really hard.

Cute.

I inch closer just to see what they do, if they move with me or not.

My lips twitch upward behind my mask when I register another sound.

I tighten my grip on my knife, ready to draw blood.

Dove

My hunter draws closer, and I retreat farther against the wall, danger crawling down my spine in cold shivers.

I fill my lungs with more air, knowing I'm going to have to move fast.

Three.

Two.

One.

I detach myself from the wall, my lungs burning from the strain of my effort. But I run—I run as fast as my legs will take me and don't look back. I make it to the next corner, my eyes already narrowing on another one. Nothing moves behind me. Maybe I've lost them.

But the skull mask coming into view in the darkness ahead of me tells me otherwise, and the knife pointed at my neck makes every atom in my body stop. I stare into a pair of two soulless eyes, an arm tightening around my upper body, pulling me close.

“There you are.”

Rowan

Warm, pulsing skin rests against the tip of my knife. My grip on the handle tightens and loosens up as I take in the face before me—one I thought I’d never see again . “No,” I say, staring into a pair of eyes I know too well. “This isn’t possible...” The words die on my tongue, taking him in, regret swimming in his eyes as he says—

“Easy, Rowan, easy .”

I grip Cole’s collar with my free hand and flick my eyes down, noticing the patch of blood drenching the side of his abdomen. He’s been shot, or stabbed... it’s hard to tell.

“Rowan,” he echoes cautiously.

Slowly, he tilts his knife so the handle faces me. My eyes snap to the motion instantly, my grip tightening. Stunned and barely able to form words, I ask, “How?”

How is he still alive?

He doesn’t flinch. Instead, he opens his palm, letting his knife clatter to the ground. “I...” His voice cracks, and he dips his head, breaking eye contact. “It’s a story for another time.”

I see red, wrath and betrayal and hurt and sadness and despair flashing through me all

at the same time. All these years, all I did was hate my existence when I knew it should've been me instead of him who died. And he was here all along and never reached out. It doesn't make any fucking sense why he wouldn't do that.

I exhale slowly, trying to reel back my control—and failing—as I stare at him through my skull mask. I push him into the wall with everything I've got, making the air in his lungs come gusting out. His lips curl into a bittersweet smile. He doesn't try to explain, doesn't try to justify. He just nods, like he's been carrying the same weight all this time.

"I'm sorry," he says.

But sorry doesn't cut it. Sorry doesn't erase the years I've spent clawing my way through hell, believing he was gone. God fucking dammit! As much as I want to keep tearing into him, the thought of Dove— my Dove—out there, waiting for me, cuts through the haze.

"Where is she?" I ask, without loosening my grip on him.

"I got her out of where they had her locked in, then sent her here to find you when I got ambushed and fought them off."

"Fought them off," I echo, trying to piece things together.

"You have no reason to trust me, I know that. But your coming here helped me start a rebellion on the inside. My men are out there, fighting the same enemy yours are."

I search his face, looking for a lie, but all I see is the same man I once knew—older, broken, but still him. My heart wants answers, but my head pushes them aside for now.

Hawke's voice crackles in my earpiece, cutting through the chaos in my head.

I look to the side, focusing on his words.

And upon registering them, my entire body sags, and I almost drop to my knees.

"I've got her, sir. I found Dove, and she's here with me right now."

fifteen

Dove

B lazng heat curls across my face and down my dangling bare arms. Raw, guttural screams reach my ears, some close, others too far out—they whoosh past me like troubled phantoms on their way into the afterlife. My eyes crack open, taking in the flames that are spreading quickly through the town.

The people... they're on fire , a small petrified voice whispers in my head.

It takes everything in me to lift my head against the pressing weight of gravity, but when I do, I get a glimpse of Rowan's malachite-colored eyes through the hollows in his skull mask. Above him, a flock of doves flies on a race to nowhere.

Rowan looks ahead, cold and determined, as he carries me back to safety in his tight grasp. Gratitude... and... and an overbearing need to crawl under his skin and never leave that place wash over me. My heart flutters, and my fingertips charge with electricity. I want to touch him, but I can't. I'm so weak that my head falls back.

"Y-You came," I whisper through the chaos going on around us. He can't hear me, I know he can't. But the way his arms tighten around me right at this moment feels as though he answers back, "I'm sorry I took so long."

Fading in and out, I catch glimpses of movement. The sway of Rowan's walk. The pounding of boots on stone and dirt. And the next time I stir awake... I'm back in our bedroom, with the sun shining brightly on my face through the large open windows.

And then... through fluttering eyelashes, I see him. All of him.

A huge man once calm, collected, and imposing—now broken with a feeling I recognize too well on his face as he sleeps on the chair next to our bed. In the way his lips tighten. In the way his brows pull together, as if he's still there, stuck in that town, between those blazing people, still looking for me. In the way his shoulders bear all the weight of everything that went on, from the moment I slipped between his fingers and disappeared into thin air. He's a sight to behold, and perhaps one of the few that shows me he too is human. It's then when I realize Rowan's pain pulses in silence, never revealing itself to me or to the others that count on him. But this time, I see him—I see him for all that he is, and I love him harder.

And when his eyes crack open, circled with signs of little sleep, he sees me too. And he groans. Like an injured animal with wounds only he can see—and feel .

“Angel,” he rasps, his voice almost broken. My chest tightens at the sound of it. “My good little angel. I’m here. Tell me what hurts.”

Such tenderness in his eyes... such emphasis on those few simple words that I know are working like a strong dam against the flood of everything he wants to say to me.

He gets up in a swift movement, the bed squeaking softly as his weight presses down on it. His scent—the leather and pine and amber I know too well—envelops me, drawing a trembling breath out of my lungs. My heart pauses as his scarred hand cups my cheek, then for the first time in God knows how long... my entire body goes slack— sags —as if to say, ‘We’re home now.’

“Rowan.” My voice breaks, but travels to him. “T-Thank you. Thank you for finding me,” is all I can muster.

His other hand takes mine, and a gentle kiss brushes the cushions of my palm before

he whispers, “Tell me what hurts.”

But I scan my body from top to bottom, and nothing does. Not the cut on my arm, now bandaged and held in place. Not my lungs, nor my throat, nor my head from the dizziness I got used to while being in my cell. I wonder what he did to fix all of that as I shake my head, the sheets rustling when I move closer to him and lean against his chest. Then his arms are around me, and all is right in the world again. A lie, of course—a blatant lie, knowing so much more has happened that carries repercussions into the present. But it’s a lie I’m willing to embrace, only if just enough to take away my pain.

Closer, closer, closer he pulls me to him until our bodies meet as one, and there’s no more room in between.

“You were so brave, angel. So brave.”

No, I wasn’t, that same voice speaks in my head. If only you knew.

“I was s-so scared.” My throat closes in on itself, causing a ball of pain to appear in that exact spot. There’s so much I want to say to him, but my voice is stuck somewhere deep inside, refusing to come out. “I t-tried...”

“I know you did, angel,” he coos, his voice almost breaking with sorrow and regret as he presses his callused palms against the side of my face and my back. “I know you did. But I’m here now. I’ve got you.”

I nod as best I can, clutching his clothes tightly, as if I’m still not sure he’s real—that he could be another one of my dreams or hallucinations. But the feel of his warm skin pulsing with life against mine and the wall of muscle and comfort he envelops me with kill any shred of doubt.

He's here. And he's got me.

Minutes pass and I allow myself to weep in his arms, to be held and loved like I haven't been in so long. To replace all the hard hands that touched me and replenish my memories with the feeling of him. I cry and he whispers in my ear, telling me things, like how he hunted down the man who took me, how he found out where I was, and how he spent every minute of every day looking for me for the past two weeks.

Weeks.

I've been gone for two weeks.

The events take shape in my mind, taking me there with him, to the hills where he buried people and to the old bar where he poisoned some. I live through his memories, replacing mine, feeling the itch of revenge flow through my veins as if I were him and looking for what they stole from me.

He could've given up. He could've tried and then given up, thinking I was lost or too difficult to get to. But his goal never wavered, never let up. The monster that Rowan King describes himself to be is the kind of man any woman would be lucky to have in her life. I can't even begin to imagine the horrors he went through all this time. The horrors I would've gone through had the situation been reversed.

My cries die down, and I sniff, pushing the words out. "What happened in that town? There was..." I swallow. "There was fire. And people were screaming..."

He lets out a long, heavy sigh. "I brought you home. Had a doctor come in and see you, and he hooked you up to an IV."

Remembering the state Hawke found me in, I shiver, then clutch Rowan's black T-

shirt in my hands.

“I’m sorry I took so long. I...” His fingers dig into my hair. “I was desperate, desperate to get to you. But I will always find you, Dove. In this life and the next, and no matter where you try to hide from me. I will always find you.”

He breathes into my skin, holding me close as what I hope it is the last of my tears slide down my cheeks.

“I was so afraid,” I say again, my voice almost as quiet as a whisper. “Those people... they’re monsters. And even after everything that happened, I still don’t think they did everything they wanted to do to me.” I think back to the moment that man touched me, shuddering. “At night, I could hear the others screaming from the cells next to mine. They sounded so afraid. So unbelievably alone. What did those men do to deserve that? I just... I don’t understand.”

Rowan hushes me softly, pulling my head back so I can look into his eyes. They look tortured, and the sight breaks my heart. “We don’t have to talk about it right now. But whenever you feel ready...”

I close my eyes, reliving the whole thing in my head. “They didn’t... I wasn’t raped.” I can practically feel his body sag next to me with relief. “Someone tried to touch me one day but there was this man,” my face scrunches up, “who tried to help me.”

“What man? Do you know his name?”

I don’t want to say it, the guilt overpowering me. But I have to. I know I have to tell the world what I did if I want any chance at forgiving myself.

“Magnus,” I say, opening my eyes but looking to the side, avoiding Rowan’s stare. “He was working with Cole, but I didn’t know it right away. I thought he came into

my cell to..." I stop, finding the courage to look back into his eyes. But the courage never comes. "Rowan, I did something really terrible."

A tear spills out of the flood in my eyes, touching my cheek. I inhale sharply, the air shaking in my lungs.

"Hey," he murmurs, gently wrapping his fingers around my chin and bringing my gaze back to him. "Anything you had to do to survive is completely justifiable. Do you understand me?"

I look up at him from under my wet eyelashes. "Magnus came in and gave me a knife to protect myself," I whisper. "But Salister found out about it. And he said... that if I didn't k-kill him, he'd let all his men use me until... until I wouldn't recognize myself."

Rowan closes his eyes, drawing in a slow, steady breath that barely softens the sharp edge of his wrath and pain. His lips press together as he exhales, as if he's trying really hard to control himself.

"But I didn't choose—I couldn't. And then when they came in to do exactly what he'd said, I begged them not to touch me. I didn't realize then that not choosing any option was only giving them the power to choose for me. So they made me do it—forced my hand onto the knife that killed Magnus. I could've tried to kill the guard instead, but I was so mortified by everything, I just froze and let everything happen before my eyes. And now... now Magnus is gone, and it's all my fault."

"Fuck," he mutters under his breath, terror swimming into the green of his eyes.

Terror, but not for living through my experience in his head, I know that. But for what it did to me, for knowing a monster now lives inside my mind, one that he can't fight for me, can't protect me from. For knowing I've seen things I still can't

comprehend. Before being taken, I'd never even seen a dead body in a casket at a funeral. I was always too afraid to look. And now... to think that I saw body parts, actual body parts scattered throughout that tunnel... to think that I sank a knife into someone's flesh...

"Listen to me, Dove. That man... he wasn't your friend. Okay? He wasn't your fucking friend. And don't make it sound like you had a choice. You know damn well that you didn't. They forced you into it, and I am so sorry you had to do it, angel, but you did nothing wrong. Fuck... you're too pure. Too fucking pure for this world."

I sob uncontrollably, ashamed of myself for being so weak. The thought of ending things comes back to the front of my mind. I look up at Rowan and I know there's not much that would faze this powerful man, but losing me might be the one thing that could destroy him. He holds and comforts me as best he can, but it does little to ease my pain this time.

I don't know how to deal with this feeling of utter hopelessness.

I really don't.

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 2:59 am

sixteen

Rowan

I push her hair out of her wet and pale face, my jaw clenching when I look into the emptiness of her eyes. I knew it would be bad, that she'd need time to recover, but it already feels like she's lost way too much. I hold her tightly to my chest and curse those dead motherfuckers in my mind, wishing I'd kept them alive longer. It doesn't feel like I did enough. It never does.

"I'm here, angel. I can make this all go away. Okay?"

She doesn't respond. Her head is lightweight, and she's letting me maneuver it as if she's losing the fight.

Fuck.

I reach one hand behind her knees, keeping them up, and the other between her legs, finding the warm spot that might bring her back to me. It's what she knows with me, and I'd rather have her thinking about this than whatever else is going through her mind.

I push her panties to the side and press my middle finger into her soft pussy. She's not wet, and I don't expect her to be. But she'll take it.

A small sound rolls to the tip of her tongue when I slide my finger down to her entrance and tap it gently above her warmth. The position has her pussy closed up

and plump. She's still gone, but she begins pulsing under my touch, the first sign of her body easing back to life.

"There's my sweet little angel," I say, praising her, kissing the top of her head. I want to look down so badly, to take these covers off of her and see her gorgeous pussy. But this isn't about me, and frankly, I'm not in the mood to fuck her. I want to love her, give her all the care and tenderness she needs.

Fresh tears run past her already wet eyelashes as she fists my T-shirt and clutches it tight. She searches my eyes, worry reading in hers, and I smile. I'm so proud of her for snapping out of her thoughts, if only for a few seconds.

"That's right, Dove. You don't need to think when you're with me. I'll think for you. All you have to do is stay still and take my fingers in your pussy the way you're supposed to."

"I c-can't..." She chokes on a sob and I hush her, hand on her pussy and lips on top of her head.

"You know I always take what I want." I slide my middle finger inside her, finding her wetness and bringing it to the surface when I pull out. She cries harder, but her pussy relaxes around me. "My pretty little angel doesn't get a say without her safe word. You know that. So let me take care of you."

Whatever Dove went through, it's my job to fix it for her. Last night on the ride back, Cole said she might need therapy. But I disagree. What she needs isn't to cry about her feelings with someone who doesn't give a fuck about her. She can do that in my arms. While I finger her. Until she moans through her tears and the pleasure replaces her pain.

I bring my hand from around her knees and pull her panties down to her ankles, then

bring her knees up one more time, spreading them on either side of her frail body, opening her pussy fully. She's still hidden under the covers, but fuck, I can imagine what it must look like right now.

Pink. And plump. And slick with arousal. Like a ripe fruit needing to be probed with my hand.

“Give me all your pain, Dove. Let me in so I can take what hurts and make it feel good again.”

I breathe out, slowly and controlled, while tracing the lines of her swollen clit with the pad of my finger. She hides her face from me, turning it to the right where I can't see her eyes. But I gently bring her chin back and lean down to brush my lips against hers.

A whimper slips past her mouth, getting slightly louder when I open her up with my tongue to find hers. She's there, warm and unmoving, letting me caress her. I slide my fingers down her clit again and push past her lips, entering her. I groan into her mouth, licking her tongue in slow, rhythmic motions while I finger-fuck her.

Then her hips writhe. Her body moves deeper into mine. And her sobs quiet down, replaced by those little whimpers I love so much. Out of nowhere, her tongue moves timidly, taking space into my mouth.

There you are.

It takes my fucking breath away. I still for just a moment, feeling her all over me. Her scent in my lungs. Her tongue in my mouth. Her pussy on my fingers. I'm so fucking thankful she's here and that she's alive... I almost shudder at the thought that I could've lost her.

Her breathing deepens, her chest pushing the covers up and down. I add another finger, curling them both upward deep inside. She pulses everywhere, her heart now beating between her legs. I pump my fingers in and out with short, rapid movements. I never bring them out fully, wanting to stay inside her when she comes.

“You’re making me so very proud, angel,” I mumble against her mouth. “You know how much I love this little cunt. You know what it does to me, don’t you?”

She nods, her face burning hot against mine, but I know it’s not her fever this time.

“Is my pretty girl too empty-headed to use her words right now?”

Another nod.

Her hips writhe some more and then, with a sharp cry, her body locks in, shuddering around my fingers, legs twitching and pussy clenching so tight around me that my cock fucking hurts from being so strained against my pants. I praise her some more, my body roaring to life at knowing what’s waiting for me under those covers. Not to fuck her, no. Not today, and maybe not for a long time. But to taste her—oh, God, to taste her again...

“Thank you,” she says, hushed, her breathing pattern a mess.

I smile, looking at her pretty and flushed face. “Don’t thank me yet, Dove. You’re going to take these covers off of you now and show me your pussy. I’ll lick you until it’s clean again. And then you can thank me when I’m satisfied.”

Her eyes avoid mine, brows drawn together and lips parted to ease her small exhale out. I slap her thigh gently, enough to bring her attention back to the present moment and take her out of her head. When she looks at me, I praise her, showing her I want her here, not back in the dreadful past.

“Nothing else exists for you right now. Just me and my command.”

seventeen

Dove

When he's done cleaning me up with his tongue, Rowan cradles me in his arms and lets me cry some more. The way he takes care of me always takes me by surprise, though I'd be lying if I said it didn't help take my mind off my pain for a little while. I resisted it at first, knowing I didn't deserve the pleasure—not this time. But the more he talked me through it and the more he praised me into submission, the more my mind sought his control. I had no choice but to let go of my morbid thoughts.

Like an addict seeking numbness through whatever drug they can get their hands on, I craved Rowan's dominance and I let him bring me into the scene with him. Because the truth is... our dynamic heals me in ways I never thought I could be healed, and it has been ever since he reached out to me. I'm thinking he may actually know me better than I know myself. He knows when my mind is elsewhere and knows exactly how to bring me back to him. He can sense when I can't keep up with my worries, and as he put it, he's there to do all the thinking for me. The feminist in me isn't even upset over this. Because my submission is voluntary, and Rowan would never take advantage of it.

Minutes pass in his arms. When my tears dry out, I pull away from him, hesitantly, finding the strength to come back to the real world. To ask the one question I've been too afraid to ask. I haven't given myself permission to think that my mom might be gone—I knew the thought would make me actually lose my mind, so I just convinced myself that she had made it. But my anxiety grows too strong, too overwhelming to believe my lies anymore.

Rowan pushes a lock of hair behind my ear as my veins pulse with nerves beneath my skin.

“Your mom is okay, angel.”

I let out a breath charged with relief, my entire body tingling in the wake of anxiety.

“She’s recovering. Maddox is providing her with the best medical care in the country, and I have her under constant surveillance. Once you feel better, I’ll take you to see her.”

“So... I can leave the house now? It’s no longer dangerous?”

He inhales, carefully choosing his words as he looks somewhere to the side of my face. “No one’s ever going to take you from me again.”

I search his eyes when he says it, and pure confidence radiates from them. I don’t know what he did to ensure my safety, but I trust him with everything I’ve got. And I was so stupid to leave his sight that day when the EFW kidnapped me.

“A-And Cole? I remember I thought I could hear him when you brought me back. I couldn’t believe it when I saw him, Rowan. I still can’t. All these years...”

“I know... I can’t either, though I had my suspicions at some point.” He sees my brows quirking up. “That orange he left smeared on the table in your apartment. I knew only one person who peeled oranges like a madman.” He huffs a small, bittersweet laugh. “He and I are going to have a long talk and figure things out. But for now, he’s fine. The doctor stitched him up. Nothing serious.”

I smile faintly and nod, brushing my palms against my face to freshen up.

“So everyone’s okay, then. Right?”

There.

Right there, in his eyes, a strange emotion flickers with little time to breathe before it does it again. His face muscles tighten. It’s only for a fraction of a second, but it’s enough to tell me that something isn’t exactly right. What isn’t he telling me?

“They’re okay,” he says, but it does nothing to ease my nerves. He sees it and completely disarms me when his mouth finds mine. So soft. So warm. So familiar. I whimper, his scarred hand caressing my hair with a touch so gentle it takes my breath away.

“You don’t need to worry about anything anymore.” His voice is eerily calm and content, as if he’s remembering something bad... something that most people would get nightmares from. Only to him, the memory seems strangely pleasant instead. “Everything they did to you, they paid for it tenfold. And I’m only just getting started. We have a long fight ahead, but now that you’re here...”

I shudder at the ideas coming to me about what else he’s willing to do. The memory of what I saw in those tunnels hits me like a brick in the head. The stench makes me nauseous, and I almost gag. I acknowledge that kernel of fear that tries blooming in the back of my mind.

I hold onto it, turning it in my mind on all its sides, and seeing it, really seeing it, its sharp claws anchored to my body like a tick attached to my skin. I want nothing more than to pull it out, but I know I won’t be able to do it by myself.

“I don’t want to be a victim. But I’m not strong, Rowan. Not like you are...”

His eyes soften, his expression a mix of tenderness and conviction. “Being scared

doesn't make you weak. It means you understand what's at stake and you face it anyway. Back in those tunnels, you pushed through. You went blindly into that war zone, trying to find me, to save Cole's life. You stood in the middle of a storm, holding on when most people would have let go. That's strength."

"It doesn't feel like it..."

"Because real strength never does. It doesn't shout or demand attention. It just keeps going." He cups my chin gently, tilting my face to meet his eyes. "You don't have to be like me, Dove. You don't have to fight with fists or fire. Your strength is different, quieter, but it's every bit as powerful. And it's yours."

I blink back the tears threatening to spill. "What if it's not enough?"

"It is. It's enough because you are enough. And when you realize that... no one will ever make you feel small again."

I bask in his words, and my heart grows at the patience he has with me. This powerful man who has the entire army at his feet is on his knees for me, taking his sweet time to mend my broken soul better than any drug. He's a force. And I don't understand how I ended up here, by his side, when he doesn't really need me at all. I don't understand what I did to deserve him. Unless...

Maybe I was meant to come into Rowan's life because I was destined for something more. I always said I wanted to help people. And I could back down, return to my old ways, hide within myself, and give people a voice the way I've always wanted to. But what would be the point? As long as the EFW rule this country, and the courthouses, and everything that moves... being a lawyer won't mean much in the grand scheme of things. It would be like fighting a dragon every time you wanted to leave the house—you can push it back once or twice, but sooner or later, it would burn the village down. And it would be your fault for not going to its lair and slaying it sooner.

“You’re gone again,” Rowan’s gentle voice fills the silence, his hand pushing my panties to the side. “But that’s all right. I’ll bring you back as many times as we have to.”

eighteen

Rowan

“We don’t know what it is,” Matthew Kutcher, the president’s doctor, tells me.

I look at him, unblinking, the sentence barely registering. He clears his throat, folding his arms as he leans his hips against the desk in my office.

“We ran every possible panel for common contagious diseases. There wasn’t anything matching. And based on the blood work we performed on you and her brother, it appears to be non-transmissible.”

I keep silent while he continues, carefully choosing every word before speaking it out loud.

“They must’ve injected her with some genetic or...” he shakes his head, “or biochemical marker beforehand to latch itself onto her specifically. It’s unlike anything we’ve seen before.”

A muscle tightens in my jaw, wrath scorching through me like a blazing wind.

Two nights ago, after bringing Dove home, I called Matthew in to check her and see why she was so weak when we found her. I lied to myself—and to her—that it was nothing. But her face was so pale... so gaunt with the early signs of an illness that I couldn’t make myself believe it. Matthew implanted the tracker I asked for under her earlobe, then drew her blood and tested everything. Now the test results are back.

And I've never felt more helpless in my entire fucking life.

My words are a low growl as I force them past the lump in my throat. "What is it doing to her?"

Matthew hesitates, then scans the papers that had been dangling from his folded hand against his ribcage. When he glances up, my heart sinks at the look on his face.

"Right now, it's attacking her cardiovascular system. That explains the lightheadedness, the excessive fatigue. But the effects are progressive. If it follows the pattern that I suspect, it will start destroying her organs one by one until..."

My eyes snap to his, and he presses his lips into a thin line, silencing himself. He shifts uncomfortably under my gaze, and I grit my teeth, my heart slamming against my ribs. I want to tell him to get the fuck out, but his words pin me in place.

"It's impossible to predict the symptoms knowing nothing more about this virus. We can manage them for a while, but..." He sighs. "There isn't much time. Whoever made this, they designed it to kill. And if we don't find the antidote soon, I'm afraid it will do exactly that."

A wave of nausea churns my insides. I fall back into the armchair behind me, propping my elbows on my parted thighs as I bury my head in my palms. Getting her out of that fucking town was too easy.

Too easy.

Too easy.

I should've seen this coming.

Why didn't I?

A knock at the door of my office gets my attention. I straighten up, thinking it might be Dove. I don't want her to know about any of this until I fix it. Fuck, if one more ounce of worry shows up on her pretty face, I'm going to fucking lose it.

The door opens and Cole steps inside, hair in disarray, and eyes still exhausted from the fight. I drag a hand down my face and pull myself together. He and I need to sit down and talk—he might even know where they keep the fucking cure. Maybe this isn't as bad as I'm making myself believe.

I look at Matthew. "Do whatever you need to do to buy us time. I'll take care of the rest."

He nods, adjusting his eyeglasses before leaving us alone. The silence is long and tense, and I'm the first one to break it.

"How could you let this happen?"

His eyes burn through mine. "I tried, Rowan..."

His voice is exactly the same articulated, careful voice it's always been. The kind that made our superiors in the army think he was defying them because he was always a solid, impenetrable rock others could rely on. For a moment, it transports me there, into the cold barracks where we lived. Back when things were so simple. Easy.

"She was right fucking there, under your eyes. If you couldn't get her out, you could've reached out to me. Could've told me where she was before they put that thing inside her. I wasted so much time trying to figure out where she was—"

He shakes his head, and it makes me want to punch the nearest wall.

I'm sick of hearing it can't be done.

I'm sick of hearing they're winning and we're losing.

I'm so fucking sick of all of this, and no matter what we do, it's never enough.

He says, "I know what it looks like, but I... You don't know the full story. You don't know about how they silenced me. They had me trapped, just like they're trying to trap you right now. But I had no one, Rowan. No one." His lips stretch into a bittersweet smile. "Everyone I loved thought I was dead. No one was looking for me, so I had to do what I could to survive and protect you all from the inside."

I scoff, but instantly regret it. He's been through more shit than any of us can handle. Throwing my rage at him isn't just unfair, but it also isn't going to help us. I take a second to reel back my control, but all I can think of is Dove's frail body and her dying in my arms. The image makes my blood boil and my desperation return.

"The break-in at Dove's apartment... was that you? I saw the orange."

"You remembered." He blinks, taken aback. "That day I took an enormous risk to get into her apartment. They were already planning to take her, but they didn't know that I knew. That's why I could break in and make a mess, knowing it would force her to move in with you. Or, rather, that you would give her no other choice. It was the only thing I could think of in such a short time to keep her safe. If I had reached out and made myself known to you, they would've killed someone... someone very important to me." He stares into the void, fury simmering in what used to be a warm hazel color in his eyes. "I couldn't risk it. And there wasn't another way—believe me, there wasn't."

"Where is that someone now?"

“She’s safe, for now.” He runs a hand through his hair. “I’ve been planning this rebellion for the past two years. The EFW is crumbling from the inside. They’ve wronged so many of their own people that it wasn’t hard to turn some of them against the cause. But he’s smart, Salister. And they’ve been butchering people left and right, then recruiting new soldiers. Starting this rebellion... it wasn’t simple. And it took time.”

I listen and nod, because I don’t know what else to do. I’m lost for words, and I know that no amount of killing is going to fix me this time. Just when I thought I was gaining the upper hand, my entire world crashes down on me knowing Dove is in more danger now than when I found her. And that I’m the reason she’s infected with a deadly virus with no fucking cure in sight.

“This virus...” My breath leaves my lungs in a rush. “What do you know about it?”

Just like me, he exhales and plops down in the chair next to mine, groaning from the pain in his abdomen.

“Not much. They have two labs outside the country, but their location is secret, even to the ones with my rank. It’s probably where they engineered it, and I don’t think it was made just for Dove. There’s a bigger plan at play—a pandemic, I imagine. They want to change the system, and... I mean... it’s not hard to do it when an entire country is suddenly preoccupied with keeping their loved ones alive.”

Fuck.

“But?” I ask, sensing that there’s more.

He dips his head. “I think I know who has this kind of information. About where the labs are, and how to get our hands on the cure. I just need to—”

“You’re planning to go back,” I deadpan. “You were never going to remain here.”

“I have to. Without me, the whole plan falls apart. And everything we worked for goes down the drain.”

I open my mouth to protest, but the ringing phone on my desk gets both of our attention. I get up, thinking it might be Maddox on the other end. I gave him a quick rundown of what happened, and he sent his doctor, then said he’d come meet us here today.

Except... the number flashing on my screen isn’t from the White House. I don’t recognize it, and very few people have my personal contact details. I look outside at the willow tree in my backyard, watching it sway with the wind. The sound coming through the cracked window is eerie—less the rustling of leaves and more of a hollow, rasping hiss, as if the tree exhales despair with every gust.

Slowly, I turn around with the phone in my hand, eyeing Cole as I tap the speaker button.

I pick up the call, and silence meets me from the other end

Cole and I hold each other’s stare, a tacit understanding flowing between us.

This isn’t some random number calling me, and we both know that.

My hand tightens around the phone as the words finally come out.

“Hello, Rowan.” A low, sinister voice fills the room. “Have we got your full attention now?”

Dove

Rowan's colonial house looks spotless as always when I walk out of his bedroom on wobbly feet. The lights are dimmed all the way into the open living room, and the sun is almost gone from the sky. I don't know how many hours have passed since he and I talked—my body is still clinging to sleep every chance it gets. But I need to see my brother. My brother... who lives and breathes under the same roof as me.

The sound of cutlery and vessels clinking together draws me into the large kitchen. I trudge toward it, expecting to see either Rowan or Cole, but I see the back of another man's head instead. One that I recognize.

"Saint?" I call out.

He turns to face me, his brows raised before he clears his throat, looking me up and down. I still don't know why he's here and what kind of work he's doing for Rowan. Last time I saw him, he was driving me back to my apartment after Odette Chevrier showed up to mess with my head. He got in trouble because of that, so I'm not exactly sure where we stand.

"Miss Finnegan," he says, surprised. "I am... glad that you're back."

I smile, but the action makes me tear up a bit. Seeing Saint here, in this house, reminds me I'm safe and back where I belong. In Rowan's world, around him, and with him.

"It's good to be home. How are you doing?"

"Me?" he asks, as if no one ever asks him that.

My brows quirk up, expecting a response—one that never comes. Instead, he clears his throat and jerks his head toward Rowan's office door. "He's in there."

I eye him for just a moment longer, but Saint goes back to doing his work as if our conversation never happened. I don't have the energy to push him on it right now, so I take a big breath in and trudge toward the office. Without bothering to knock this time, I push the door ajar, seeing both my brother and Rowan through the crack. They both turn their heads to look at me.

Rowan's hair is disheveled, jaw clenched and nostrils flared, the way he always looks when he's raging inside. Cole is sitting with his head in his palms, his eyes strained at an invisible threat that haunts the four walls surrounding us. It's a strange sight considering the fact that Cole has always been a rock for me and our family. No matter how bad things got when our father was still living at home, he never broke. Not once. But now... sitting there with his broad shoulders hunched and his brawny forearms supporting the weight of his troubled mind sends a sharp pain through my heart.

"What's going on?" I ask.

Rowan pushes his arms off the desk he was leaning against and saunters over to me. I follow him with my eyes, afraid he's going to tell me to go back to bed so that I don't hear what they're talking about. I want to be here; I want to help them in whichever way I can. But when he comes near me, he wraps one arm around the small of my back and the other behind my knees, lifting me up.

"You should've called out for me to bring you here, angel," he murmurs.

I smile, grateful that he isn't shutting me out. That he trusts me to be here with the two of them. "I can walk just fine," I say, but let him hold me anyway.

"How are you feeling, Dove?" my brother asks.

The sound of his voice still feels foreign to my ears. I still can't believe he's here,

back in our lives. Rowan carries me to the armchair opposite from him, then lowers me back down and places a taut kiss on top of my head. The press of his warm lips lingers.

“Fine,” I lie, not wanting to talk about my current state. “So? What’s going on?”

Neither of them says anything, and that’s how I know that whatever it is, it’s bad.

“This is about what they did to me, isn’t it?”

My question seems to take Rowan by surprise, but not Cole. Although he hasn’t said it explicitly, I think my brother knows exactly what happened to me. He leans back in his seat, watching Rowan, letting him speak first. A shared bond of pain seems to pulse between the two of them.

Rowan’s voice is raw as he says, “Salister called.”

Nausea swamps me, and if I were standing, I know I’d take a step back. That name... that face... Salister’s eyes gleam in the darkness of my mind, promising nothing but horrors and destruction and the death of everything I’ve ever loved in this world.

“A-And?” I ask.

Rowan meets my gaze. “We know why he took you. And what he wants from us.”

Before I get to ask more, the sound of cars approaching the house steals our attention. I brace myself on the armrests and try to stand up, but Rowan calmly tells me there’s no need for that. Minutes later, when the president and the First Lady walk into the room, I jolt upright anyway.

“Mr. President,” I gasp, still not used to seeing him, to seeing both of them so

casually, like we're old friends getting together for a glass of wine. My face burns as I look down at my pink pajama pants and Rowan's T-shirt I put on. But before I have time to feel the depth of my shame, sweet, sophisticated perfume enters my nostrils as I feel Cam's arms snake around me.

She pulls me close into a warm embrace, muttering, "Oh my God, Dove! You're okay. Oh, my God..."

I hug her back, my nerves dissipating when I'm hit with the informality of her demeanor. She might be the First Lady, but she's every bit human and shows it every chance she gets.

"I didn't know you were coming." I smile, swallowing the lump in my throat. "I would've... changed."

She laughs softly, but a sob interrupts that laugh. "You've just been through hell and back, and you're worried about changing your clothes for us?" She pulls back, taking my hands in hers as she stares me down with tears in her eyes. "Dove, I am so, so sorry. You have no idea—"

"It's okay," I tell her, sniffing. "This isn't your fault, Cam. None of it. We don't get to choose our parents."

Based on our previous conversations, I now know how hard this must be for her. Salister is her father. And everyone she's ever loved has been under his thumb her entire life. Cam falls silent, her ashy green eyes looking vacant for just a second before she blinks and life returns to them. Her lips press together in a faint smile, as if to please me, as if to make me believe she agrees with what I said. Pretending is part of what we do, she once told me. I make a mental note to call her out for it later, if or when we have time to talk more. She has nothing to feel guilty about.

Next to us, the president—Maddox—and my brother greet each other again for the first time in years. Rowan steps in, and the energy in the room shifts completely. They stand tall and in control, all three of them, their bond and their power pulsing around us like the steady drumbeat of war. Cam and I watch as they smile faintly at each other, the first sign of hope either of us has seen in a long, long time.

“Please,” Rowan says, breaking the silence. “Have a seat. It’s gonna be a long night.”

nineteen

Dove

“Two things,” Rowan announces, interlacing his fingers and placing them on the table in front of him.

He’s calm now, unlike earlier when I walked into the office. The news must’ve been really fresh. But now that it’s settled in, he can think clearly. They all can.

I sit on the armchair with my legs crossed, listening to Rowan as he explains, “They want a vice president of their own choosing in the White House, which I already knew about. And also...” he pins the president with his stare, “...for me to surrender and let the Coalition win the war on the Ridge.”

My mouth goes dry. Maddox curses under his breath from where he’s sitting to my left. Cam sucks in a breath, but otherwise remains silent. Rowan’s eyes flick to me for the briefest second before returning to the room. “In exchange, they’ll give us the antidote.”

“Antidote...?” I ask.

Everyone’s eyes shift to me, as if they’re already in the know and I’m the only one left out.

Cam’s question confirms it. “You haven’t told her?”

Rowan closes his eyes, biting into the tissue of his inner lip as he breathes out through his nose.

“He doesn’t have to.” I dip my head. “While I was there in their town, they kept injecting me with something every day. And at first I thought it was drugs. You know, to keep me compliant. But the more they did it, the worse I felt. I was pretty sure I had an infection of sorts, but I blamed it on the cold concrete floor in the cell where they kept me. I don’t know what that serum was, but I can tell it’s bad. I just...” I look up at the ceiling, fighting back tears, before holding their stares. “You can’t let these people back into the White House. Not after everything you’ve all sacrificed.”

To my surprise, it is the president who answers to that. His voice is low and imposing as he says, “Don’t speak as if you’re not worth the sacrifice, Dove. We fight for our country, yes. And you are part of it. So we will do whatever it takes to save your life, consequences be damned.”

I don’t know what to say, so I just nod like an idiot. When I turn my face to Rowan, he’s already there, holding my stare with soft eyes.

He says, “I told you that you’re safe now, angel, and I meant that. You don’t have to stay here and listen to any of this. In fact, maybe it would be better for you to—”

“No. No, I... I want to help. Don’t push me away. I don’t want to be alone with my thoughts right now.”

He nods faintly and I ask, looking at Cam, “How did this happen? How did Salister come into power? From the brief conversation I had with him, it sounded like they’re trying to change the system... to control the population in some way. Can he actually do it?”

The First Lady leans forward in her seat, supporting her chin with her palm, her legs crossed. “It’s pretty sad, actually. Our family—my ancestors—founded the EFW back in the beginning of the 17th century. The knowledge was passed on from father to father, and mine... Salister ... his life was decided from before he was even born. My grandfather raised him after the society’s customs—to view women as nothing but breeders and toys, to sacrifice his wants and needs for those of the society, to think beyond what is possible and lead with an iron fist. There was only one time...” she bites her lip, looking into the void, continuing, “only one moment when I saw his humanity shine through.

“It was when my mother was imprisoned for bringing a man back to life after he’d been tortured for weeks. She was... a rarity with a kind soul in this dreadful world.” She smiles. “I could tell my father wanted to help her. In his sick, twisted ways, I think he loved her—this was before the celibacy rule came into place. But there was nothing he could do without sacrificing his position in the EFW and losing the only thing he knew to be real in this world. So she died in that prison, and then he sent me to The Hive for training and guidance from the Matron. And after that, I never saw weakness in my father’s eyes again. I think whatever kernel of humanity he was holding onto died with my mother.”

I’m still as a statue as I listen to her words, my chest tight with a feeling I can’t quite put my finger on. I shouldn’t care about the kind of life Salister endured, but a small voice in my head tells me it’s okay to understand. Not to forgive, no. But to understand. The story ends, and I let out a breath that has my body silently thanking me for releasing the tension I’ve been holding onto.

“If he told you he wants to change the system, then believe me, every single thing he’s done over the years was to achieve this. He could do it...” Cam clicks her tongue. “If it weren’t for all of us here, in this room.”

“I’ll go back,” Cole says decisively. “The men I rallied to go up against them are

doing their part. But I also need to do mine.”

“Which is?” Maddox asks.

“Tell Salister about the rebellion and pretend to put an end to it myself. If I do this, I’ll gain his full trust. I’ll get access to high-level stuff, to most if not all of their plans. I only know bits and pieces, but if I go back, I can piece things together.”

Rowan taps his fingers against the desk. “You don’t think he knows you’re behind it?”

“He shouldn’t. I’ve been careful to cover my tracks.”

“So this whole thing is hanging by a thread of assumption?” I ask.

My brother’s eyes turn to me. “It’s the only option we’ve got.”

“No,” I say, my voice falling cold. “I won’t let you leave again. We’ve only just got you back and... and... you want to go back there and die?!”

“Dove...” he murmurs.

“Rowan,” I press on, leaning forward in my chair. “Tell him. Tell him it’s stupid and that he can’t go.”

Cam intervenes calmly. “This likely won’t work, Cole. Rowan and Maddox have been attacking their outposts for years. Rowan eliminated an entire town. But they keep going—they always find a way.”

Cole stiffens. “You don’t understand. Those men depend on my leadership. I can’t just leave them there to die. Besides, this isn’t the same as destroying their outposts.

This destruction would come from the inside out.”

I give him a beseeching look, and once again look at Rowan, who keeps tapping his fingers against the table. My brother and I stare each other down, my stomach twisting further. After everything... he wants to do it all over again. Exit out that door and fight for me, risking his life. I get the sentiment. I would do the same for him in a heartbeat. And I get that there are people still out there, depending on him with their lives. But is this the only option? I refuse to think that Cole dealing with that monster all by himself is our only way out.

“They’re right,” Rowan finally says. I let out a breath of relief. “If you go back, they’ll imprison you again. Or kill you on the spot. Don’t underestimate Salister. You know he has eyes and ears everywhere.”

End of discussion. No room for debate.

“A rebellion might not even be enough to put an end to this,” Maddox adds. “It’s a start... But I don’t think it’s enough. No one knows the lengths they’re willing to go to—”

Maddox keeps talking, but I’m no longer listening. My hands grip the wooden armrests of my chair, back stiffening as a thought comes to mind. As though it has a life of its own, the idea flows through my mind like the ebb of a whirling river. Come chase me, come chase me , it seems to say.

Rowan notices and gets up, gently touching my arm and getting my attention.

“Angel,” he says with palpable concern, “what is it? Should I call the doctor?”

I shake my head. “I just... what if...”

I can feel all their eyes on me, but I'm no longer seeing anything through the veil of my thoughts, the world blurring into a muted haze. Only Rowan's hand grabbing mine brings me back as I feel the calluses and the warmth radiating from him.

Finally, my eyes shift to the president.

"No one knows the lengths they're willing to go to," I repeat his words back to him.

Cam sucks in a breath, the realization dawning on her as well.

"...so what if we showed them?" I ask. "What if we showed the world who they are... with concrete evidence? With hard facts. No one could bury those stories. The world would know, and then..."

"We'd take away their power," Rowan says, continuing my thought. His fingers dig deeper into the crease made by my loose fist until he's fully covering my small hand. "It's a good idea, and one that I have considered in the past. But there are many problems associated with it. For one, we don't really have any factual evidence. They always cover their tracks."

I straighten up. "I am the evidence. I can testify to being kidnapped, to having this... this virus inside me, or whatever it is. There's no public cure for it, right? That is proof."

Cole nods absently. "Proof of the virus might work, if only because their allies would back down. Russia would no longer trust Salister enough to advance their plans together. Neither would Angola."

"Angola?" Maddox quirks a brow.

"Their latest addition to the party." Cole waves a lazy hand in the air.

Cam hums in agreement. “I mean, we certainly have the resources for this. But for Dove to testify... I don’t know, people might interpret it the wrong way.”

I ask, “The wrong way... how?”

“Like we’re making it up. Because you’re with Rowan now, and Rowan is friends with the president... it’s easy to get people to make up stories. Stories like...”

“Like we’re the bad guys, and we’re trying to manipulate them,” I conclude, letting my back hit the cushion of the armchair behind me in defeat.

“Which was, in fact, the second point I was going to make.” Rowan nods.

I feel stupid now after voicing it. Of course they’ve thought about this before.

“Don’t do that,” Rowan says, instantly reading me like an open book. “It’s a good idea. We just need more evidence.”

I don’t get to respond to that when Maddox suddenly stands up and says, “Then let’s find some. We don’t have time to think of something else. Besides, Dove is a law intern.” He smiles faintly. “If anyone can help us do this, it’s her.”

The mention of that takes me by surprise. I don’t know if he’s just saying that to make me feel better or if he truly believes I can help. But it doesn’t matter.

Because I will find that evidence if it’s the last thing I do.

twenty

Rowan

The night ends at around four in the morning by the time we have wrung the discussion dry. Cole and I step outside, seeing Maddox and Cam to the Secret Service waiting for them in my driveway.

Thick, dark clouds swallow up the full moon, as if a storm is about to hit. Cam's hair is blown away from her face in the intensifying wind, which she fixes behind her ear, but it breaks free from the position almost immediately. Then Maddox opens the door for her to the presidential car.

We've already said our goodbyes, so she takes her seat saying nothing more, lost in thought.

When Maddox turns back to face us, I shove my hands in my pockets and open my mouth to speak. There's a question I still haven't asked him because I've been dreading it. But this isn't what I do—I don't fucking steer away from hard truths. It's not who I am.

So I ask him now, because I need to know so I can prepare myself for what's next. "Did you do it? Did David Foster take back his job?"

My job.

But to my surprise, he shakes his head, an amused smirk on his face. "Don't be an

idiot. Of course I didn't give it to him."

"Then what the hell did you do?"

He shrugs. "Threatened him."

"Threatened him?" I scowl. "You. The president. Threatened David Foster."

"With what?" Cole asks, his presence still something I haven't gotten used to.

Maddox pins us down with his stare, not wanting the Secret Service to hear what Cole and I both know to be true. They might be on our side, but Maddox keeps a lot of our plans away from them. For precautions, he says. Which is a good thing, I guess, since Maddox is practically telling us he threatened to kill a man.

"You're insane," I tell him. "I can't fucking believe he took you seriously."

He scoffs. "Why wouldn't he? Aren't I the president? If anyone could do that, it's me."

I don't even respond to it, as we both know how crazy that is. He's the president, and he's the only one out of the three of us who doesn't get to have skeletons in his closet.

Silence passes between us, only the wind and the yellowed autumn leaves scratching across the pavement making a small noise. I still have my job. I'm still commander of the army, though it won't mean much a few days from now. After a short while, Maddox is the first one to speak again.

"You don't think the plan is going to work," he says, looking at me.

I simply answer, “I don’t have the luxury of being uncertain this time.”

Dove’s image comes to the front of my mind, her hair draped over the pillow as her body lowers and raises with soft breaths. I carried her into our bedroom earlier, seeing how dizzy she was. Desperation twists my gut knowing the state she’s in, and like always, I shove it down, down into a place so dark that any amount of light seeping through would instantly die.

Too much. I’ve failed too many people and disappointed them way too fucking much. I’ve fought hard and made sacrifices, but life has a funny way of showing you nothing you ever do is enough. Well, ha, ha, ha , motherfucker, I’m about to put everything on the line this time. Everything I am, and everything I could be, and everything that I hoped to be by Dove’s side... I’ll give it up with a smile on my face if that means saving her life.

Cole takes a few aimless steps in the alley, the stress of the past few days lingering in his system. He’s just come back to us. To Dove... to his family. I won’t make the same mistake as last time and lose him twice.

“Which is why I have another plan,” I say, stopping Cole in his tracks.

He drags a hand down his face. “Great. So everything we talked about in there, what the fuck was that for?”

It’s Maddox who answers for me, his voice barely audible as he says, “It was all for Dove... wasn’t it?”

I offer a nod, knowing full well this conversation is going to rock things between the three of us.

“Dove needs a clear vision to fight for right now. She needs to use all the anger and

all the fear she's gathered and empty them out into something meaningful. I know her... and without the plan we just talked about, she'd..." I wince, remembering the night I got her back and her eyes were void of life.

"She'll make it." I smile. "She'll bring those motherfuckers down, and the three of you are going to help her. But this... what we discussed tonight... is not the plan that's going to keep her alive. Because Salister doesn't respond to blackmail." My eyes shift to Cole, because he knows him better than any of us after what he's been through.

"He just pulls out a bigger gun," he answers, understanding. "If he loses the fight, he'll bring her down with him. Just to spite us."

Maddox clenches his jaw, his nostrils flaring as he rushes to get to the bottom of this conversation—of my new plan. "Rowan... what the fuck did you do?"

"Will you come with me?" I ask Dove over lunch the next day.

The hand she holds the fork with freezes as she gives me a bewildered but hopeful look.

"Is that okay? I don't want to disturb you at work."

I smile, ignoring the last part. She's still disoriented and shaken by everything that happened. Everyone tells me to give her time to rest and recover, and of course I do. But I won't have her locked in her room like Salister did back in Montana. She yearns for air and life as she knew it—I can tell—so I'll give her that too. The EFW won't strike now, not when they have the upper hand and the ball is in my court. Besides, I never want to be anywhere she's not.

"We both need to get some fresh air. Eat up, then we'll go. I only need to meet some

officers. It won't take long."

She nods faintly, the light in her eyes flickering as if it still hasn't fully decided to stay with her. To keep her going. She pushes her food around with the fork, then takes two more hesitant bites of the braised duck before looking up at me with her big hazel eyes.

The doctor warned me her appetite would be low.

"Angel..." I tilt my head, a plea in my voice.

"I can't eat right now. I'll try again when we get back. Please?"

My eyes narrow slightly as I take in her fragile body. She needs to eat, but forcing her won't do. Maybe taking her outside will help. Maybe exhausting her body with my fingers will bring out her appetite. I focus my eyes behind her, on Saint, and he approaches almost instantly.

"Bring her a granola bar. And keep this food warm until we get back."

Saint nods and disappears into the kitchen with her plate. I take Dove upstairs, picking a pleated skirt and an ivory blouse with short sleeves from her closet. Despite her insisting she can do it herself, I help her get dressed, not wasting any chances to feel her beneath my fingertips. Then we're in the car and I wrap my arm around her, pulling her close to me in the backseat. Perez, another one of my hires, drives us around the city in silence.

Outside, the sun is mostly covered by grayish clouds. But the weather is still warm and the Potomac River is calm and quiet. So much so that Dove breaks the silence to ask for the AC to be turned on. Perez does it, and I swipe my thumb across her shoulder, forcing her to lean on my chest with her pretty head. The scent of her

shampoo registers when she does it and I cling to it, burying my face in her hair as I say, “Lie down, angel. There’s traffic.”

I press a soft kiss to the top of her head. Without protesting, she brings her legs up and curls at my side, sighing softly with her eyelashes fluttering close.

I catch Perez’s eyes in the front mirror, but he’s quick to avert mine.

Good.

We drive over a speed bump, and I extend my hand down to Dove’s skirt, where I grip her soft ass cheek above the thin material. I lower it more until I’m touching the back of her thighs. Then my hand disappears under the skirt and I slide it to her pussy—plump, closed, and covered by another layer.

Feeling the strap of her thong, I curl a finger behind it and push it to the side. I stroke her naked slit with my knuckles, barely touching her when her head shifts. She looks up at me, brows furrowed with a question in her eyes.

Still petting her pussy, I tilt toward her ear and say, “Be good, Dove.”

A muted mewl answers back, and I notice when her gaze wanders to Perez, a clear sign of her concern for being watched. But Perez isn’t watching—he knows better. And I’m not exposing her to him.

I push my finger into her soft flesh, feeling her damp walls bury me at her entrance. I cover my mouth with my free hand, supporting my elbow on the window frame as I groan at the feel of her. She stills against my body, save for the subtle swaying caused by the moving car. It reminds me of the first time I tasted her, back in June when I was traveling with my convoy.

I pump my middle finger in and out of her entrance, feeling her body relax more.

That's it. Such a good girl for me.

So much wetness pools around my hand that the sounds of her arousal break through the constant hum of the car as we ride through the streets of Washington. I remove my finger and start petting her entire pussy, giving her channel a short break. My knuckles slide across it easily now, her lips and clit nice and slick.

I look down at her, seeing her slender hands gripping the lower edges of my uniform jacket and her cheeks flushing with a shade of pink. Her lips are parted, and her breaths shallow as she lies in my arms and takes all that I'm giving her.

I want her thoughtless—a present, whimpering mess with no time to remember the horrors she went through. A mind so aware of her constantly used pussy that all she needs to use her voice for is yes, sir , and please , and if needed, her safe word. And I want her to expect it. To know that I could reach for her pussy anywhere I want, regardless of who we're with or where we are. As long as she's with me, she doesn't have to worry about anything. I'll always think for her when I know she needs it.

“Sir,” Perez says without meeting my gaze in the front mirror.

“Hmm?”

“We're here.”

I nod, removing my hand from Dove's pussy and wiping it on her skin beneath her skirt. I'm not done with her, but I'll have to wait until we go inside the Command Center. Hand wrapped around the back of her neck, I guide her towards the building, the scent of her pussy on my fingers wafting around us. It makes my cock twitch, and I have to take her hand instead because I can't be seen with a fucking erection where

I know reporters like to roam around. Once we're in the building, I settle her in my temporary office so I can go talk to the officers.

"Will you... Can you lock the door?" she asks, wrapping her arms around herself.

I don't know why but the question sparks something in me. She wants me to lock her up, to protect her from the monsters outside these walls when I'm just another one. The only difference is that I love her.

"I will. Is your pussy still wet?"

She leans against my desk, facing me but looking to the side. "You know it is."

"Show me."

"What?"

"Show me your wet pussy before I leave. So I know what I'm coming back to."

And maybe because she's so aroused, or because she's gotten used to me, the request doesn't seem to take her by surprise as much as it used to. She's learning fast.

"H-How do you want it?" she asks.

I smile, folding my hands in front of me.

"My good little angel. Always wanting to be told what to do." I straighten up, my jaw clenched as I stare at her beautiful legs in anticipation. "Take off your panties."

A faint nod, and then her hands dip under her skirt and I see her thong slide down, pooling on the floor at her feet. She walks out of them and fists them in her hand.

I jerk my head toward the desk. “Haul yourself up. Sit on the desk facing me.”

She plants her hands behind her and lifts herself, her legs now dangling in the air.

“Spread them.”

She gulps, the air between us thick with sexual tension. It’s not like I haven’t seen her cunt before, but we’re both acting as if it’s the first time—me, impatient, and her, nervous.

“Very good, Dove,” I mutter. “You know what to do next.”

She sucks in a breath and, without leaving my gaze, she scrunches her skirt up, inch by inch, until her shaved pussy fills my vision and melts in my eyes.

“There you are.” I exhale, feeling my throat bob as I refrain from touching her. She’s so wet, she’s practically glistening, her clit engorged from all the blood swarming there. My eyes fixate on it, unable to look anywhere else.

This is mine. All of her is mine.

Eventually, I saunter over to her, slowly, letting her wonder if I’m going to finger her again. I tower over her small frame, lifting her chin with my index finger.

“I want you to do something for me while I’m in that meeting,” I say.

She says nothing, but the question shows on her face.

“Remember when Leon and I played with you that night?”

“Y-Yes.”

“Remember how we edged you? How I didn’t let you come for hours?”

Her brows furrow. “Y-Yes.”

“I want you to do that to yourself, Dove. Not for hours, but for the ten minutes I’ll be gone. I want to go into that meeting knowing you’ll be here, touching yourself, waiting for my permission to come. Will you be a good girl and do that for me?”

“I...”

Before she has time to think about it, I pull a small bullet vibrator out of my chest pocket and touch the tip to her slit. She whimpers, looking down at it. At my hand that is holding it.

“Will you?”

“I’ll try,” she whispers, spreading her legs more. I wonder if she’s aware of it.

“That won’t be good enough. If you come, you’ll get punished. If you don’t, I’ll reward you. Don’t worry, there are no cameras in this office. But if you lie to me, I’ll know. You know I always do.”

“Yes. Yes, I know.”

I take her hand and wrap it around the vibrator, handing the task over to her.

Christ. I don’t want to fucking leave this room.

“Good girl. Make it feel good. Keep it warm and wet for me. I’ll be back to play with it some more soon.”

twenty-one

Dove

Days pass and things fall into a normal rhythm. Well, as normal as they can be right now. Night after night I wake up in a cold sweat, thrashing in Rowan's arms as the nightmares take up more and more space in my mind. I dream of the tunnels, of the corpses and their stench, of the chains wrapped tightly around my wrists and ankles. I wake up screaming, not knowing what to do with myself.

But Rowan is always here, reeling me back into the present moment, into the strength he provides to me and the warmth radiating from his bare chest against my back. He holds me, then he makes me come. And I let him, because it's the only thing that puts me to sleep. I don't wake again until the sun is up.

And I see him... I see him fighting his demons every day when he doesn't think I'm paying attention. I can feel his kisses getting more tense, like he's afraid he's going to wake up one day and I'll be gone again. We're back to square one, where he's stressed and worried about me, and I worry about him just as much.

Matthew, the doctor Rowan hired to see me, keeps coming here. They don't tell me what's wrong, and I never ask. I already know that whatever it is, it's bad. The IV drips I receive keep me stable, though my condition is only getting worse. Just last night, I fell down while brushing my teeth, my legs no longer being able to support me. I got up and went to bed early, making sure Rowan didn't find out about the incident.

He also took me to the hospital to see my mom and never let me out of his sight. He said the EFW wouldn't be on our tracks this time, that they are waiting for us to give them what they want. Still, my brother didn't come—he didn't think it was a good idea to tell her he's alive. And I couldn't argue with that. My mom already lost her son once, and if Cole continues to put himself in danger the way he just did by leaving to meet in secret with one of his men, I'd rather she doesn't know he's alive for now.

But I went to see her, and the sight of her in a wheelchair broke my goddamn heart. They think she'll make a full recovery, but it will take time. I already know that as soon as they let her out, I'll use all my savings to get her a full-time nurse. Anything to get her back on her feet as quickly as possible.

In the meantime, I've been working almost nonstop. Reading articles, writing down names who I think might know more than what's in the public eye, linking events together and trying to prove the EFW are guilty, just like my boss taught me. I feel powerful doing it, and it reminds me why I chose this line of work.

Except... the job I had is gone. I know it is, and I don't need to read the long string of emails I got from Miss Pratt to know that. In fact, I've been avoiding it. I know it will be just another thing the EFW took away from me, and fuck, I worked so damn hard to get that internship... the internship no one else in my class got. Anger surges through me, and I use it as fuel to keep researching while ignoring everything else.

Everything except...

Rowan walks out on the front terrace and, without a word, his hand moves with deliberate ease, lowering my laptop lid with a soft click. My eyes snap to his, and my hands extend to open it up again. But he puts pressure on it with his fingers, and I have no choice but to give up.

I tilt my head back to catch his gaze, my breath hitching and my lips parting in frustration. He looms above me, his broad frame silhouetted against the soft moonlight.

“Rowan...”

His eyes darken as they hold mine.

“That’s enough,” he says. “What did I tell you?”

Rolling my eyes, I cross my arms at my chest, but he doesn’t falter.

“I know what you told me, and I have been taking care of myself. I was just reading something that—”

His voice goes down an octave as he says slowly, “You barely ate your dinner. You haven’t slept enough. And you didn’t come into my office this morning, like I told you to.”

Told me, not asked me.

I breathe out, my thighs pressing together. He asked me to go into his office every morning at eight sharp. Because he needed to eat... and he wanted me to be his first meal of the day.

My frustration suddenly vanishes into the starry night. The garden is alive with the hum of crickets and the faint whisper of an early fall breeze, stirring the leaves of the willow trees and making me pull the edges of my blanket tighter around my body. It smells like fading blossoms, as if the world is clinging to the last traces of warmth that the season offers.

“How did you even know?” I ask. “You were busy all day. You didn’t pay attention—”

“I pay attention to everything.”

I squirm in my chair, defending myself. “I wasn’t hungry. And I’m too eager to get this research done to spend my time sleeping. I’ll have plenty of chances to do that after it’s all over.”

He hums, a dark smile stretching across his lush lips as he pushes my laptop to the side, then stands upright and disappears behind my chair. A shiver runs down my spine, and I know it’s not from the breeze this time. His muscular arm snakes down my naked collarbone, dipping beneath my silky nightgown until it reaches my soft nipple. I gasp, the need for him building fast.

His breath tickles the shell of my ear as he says, “We made a bargain, angel, did we not?”

When I don’t answer, his fingers pinch my nipple and I let out a whimper.

“Did. We. Not.”

“Y-Yes,” I whisper, my eyelids growing heavy.

“ Yes ,” he mocks, his hand sliding down, down, down, until it goes past the edge of my gown and his skilled fingers pull it up. The breeze blows softly against my pussy, now covered only by the thin layer of my panties. “You can work all you want, so long as you follow the simple rules I laid out. So help me understand, then, why is my good little angel not taking proper care of herself? And why did she not bend over my desk this morning with her beautiful pussy out on display?”

“Had work...” I mumble, my chest rising and lowering with heavy breaths. “...to do.”

He hums in understanding, but I know there’s no sympathy in that low growl. I’m about to be punished hard. Anyone seeing us could tell. His middle finger presses into my pussy, feeling for the wetness already pooling there, behind the thin lace. But he doesn’t go any further than that. I yelp when his other hand comes around me and he grabs my thighs, making me bend over the table in front of me. My head turns to the side, face pressed to the wood. The chair is removed, and I lower my bare legs to the heated floor, my blanket now a mess at our feet.

His fingers hook my panties and pull them down to the middle of my thighs. I try to wiggle out of them, but they won’t slide down unless we pull them down—which Rowan doesn’t do. He wants me restrained.

He lifts my nightgown, letting it rest on my lower back, exposing me to him fully—my pussy, my ass, and my trembling inner thighs smeared with my arousal. I bite my lower lip expecting him to play with me, to have the meal I denied him earlier. But he doesn’t do any of that.

Instead, cold liquid makes shivering contact with my tightest hole, and my eyes widen at the realization. He’s been patient and caring and offered me all the pleasure I was willing to take. But we had an argument about this the other day, when I told him he should stop holding back. I told him, once again, that I didn’t want to be treated like a victim or like a wounded person—it would only reinforce it in my head.

He listened. And now... he’s going to fuck me in the ass.

“My, my ,” he drawls, spreading my ass cheeks with his warm palms. “Look at this precious asshole opening and closing for me. That’s so very naughty of you, Dove. Don’t you think?”

Shame burns on my face with the force of a thousand suns, making my pussy wetter.

The sound of a zipper reaches my ears, and he positions his warm, throbbing cock against my hole. I whimper, moan , and he has barely touched me. I arch my back, and—

Tap.

Tap. Tap.

His fingers tap my closed lips, a silent command to open my mouth. Hesitantly, I obey. And when I do, they push to the back of my throat, silencing me. My eyes go wide at the intrusion, but I do nothing to push them out.

“I’d pacify you with my cock if I could... but it’s a bit too ‘eager’ to fuck your ass.” He huffs a taunting laugh as he repeats my words from earlier back to me. Then his cock pushes against my tight hole, and pain trickles through, burning, then subsiding, then burning again. I thrash, trying to get away. I know he won’t hurt me, but I can’t fight the instinct overpowering me.

He chuckles, then says, “You know that won’t work with me.” He grabs my ass cheek with his free hand and digs his fingers into my soft skin. The first inch of his cock enters me—velvety and hard as a rock. “I own you, angel. So you will stay. And you will come with my cock buried in your ass when I tell you to. Yes?”

I nod as best I can, my body sagging onto the table as I try to relax my muscles.

“Good girl. Don’t thrash, don’t shout, simply bite my finger if you want me to stop, and I will.”

I nod one more time, then his cock spears me further from behind. The hand on my

ass extends to my hair, caressing me in gentle strokes—a sharp contrast to remind me he can be gentle when he wants. My face scrunches in pain, but my pussy throbs, begging to be touched. Arousal drips down my thigh, coating my skin with the proof of my innate submission.

“That’s it,” Rowan whispers above me as he continues to caress my hair. “What a good little cum hole.” He praises me through it until finally, my face relaxes, and I wait.

Neither of us is moving anymore. He just stands there with his cock in my ass and I’m bent over this table with my panties down my thighs and his fingers in my drooling mouth.

I’m completely at his mercy, and all I can do is wait for how he wants to take me.

Will he be gentle? Or will he fuck me hard?

Thrust.

His balls hit my pussy when he enters me to the hilt, and his abdomen clashes against my ass cheeks. He hums in pure pleasure—a decadent, sultry undertone streaming through the ebb of his voice.

“Oh, angel...” he laughs. “I simply can’t decide when I like you better—when you’re a sweet, obedient girl or an undisciplined little brat.”

Thrust. Thrust.

His belt buckle jingles with every movement. I moan and grunt as he pushes me higher on the table. My ass feels full as he slides in and out of me with ease now, after it has somewhat adjusted to his size. I grip the edge above my head with my

hands, holding on tight. Except I can't hold on tight—my hands are sweaty and my pussy has found the much-needed friction now that my hips are making contact with the wooden corner. It takes but a few seconds before it turns into a slippery mess from my wetness being smeared around.

All my breath leaves my lungs when my orgasm spreads through me like a gigantic wave, drowning everything in its path. Simultaneously, Rowan pulls his drenched fingers out of my drooling mouth, this time gripping my hair forcefully instead of caressing it. He yanks my head back, stretching my neck to its limit as my body trembles with my pleasure dripping out of me. My scalp burns from the force of his grasp and he bends over me, burying his lips in that exact spot.

His muffled voice reaches my ears. “Did I tell you to come?”

My breathing is shallow and uneven as my worried eyes roll back to meet his.

His cock is still in my ass, and my cheeks are hugging it shamelessly.

Oh, God...

“Breathe for me,” he says.

I take in a big heap of air, and he pulls out as I exhale, taking the last remains of pain with him. He flips me over to face him and sits me down on the table. My ass hurts already, but I don't flinch. The next thing I know, he's on his knees and his soft mouth is on my slippery pussy.

“Rowan—” My head falls back, a groan escaping me as I look up at the starry sky.

“Oh my fucking God, angel,” he mutters, mouth full of pussy and my cum. “I should tie you up as my glory hole for the rest of the night. I should punish and discipline

you right now. But you're so sweet— this is so sweet. Fuck..."

The idea excites me more than I'd like to admit. I love it when he uses me without asking. I love it when he takes, takes, takes, and doesn't get satiated with me. This was supposed to be a punishment, but his self-control often shatters when he's around me. A shy smile spreads on my face, my fingers diving into his dark, velvety hair and fisting it as I bring his tongue closer to my clit.

He licks me fast and tenderly, savoring me. The meal I denied him this morning in his office.

My pussy grows slicker, and I barely feel it when he pushes one finger inside me. Then the second one follows suit, and I lie on my back, watching a shooting star fly by as the man I love licks between my legs like he's been starved.

"I love..." I whisper, my eyelashes fluttering closed. "I love you."

He grunts, his voice vibrating through my core as he murmurs something I don't understand.

But I don't ask for clarification. Because the weighted band he just slipped up my finger says it all.

twenty-two

Rowan

“ I love you,” her soft voice breaks through the silence of the night.

I sit on one knee, fucking her with my fingers and tongue, savoring her sweet little whimpers as they come in quick, steady waves. I want to tell her the same, but I can’t tear myself from between her legs. She tastes like heaven. She has this... this distant sweetness to her I keep reaching for in the depths of her core, but I can never get enough of it on my tongue. I’m digging for it like a miner craving fresh mountain air.

In my mind, I tell her I love her. That I worship her. That she’s it for me.

My body listens, so my free hand reaches out for the black velvet box I keep hidden in the pocket of my slacks. I was going to do this somewhere else. I had the whole evening planned out for her, but this can’t wait.

Tongue up in her sweet cunt, I fumble for the lid and manage to take out the ring, surrounded by the scent of her arousal and the last of summer’s flowery aromas. I feel the large, oval-cut diamond sitting at the center with my fingers—flawless and sparkling, as if it holds a piece of the moon. Around it, smaller diamonds form a halo, the arrangement soft and angelic, just like her. I let the box fall to the floor and open my eyes to find her finger before putting it on.

“Rowan...” she whimpers, her moan intensifying as I resume fucking her with my other hand. Her arousal smears my skin, coating it unevenly, making a wet sound

when I pump in and out of her. Her back arches, allowing me deeper inside, and the heat radiating from her body sends a ravenous growl through the length of my throat.

“Come for me, angel. Let me see this beautiful pussy up close.”

Praise seems to take her over the edge and her cunt pulses in front of my eyes, drenching itself in her own cum. I caress the area some more with my hand, loving the way she feels under the pads of my fingers—slick and warm and so fucking soft. Her legs twitch from her orgasm, and she tries to hide from me, to close them up and make me stop touching her. But it only makes me want her more.

I dip my fingers back into her wetness, then smear it around her asshole. I’m not done. And I want to see that again. I want to see her cunt move and spasm and become overstimulated from me worshiping her.

It’s such a strange thing, being a pleasure Dom. Her pleasure shows me she’s mine, and there’s no better feeling in the fucking world. Just like there isn’t one now as I look down and see her exactly the way she should be—pussy pulsing, my ring on her finger, and my cock back in her ass where it belongs.

Dove

We shower together in the bathroom downstairs. I cling to his shoulders, my body exhausted and on the brink of collapsing again, like it did that day. I can’t hide it from him anymore. And I can’t pretend not to notice the big diamond ring on my finger. My hands are shaking from the emotion and the intensity of the moment. He hasn’t asked me anything, and I haven’t said a word to him about it either.

I’m dying. Whatever virus is inside me is taking more and more place in my cells. Even if we expose the EFW to the world, I’m honestly not sure that will mean I’m saved. And by him doing what he just did... he condemned himself to the life of a

widower, a man who'll get married just to lose his wife in such a tragic way. I don't expect him to understand—he always acts as if I'm everything to him. But he's everything to me, too, and I can't let him live the rest of his life in pain.

His naked body overpowers mine, muscular and slick with the hot water streaming down on us. I stare at the ring, at my hand pressed to his tan skin, my heart growing at seeing it wrapped around my flesh. It has a halo made of diamonds, and I smile to myself, understanding why he picked this design for me.

I was never the girl dreaming of grand proposals. I never wanted flashy things or public declarations of love. But this man... just... took me. He saw me there, and he took me like he already owned me. It was so simple. So natural. And he is right—I belong to him already, and every atom in my body knows it.

The water stops, and Rowan extends his body to the side, retrieving a towel. He wraps it around me, bringing the sides to my hair, and pats it to get rid of the excess water. I stare into his eyes as he does it—they're focused on the task and not concerned about my lack of words in the slightest. When he's done, he wraps another towel around his waist and lifts me up into his arms like I weigh nothing.

I breathe hard, my lungs straining from the illness as I say, "Hey, I think we should talk—"

A soft kiss lands on my forehead. "We can talk about it over dinner. You need to eat."

I nod, noticing how empty my stomach actually feels. I haven't been able to keep down food since I got back—only bits and pieces, like yogurt and toast. Everything else has pretty much gone down the drain, and I've tried my best to keep it from Rowan. What's the point in worrying him when there's nothing more we can do about it, anyway? But some days are better than others, and today I feel like I could

maybe eat if I chewed really slowly.

A few minutes later, we're in one of the guest bedrooms downstairs, where a beautiful red dress is waiting for me. I give him an inquisitive look as he lowers me to the bed. But save for caressing my hair and picking it up himself, he doesn't clarify any further.

"Arms up."

I comply, and the thin material drapes over my body as I let go of my towel. "Are we going somewhere?"

"Depends," he says. "How are you feeling?"

"I've been better." I smile. He doesn't.

"Then we're not going anywhere. I'll cancel our reservation."

My head lowers, and a stinging pain blossoms in my chest, spreading through my body like ice. I wish we could go. I wish we could continue doing what happened earlier on the porch. I wish I wasn't in this state, and he didn't have to coddle me, and...

His index finger lifts my chin, forcing me to look at him. "I didn't say I'll cancel everything. My wife deserves a night she won't forget, and I'm about to give her the first of many."

His wife . We're not even married yet, and he calls me that. My heart flutters at the word and begs me to accept it. And I want to, fuck , I really do, but what will happen to me—to us— if we don't find the cure? How can he be so sure we will?

He helps me get me ready, drying my hair and bringing me my makeup bag from upstairs when I ask for it. And when he comes back into the room, he's wearing a black suit with no tie that molds to his body, accentuating his muscles and his powerful stance. His hair is still damp, draping slightly over his eyes, and my skin prickles with goosebumps at how handsome he is—chiseled, and fresh, and oozing with pure sin.

He comes in front of me, kneeling down to help me get a pair of black heels on, which I'm pretty sure I won't be able to walk in. They fit me perfectly, and so does the dress. He really pays attention to everything, and right now that worries me.

When he's done, we both stare at the image of us in the oval mirror facing the bed. Him kneeling, and me sitting on the bed above him, with my hand on his shoulder and the enormous diamond on my finger. I stare and stare and trace the lines of us with my mind's eye, never wanting to forget the way we look together—that he's mine.

"Come on," he says, taking my other hand in his and pressing his lips to my skin.

I get up on wobbly legs and he snakes his arms around me again, lifting me up. Then, relaxing into his wall of muscle, my head dips back against his shoulder and I close my eyes, letting him take me wherever he wants. I don't open them again until I hear the crackling of a fire and feel the hot, smoky air brush against my skin.

The back garden is alive with muted lights placed around a table with two chairs. A small pillow cushions one of them. Flickering candlelight bathes the table in a warm glow, where the silverware and glasses lie meticulously arranged. Black napkins folded into an elegant design and restaurant menus lie on top of the plates. Right to the side of this arrangement, a fire burns in a metallic bowl, its flames crackling and throwing off sparks against the night sky. And there are flowers everywhere. Vases of different sizes filled with roses, lilies, and dahlias in hues of early fall.

So beautiful.

Approaching the table, Rowan lowers me into my seat. The softness of the cushion soothes me, my body instantly releasing some of the tension it's been holding onto. Butterflies spring to life in my stomach, palms becoming sweaty as Rowan places his suit jacket on my shoulders. I'm not cold, not with the fire so close by, but he does it anyway, and I relish in his scent enveloping me. Then he stoops and finds my lips with his, pressing a long, charged kiss into them that takes my breath away.

"The chef from the restaurant I was going to take you to agreed to serve us here tonight. Thought we might end up staying in, so I arranged for him to come here earlier."

"Oh. W-Who is he? And when did you do all of this? I heard nothing. All day, I was—"

"Working." He dips his jaw as he takes his seat across the table. "His name is Marco Bellini. I discovered him years ago at a government party, when he was just starting. His signature arancini are just... ridiculous." He laughs. My eyes widen at the sound of it: warm, low, and beautiful, and unlike any other laugh I've ever heard. It makes me lean forward in my seat, chasing more of it. He continues, "Super crisp on the outside, creamy on the inside, with just the right hint of truffle. I could eat a hundred of them and still want more. Marco makes them better than anyone."

I narrow my eyes. "And you got him here... on a busy Friday night."

"I will get him here every night if you tell me you like his food." He takes his menu off the table, extending his hand, a silent invitation to have my pick. But I don't follow suit. Not yet.

I gather my strength and do another sweep of the setting with my eyes. It's beautiful

and perfect, and I want nothing more than to just accept the ring on my finger without a fight. Because he's right. We belong together, and marrying him would be a wish come true. But the circumstances... the urgency surrounding them... I know what he's doing. And I won't let him throw his life away for me.

I swallow. "You... you asked me to be your wife."

But he surprises me, like he does, when his lips curl into a smile at the sound of that.

The menu in his hands is back on the table and his eyes are on mine as he says, "No, angel. I never asked."

Rowan

Her beautiful plump lips are moving with the sound of a question, but all I can think of is that ring on her finger. Fuck. I waited too long. I should've done this way sooner. All this time I told myself I couldn't do it—couldn't give my heart to one woman and be someone I'm not. But with Dove, none of that mattered. She saw me for who I am—scarred, and controlling, and with dangerous impulses, and she loved me regardless. I know I scare her sometimes. That I challenge her beliefs and make her furious with me. But she sees everything else about me... everything else I didn't think I was.

"Back when you came to my apartment that night," she says, shifting in her seat, "when Jared came by..." I flinch at the mention of that asshole's name. "You told me I always had a choice. That I could leave at any time. Did you lie to me then?"

"No."

"But is that still... Do you still mean that?"

The question doesn't worry me like it should. If she thinks I'll let her go, she's wildly mistaken. At first, I only said it because I hadn't come to terms with involving her in my world. I didn't want anything bad to happen to her, and it was her right to back out. But now... things are way fucking different now.

I know my silence comes as a surprise when I pull out the pink ribbon from my chest pocket. The thin layer of satin molds to my touch as my fingers play with it on the table—it feels the same, maybe a little worn out, but still the same as it's always felt in my hands whenever I took it out over the years. Across the table, Dove's restlessness is almost palpable as she struggles to remember the item.

"It's yours," I say, continuing to look at it. "Picked it up from your apartment one day . You were out, having drinks with Sterling. So I went in, and I just..." The corner of my lips twitches. "I saw a bunch of ribbons on the backrest of your chair. I didn't think you'd notice if I took one."

Her voice comes out soft, reverent, as if the memory comes back to her on a gentle wind. "I did."

"You did. You freaked out over it, thinking you'd gone mad." I laugh and lift my gaze, seeing how fucking beautiful she is in the little red dress I bought her. I could get used to this— dressing her like my own personal fuck doll. My beautiful, smart, innocent fuck doll.

She crosses her arms. "I like to be organized, and I remember where I put things. You know that."

I do know that. I know everything about you, because you're my favorite thing to look at.

"I held on to it," I continue. "Had it in the chest pocket of my uniform all the time.

This pink ribbon was often the only colorful thing in a room full of grim faces and disgusting news. And I felt it there, against my chest, and I could breathe a little easier knowing you were with me. I know it sounds crazy, but I made do with what I had— any part of you was better than none. And I did this for years and years and years until the day I called.”

Her brows pull together as if to scold me, but the restrained smile gives away how she’s really feeling about it.

“So I hope you can understand when I tell you, Dove, that you can ask me for anything, anything in this world, except... giving you up. Not after everything.”

Her hair sways with the movement when she shakes her head. “I can’t believe you, you know? You’re the most insane person I’ve ever met.” She huffs a sweet little laugh. But there’s something else behind that laugh... a kernel of something sad that makes my wrath flicker under my skin, reminding me of the day I lost her. “I don’t want that. I’m not trying to say I want out. But Rowan, I don’t think you should marry me when—”

I listen with all my senses perked up, but the server Marco brought with him from the restaurant approaches the table, and she goes silent, back into her head.

“Good evening, Sir... Madam..., may I take your order, or would you like more time to decide?”

“We’ll need more—”

“No, that’s all right,” Dove chimes in, smiling at him. I blink, taken aback by the simple gesture. The fact that she’s still smiling after everything that happened to her makes my chest tighten—with guilt, and pride, and a flicker of relief. The server returns it, and I’m suddenly overwhelmed with needing to rip his fucking mouth with

the butter knife in front of me. Dove continues, “I think I’ll have the famous arancini, please.”

“Certainly. And for you, sir?”

My voice comes out tense. “Two of those. And a bottle of Massandra sherry.”

“Excellent choice. Mr. Bellini is eager to cook for you again.”

I drum my fingers on the table, eager for him to leave us alone. When he does retreat back to the house, I hold my breath for whatever else Dove is ready to talk about. No matter what troubles her pretty mind, it’s my job to find out and fix it for her. It’s what a good fucking husband does.

She blinks, avoiding my stare. “I haven’t met your parents. You haven’t met my mom—not properly. Sterling doesn’t even know what happened to me. And, of course...” she adds as an afterthought, “I don’t know if I’ll live to see another day. I guess... I guess what I’m trying to say is I don’t want this to be rushed because we’re running out of time and—”

This isn’t what I was hoping she’d think about tonight, but I suppose we were going to get here eventually. She’s right, but at the same time she isn’t, because I’ve already taken care of everything she’s worried about. Only I can’t tell her that without having to answer questions I don’t want her knowing the answers to.

“Hey.” I extend my arm around the small table. “Come here. Come into my arms.”

Hesitantly she gets up and makes the two steps toward me. I help her flop down on my knees, inhaling the faint smell of strawberries from her collarbone. Out of nowhere she flinches, tensing up above me, as if she wants me to stop.

“What’s wrong?” I ask.

“I... um... Sorry.” Her hand looks for mine as she swallows hard. “It reminds me of... of the man in the basement cell. He asked me to sit on his knee and then—”

Fuck.

“I’m sorry, angel,” is all I can say to that. Because there’s no erasing those memories—no physical monster I can fight. The ghosts of the past now live in that beautiful mind of hers, and I know that even with everything I’m doing to help her, it won’t be enough. The weight of the situation presses down on me in full force. I move the plates around, lift her up in my arms, and sit her down on the table in front of me with my hands on her thighs.

“How’s this?”

She smiles faintly. “Thank you. And I’m really—”

“I’d prefer it if you didn’t apologize on that asshole’s behalf. We’ll get through this, angel. You and me. Okay?”

I let my hand move up and down her thigh, centering her back to the present moment. I know the situation isn’t ideal, and I wish I could’ve given her more time to adjust to all of this—to making her my wife. But the reality is, I don’t have it. That time is almost up.

“You know, when I was a kid my father used to tell me I didn’t have what it took to follow in his footsteps. He used to say...” I inhale. “That I’m impulsive. Hotheaded. That I’d never make it far unless I changed everything about myself. And maybe he was right.” My jaw tightens. “But it didn’t matter what I did. It was never enough for him. I was never enough.”

“If your grandfather was alive, he would’ve whipped you until your flesh came out.”

“Man the fuck up, boy. No wonder your mom can’t even look at you.”

“Get out of my face. You’re embarrassing me.”

I trail my hands down to her shins, trying to remain present, but it doesn’t stop the memories from clawing their way in. “I tried to prove him wrong. I really did. But I couldn’t be who he wanted me to be. Because I didn’t want to become like him. He was...” My voice falters, and the memory hits me.

I’m five. My mom brings out the birthday cake, her sweet voice filling the house with the first words of the Happy Birthday song. My father just stands there in the hallway with his combat boots still on. His face changes, scrunching under his incoming rage.

“Where the fuck is the food?” he yells. “I come home after the worst fucking day at work and this is what I get?” He disappears into the small adjacent kitchen, then comes back with a knife in his hand.

My mom has stopped singing. My heart thrashes in my chest, knowing what’s next.

“Come here, both of you.” He yells and yells, cursing as the vein on his forehead threatens to pop. His muddy boots pound through the spotless hallway as my mom and I back away. I keep close, knowing I’ll be the first to die before I let anything happen to her.

“Barrett... please,” my mom sobs, the cake shaking in her hands. “Please, think about Rowan. Please.”

I wave the memory away with a swipe on Dove’s skin. “I thought I could be different. Thought if I waited, if I planned everything perfectly, I could protect

you—could keep you safe. But...” I look up at her, hoping she can’t see the cracks in me. “So far, all I did was to prove him right.”

Her eyes soften, but she keeps listening.

“That’s why I waited so long to make you mine. Even if I may be everything my father tells me I am, this decision wasn’t made today. It was made five years ago, when you smiled at me with tears in your eyes. Do you understand? This isn’t some... some thing I decided on a whim. I’ve been waiting for this day my whole life. For you to come in and show me what it’s like to—” I swallow.

“T-To what?” she whispers.

My throat swells, and I make a conscious effort to keep the words locked inside. But it’s my heart—my fucking heart—that grabs them and throws them out so she can hear me. So she can see more of who I am, more of who I was before her. I’ve given no one a look inside before, not even a glance. Dove... she gave me all of her, even when she didn’t know she was giving it. I took and took and took and only gave back small bits and pieces. Not because I didn’t want her to know me fully, but because... I think deep down, I was afraid she might not want me anymore.

“To live,” I say. “And not walk around life half-dead all the time.”

She offers me a faint smile and a gentle touch on my arm. “I’m... I’m sorry. I had no idea your father was so tough. What about your mom? They’re still together, aren’t they?”

I nod. “She never left him, not even after I’d made something of myself and told her I could provide for her. I couldn’t understand it, not for a long while. But now I think that in their messed-up, toxic way, they love each other, or need each other like they need air.”

“Codependency,” she murmurs.

“Something like that. When I got older I could fight him, put him into his place. He hasn’t laid a hand on her since, but he’s still a bastard every chance he gets. We’ll never have a relationship, him and I, and neither of us intends on starting one. We’re civil only for my mother’s sake.”

“I’m sorry,” she says again. “And I hope you don’t believe what he says, Rowan, because it’s not true. You are good enough. God, you are more than good enough. You’re...” She breathes out. “Everything.”

I smile, not daring to agree, because I don’t know that I am.

“So you’ll marry me.”

She wraps her arms around my neck, stooping so her minty breath tickles my lips. “Still not a question.”

“No,” I say, trailing my finger up the slit of her dress, enclosing on her pussy. “And I don’t think you want to be asked, angel. I think you want me to take you. Use you. Have my way with you and make you mine in every way there is. That’s the kind of girl you are, Dove...” Her breath hitches, my finger drawing circles on the inside of her thigh. “And it just so happens that I’m the kind of man who delights in doing just that.”

She whispers, “But what if... what if...”

“No. No what-ifs. I’ll take care of everything. The only thing I need you to do is pick the white dress I’m going to rip off you on our wedding night. Will you do that for me?”

“Look at you, asking me a question. I knew you had it in you.”

She laughs. Marco’s arancini arrive. And I spend the whole evening whispering sweet nothings in my wife’s ears, charging me with the strength I need to do what needs to be done a few days from now.

twenty-three

Dove

“J esus,” my friend Sterling says, her lips frozen in a silent gasp.

Her hand squeezes mine as I relay everything to her. How Rowan and I got together. How I met the president and his wife, how I got kidnapped and injected with a deadly virus with no cure. I tell her about my brother being alive. And about the EFW and everything I found about them through my research so far. She sits by my side on the couch and listens, lost behind her furrowed eyebrows and fiery eyes.

“I... I have no words,” she says when I’m done. “I’ve been back for over a month and thought you were straight-up ignoring me. Then I saw you in the magazines and I felt so betrayed. Like you had suddenly gotten this whole new life,” she gestures around the house, “and didn’t want me to be a part of it. To think that you were out there, fighting for your life, Dove...” She looks down at our entwined hands. “I am so, so sorry. I’ve been a terrible friend. I should’ve known something wasn’t right.”

I shake my head. “I should’ve messaged you the moment I was back. But I had no idea how to tell you about all of this. I thought maybe you wouldn’t want—”

She scoffs. “Be around you anymore? Dove, fuck, this is some serious shit. You know my mom died of cancer. If these assholes have the cure and keep it hidden from the public, that’s a crime I can never forgive. Besides...” She smiles faintly. “I’m pretty sure I told you when I was hammered that I’d follow you through a ring of fire if I had to. That still stands.”

“No, you said you’d throw me into a ring of fire if I took your fifth shot away.”

“Semantics.”

She laughs, throwing her head back, and I can’t stop my shoulders from shaking as I laugh with her. I can’t believe she’s here. I didn’t think I could see her with my precarious state and all, but after our last dinner, Rowan sent a car for her and she agreed to come.

“Damn,” she says, her finger swiping over my ring. “How much money does this guy have?”

I huff out a laugh, not knowing or caring about the answer to that.

Then the whole day turns into much-needed girl talk. My thoughts go back to Rowan now and then, wondering if he’s all right. He said he had something to do with Cole today and that he wouldn’t be back until later tonight. When I asked for details, I didn’t get any, but I didn’t let it bother me. I thought it was time... time for me to weave my own secrets and give my new friend at the White House a call. Cam, it turned out, was more than happy to indulge me.

Rowan

When I get home, it’s already past one in the morning. It’s raining hard. The cold water glides down my skull mask as I walk toward the main door with Cole and Hawke by my side. It’s been a shitty day, and the only thing that makes me feel better is knowing Dove is sleeping in our bed right now. But the lies... the fucking lies are getting to me. I had to lead my friends astray tonight so I could make progress with my plan—not the one I told Dove, nor the one I told Cole and Maddox. I knew neither of them would’ve agreed to my real one, and we’re running out of time. Dove coughed up blood this morning. Her condition is only getting worse.

My phone vibrates in my pocket and I take it out, seeing a string of messages pop on the screen.

Well done, Commander

So very close to getting everything you want

Cheer up

My jaw clenches and I close my eyes tightly, trying to block out the world for just a second. Then I dial the doctor's number and bring the phone to my ear. When he picks up, I only tell him, "I've got the cure. A car is on its way to pick you up."

Dove

The air feels damp and heavy, carrying the faint scent of holy oil and aged stone. The soft hiss of wind and rain splattering against the distant windows tells me something's wrong. Against my closed eyelids, the lights are warm, red, as if a fire burns nearby. I nudge my hands forward, but they're tied up somewhere above me. Instantly, panic rises to my throat and my eyes snap open.

"No. No, no, no," I whisper, realizing I'm back. Back in that horrible place, into that never-ending tunnel maze, where no one can find me, where no one will ever—

The shadows on the walls writhe through the spacious room. As if a beast lives here and I've just woken it up from slumber. I follow them with my eyes, hoping to see a body, but there's no one inside. A shiver crawls up my spine. I glance down at my body, and I realize I'm naked from the waist down. Whoever took me, took me exactly the way I went to sleep: in my burgundy nightgown.

To my right, there's an altar. The candles crowning it makes it glow as if it's a

breathing organ, their light spilling across the polished stone walls like blood smeared on marble. I blink and shapes emerge from the darkness. Wooden pews stretch before my eyes, the shapes of saints and martyrs haunting the empty seats.

Why am I in a church? Why am I naked and tied up in a church late at night?

My pulse quickens and my breath comes out in soft gasps when the sound of footsteps echoes to my ears.

I won't be afraid.

I won't be afraid.

I won't be afraid.

A low growl rumbles close to my ear from behind me. I close my eyes and grind my teeth.

“Hello, little angel.” Rowan's voice registers simultaneously with the warm finger coming between my pussy lips, gliding across my clit.

Instantly my body sags with relief, and I'm held by my pussy like a bird with her feet coiled around a forest branch. Moisture dampens his skin, making my cheeks burn.

You're... you're in a holy place, Dove. Shit.

Two hollow eyes meet mine when he comes around my suspended body, his mask looking grim and psychotic, making my fear return. Flashbacks of the night he saved me strike through my mind. I remind myself he's not a danger, but my body doesn't seem to want to listen this time.

His voice pulls me back a little when he asks, “Afraid of me, Dove?”

I shake my head.

“Use your words. Or I’ll take them away from you.”

“W-What are we doing here?”

His hands take my breasts out of my nightgown, one by one. They hang heavily in his wide palms, soft against his callused skin. My nipples harden as he swipes his thumbs over them. It’s such an erotic thing to have your breasts out while having the rest of your torso covered up. The action does things to me—things like making me rub my thighs together and scolding myself in my mind.

“Rewriting history,” he says plainly. “I never want you to be afraid when you’re in the dark. So I’m going to fuck you. I’m going to use you. And I’m going to show God you’re mine, no matter how much he likes to think otherwise.”

Rowan

I leave her hanging with her breasts out as I go behind her to pull the other end of the rope. It has an anal hook attached to it. If she moves, it will hurt her, so for her sake, I hope she doesn’t. I want her still while I use her holes in every way I can think of.

God, I fucking love this—stealing away her last bit of innocence in the church where she’ll marry me in a few days. I haven’t even told her yet, but she’s already mine... I forged the marriage papers and made sure she gets everything I own if I die. The wedding is for her. Because she deserves the world, and I’m nothing if not a madman completely obsessed with his wife.

“Open wide, angel,” I tell her as I bring the anal hook to her mouth. “Get this hook

nice and wet for your little asshole.”

“It... it still hurts.”

I smile but ignore her implied plea. “I know it does. Now show me your pink tongue.”

She knows what to do if she doesn’t want it. But my girl loves a little pain when I use her. She likes to feel it all. Otherwise I wouldn’t be staring at the way her soft lips open up for me right now.

“Oh?” I ask with false surprise. “You’re really going to let me fuck your aching ass right here in the church?” It makes her squirm with embarrassment, her breasts swaying lazily from the movement. My cock grows harder at the sight. “That’s so embarrassing, Dove. You know that, right?”

Her whimpers cause my body to roar to life. I smile behind my mask. I wanted to bring her here so I could replace the monster in her nightmares with the one she’s known for the past few months. The one who loves her, kills for her, kneels for her... I won’t be able to hold her through the night when I’m gone. But at least there’s this. At least she’ll wake up to dreams of me claiming her before God’s almighty eyes.

I praise her when she takes the hook into her mouth and starts sucking on it like a good girl. I leave it in and grab her thighs, pulling them apart. Her swollen clit welcomes me again, but I ignore it this time. I push two fingers into her drenched cunt, pumping them in and out. Her body rocks back and forth from the movement. The thought of seeing how many fingers she can take comes to mind, but I know she wouldn’t be able to take it right now, not before the cure settles in her body and takes that fucking virus out.

I only stop to slap her dampening cunt.

Once.

Twice.

Harder the third time.

She cries out and rocks into my touch, her pussy swollen and bright red like a juicy cherry.

“You love sucking on that thing, don’t you, Dove? I bet you wish it was a cock instead. Who knows...” I run my knuckles across her sensitive pussy, caressing where I caused pain. “Maybe I’ll call Hawke to do that part while I fuck your pussy and push that hook into your ass. Would my little wife like that?”

My words make her groan, and it’s all the answer I need. I know she enjoyed it that night when I held her down so Leon could lick her pussy and make her come. We talked about it afterward. She enjoyed it more than she was confident to admit. But as much as I’d love seeing her come undone under my command, there’s no time for it now. Just another thing I’ll never be able to experience with her because of what I did. Her imagination does the work for me, though—I know that because my fingers slide across her slippery pussy easily as she continues to wet herself like the perfect little slut she is for me.

I unzip my pants and take my cock out, positioning myself at her entrance and feeling the way her soft pussy pulses around me. My head dips back as I reel back my control, refraining from slamming into her. I want to feel everything. I want it all.

“Remember the day I picked you up from work and held my fingers in your cunt the entire ride? I wanted to do the same with my cock. Wanted you to sit on my lap, with my cock buried deep inside you for hours. Just so I can feel you there the entire fucking time. How you clench around me. How you squeeze my cock like a needy

little whore.”

I dig my fingers into her soft hips, knowing it’s going to leave bruises. The rope keeping her hovering above the floor straightens more as she pulls on it with her hands. She sobs quietly, ashamed while arching her pussy back toward me, offering herself to me like a sacrifice. I fucking love it.

“We’ll have to leave that for another time,” I say, knowing full well it will never happen.

The way she sucks on that metallic hook has me desperate to ram my cock to the back of her throat, but I refrain from that too. Everything in due time. First, my cock inches slowly into her tight cunt. She’s so warm inside, like a goddamn oven. Her channel pulses around me, stretching and making space for me until my pelvis makes contact with her bare ass. I fist my hand in her hair, pulling her head back. Then push my hips forward, fucking her slowly and increasing my pace when my impatience runs out.

I’m fully dressed in my combat uniform and she’s almost completely naked save for the sheer layer of silk that covers bits and pieces of her upper body. It’s how I love to see her. Bare, wet, and ready to take me in every single hole she has.

Her cute little whimpers echo in my ear, together with the wet sounds her pussy makes when I fuck her. I take the hook out of her mouth, and a huge gasp of air leaves her lungs.

“Jesus, fuck. Oh my God, Rowan,” she cries out.

“Language, angel. Look at where you are,” I say, motioning to the rest of the church. “Wouldn’t want you to be dragged down with me into the dark now, would we?”

My cock slides in and out of her with ease now, and I press the hook against her asshole, waiting to insert it when I'm done coming in her cunt. I don't want to hurt her, even if she told me to stop holding back. She's still too weak for the depraved things I have in mind for her.

One last thrust brings me over the edge, my cum spilling inside her warmth where it belongs. She's started taking her birth control again, and I got too excited at the thought of throwing it away for her and replacing it with sugar pills. But I couldn't bring myself to do it knowing the reality that awaits us after the wedding. I push the thought away from my mind, wanting to focus on the now. Because now, I have her. Now, she's all mine.

"Hold it in, angel. Don't let a single drop out. Is that understood?"

"Yes. Oh, God. Please..."

"You're wasting your breath asking God for anything right now. He's too busy watching to listen to you pray."

Her legs shake and spasm as I bring my fingers to her clit and massage the area. Naturally, my cum slides out of her, making her sloppy and slippery as she rocks into my touch. Her first orgasm flashes through her small body. The ropes move with her, and I push the hook all the way into her ass this time.

Then I simply back away and admire what I've done. My cum is slick on her swollen pussy, dripping down her thighs and gleaming like early morning dew. She hangs like a broken doll in the middle of the church, her arms spread above her head as I watch—I watch her with carnal need and curiosity, waiting to see how much more of me she'll need before the subdrop hits. It makes my lips curl into a wicked smile, knowing it still hasn't. She's such a good, patient girl for me.

I take out a cigarette from my pocket and use a church candle to light it on. I quit smoking in high school, but right now I need to watch something burn. To remind myself of what I've done: that Dove is here, and I have a long trail of sins to account for saving her life.

twenty-four

Dove

I 'm getting married tomorrow, and I can't wrap my head around the fact.

Last week I was coughing up blood, thinking I was going to die. And before that, I was living in a basement cell with chains wrapped around my limbs like an animal. Everything happened so fast, and though the weight of it all still presses down on me every day, I've never felt more alive. I'm more than ready to take down those bastards and spend the rest of my life with the man I love, right here in this house.

Oddly enough, I feel stronger than yesterday. I can breathe a little easier, and I've eaten my breakfast without throwing it up.

But I see the way they all look at me—Sterling, and Cole, and even Saint. They expect me to curl up into a ball and spend my time crying in my room like the victim they think I am. I don't blame them for that.

The truth is, I've never given them a reason to consider me strong. That I could rise above anything if I wanted to, if I had a good enough reason to fight for. I have plenty of reasons now. The woman they remember is dead. She died in those tunnels below Salister's town, and now... now I'm reborn from the ashes of my wrath. Of Rowan's wrath.

The brush stops in my hair and I close my eyes, trying to block out the sight of blood, of darkness, of Magnus's dead body against the wall... But a loud squeal sounds

from downstairs, getting my attention. The laughter flies to the first floor, up the stairs, then stifles when it reaches the door of the main bedroom.

Sterling's muffled voice asks from the hallway, "Can we come in?" I can hear Cam giggling by her side.

"Yes, of course." I smile and leave my hairbrush on the counter in the en-suite bathroom, accidentally catching a glimpse of myself in the mirror. I haven't looked since I got back, and I almost asked Rowan if we could cover them up with sheets so this exact situation wouldn't happen. But I didn't do it, and now I get to stare into the eyes of the coward who left that man to die. I don't get to dwell on what I see because my friends burst through the door, and I know I have to come out.

I put on my smile, shaking it off, and say, "What on earth are you doing here so early in the morning?" I ask this of Sterling, knowing full well she's more of a night owl than an early riser. I then shift my eyes to Cam. "And you, don't you have a country to dazzle with your..." I gesture aimlessly around her. "Awesomeness?"

"Please ," Cam scoffs. "If I give one more interview this week, I swear I'm going to say something really crazy. You know, like, let all my intrusive thoughts win."

Sterling quirks a brow. "So this is you acting normally ?"

I cross my arms in front of me and sigh. Cam places her hand on her chest, a sign of false betrayal.

I'm so glad the two of them met. They hit it off really quickly, as I knew they would. Unfortunately for me, the First Lady and my notorious best friend have a lot of things in common. Letting their intrusive thoughts win, for one. And being really, and I mean really, extroverted. An introvert's dream. Yay .

Cam claps her hands. “You’re getting married!”

“I know that,” I drawl, sensing that there is more.

“So then you know what time it is...” They both grin at each other like two Cheshire cats.

I’m officially scared.

Cam walks behind me and places her hands on my shoulders as she sings, “Dress picking time! Yolanda, bring them in, honey!”

I mouth to Sterling, “Who the hell is Yolanda?” but she doesn’t see it—or she pretends not to see it. I’m sure she’s friends with Yolanda, too, by now. A clothing rack is rolled into the room. It overflows with an array of white fabric that shimmers and reflects the morning light filtering through the window. And it holds everything—from flowing lace trains to satin bodices and everything in between. At the other end of the rack is a short woman in her sixties with the softest eyes I’ve ever seen.

I gape, and the gaping turns into a breathy laugh as I say, “Cam... you didn’t have to.”

“I know it would’ve been more fun to hit the shops, but under the circumstances, Sterling and I figured it would be cool to raid Yolanda’s collection instead. She’s an artistic genius.”

I place my hand on the one she still has on my shoulder and look at Sterling, whom I find smiling at me.

“This is perfect. I... thank you, both of you.”

Like a bunch of teenage girls trying on makeup for the first time, all three of us start shifting through the hangers and picking dresses we place against our bodies in the mirror. Yolanda—who I found out is Cam’s stylist at the White House—helps me find the style that matches my body type, which makes choosing what dresses to try on a lot easier. They’re all so pretty. Only the soft knock against the door rams stops everything like a freeze frame.

“Get. Out !” Cam shouts, throwing a bunch of random fabric in Rowan’s direction. He pretends to dodge it with his hands out. “Don’t you know you can’t see the bride until she walks down the aisle?”

Pressing a dress against my body, I lift my gaze from the floor to see him. Butterflies come to life in my stomach almost instantly, my body tingling all the way to my fingertips. He’s wearing his official uniform today. He said he had some meetings at the White House. And right now... he’s leaning against the doorframe watching me. Only watching me.

“You do realize I’m going to see her in this bed tonight, before the wedding,” he tells her.

Cam sighs. “Kids these days consummate things before they even say ‘I love you.’”

Sterling shifts uncomfortably from her seat on the bed and stands up. She might be cool with everything, but I remember the first time I was in the same room with Cam, the president, and Rowan. It was overwhelming—I wouldn’t be surprised if it was a bit much for her, too. I give her a smile just to let her know she has nothing to worry about.

“Just came by to say I’m off. Text me if you need anything,” he says. And he says it so... naturally. Like this is the way it’s supposed to be. Like we’re going to be doing this... a lot. Working for something we both care about, fucking in the middle of the

night, and kissing each other goodbye in the morning before our day starts. I nod, my face lighting up with love and emotion. And I think... I think I'd like to live through all of that.

He mouths silently, "I love you" just for me to see it. A private moment we both get to share in a room full of people. My mouth forms the shape of the words, much like a mirror reflecting them back to him.

"Begone now, Commander," Cam says, rolling her eyes. "Go do your shady business, or whatever it is you're doing today."

Rowan quirks a brow. "Is that what you think I'm doing? At the White House? Really?"

"Last time you came over you asked me to prepare your poison, so who knows what you're planning to do these days." She gives him a knowing side look, as if she knows exactly what those plans are. Rowan holds her stare, and for a moment my heart stops, thinking he might suspect Cam and I have been in contact without him knowing. But he snorts, tapping his fingers against the door before exiting the room as quickly as he appeared. The girls and I continue our dress-picking frenzy, though my mind keeps going back to him, to whatever he's doing out there today.

A few hours later, when I'm prepared to collapse on the couch with my laptop again, Saint comes in and tells me I have a visitor. Who could it be at this time in the evening? I straighten up and fix my hair with my hands as best I can before a soft voice sounds from the foyer.

"Rowan still hasn't relieved you from your duties? Oh, Saint," the voice says. "I hope you have at least learned your lesson?"

"Yes, ma'am," he answers.

They both come into the living room, and I meet them halfway. A woman walks in front of Saint with green eyes and lush lips, reminding me of my soon-to-be husband. She stands tall, back straight like she's bracing against a wind that never stops blowing. Her silver hair is pulled back into a neat bun, and the lines on her face don't make her look old—they make her look like someone who's lived an intense life. Someone who's fought and clawed and bled her way through whatever life threw at her and still came out standing.

"Hello, dear," she says, her endearing tone instantly putting me at ease. "I'm Anne, Rowan's mother. Look at you, you're so beautiful. Just like he said you were."

Her hands extend forward, and I give her mine. They're warm and slightly battered as she gives me a gentle squeeze, her eyes gleaming with something soft but deliberate. Anne King doesn't seem to be the type of woman who's too kind for her own good. I think her kindness is a choice. And I think that makes her even more powerful.

"I'm so happy to finally meet you," I say, a bit stunned. "Rowan didn't mention you were coming. I thought he'd be here too, so we could have dinner and—"

"Ah, yes, yes, we're all so used to Rowan's antics. Don't worry about it. In fact, I am glad it's just the two of us."

Rowan's antics, indeed.

I nod, inviting her to sit.

"Can I fix you a drink? What would you like?"

Saint brings out some snacks that Rowan's chef made for us from the kitchen. Anne seems lost in thought as she follows him with her eyes.

“Poor boy,” she says, ignoring my question. “I wonder when he’s going to stop punishing him.”

My curiosity perks up. “Punishing him? For what?”

She laughs softly, and it’s a laugh that pulls you in, just like Rowan’s.

“He didn’t tell you? Ah, he stole his father’s baseball card collection and sold it on the Internet for tens of thousands of dollars. This happened about two years ago, when he started training in the military. When his father found out, he gave Rowan a call and asked him to discipline the boy by whatever means necessary.”

I let out an amused breath of air. “Why Rowan?”

“Well...” She presses her lips into a thin line. “He was the toughest general around. Every young man coming in for training respected him and was afraid of him. Even Saint. So Rowan took him in and made him his butler while his friends continued their military training the way they had set out to do.”

“Oh my God.” I shake my head. “Isn’t that a bit... extreme?”

She nods. “Better than prison, surely. But maybe you can talk to him. Saint looks rather disciplined to me now.” She gives him one last look as he places two cups of tea in front of us. What a strange thing, indeed—a tough-looking guy like Saint, working as a butler to be disciplined.

“Thank you, dear,” Anne tells him, then shifts all her attention to me. “Now tell me all about yourself, Dove. I hear you work as a lawyer? That is so special. Serving justice is no easy feat.”

I take it she doesn’t know about what happened to me. Thank God . I hoped that

wouldn't be the first thing she and I discussed. In truth, I haven't really talked about what happened much since telling Sterling. If it's healthy or not for my mind, I don't really know, but... I know I hate re-visiting that place even through my memories. I tell her about my internship without mentioning it's now gone, then the conversation becomes more personal.

Fidgeting with the hair tie wrapped around my wrist, I say, "Can I ask you something, Mrs. King?"

"Only if you call me Anne." She places her hand on top of mine, then takes a sip of her tea.

I smile. "Rowan's father... How come he didn't..."

"Oh, Barrett doesn't know I'm here. I don't know how much you know about our family, but... his relationship with Rowan is still strained."

"I'm sorry. Yes, Rowan mentioned that."

"He would've brought me here if I'd asked him. Over the years, our relationship has changed. He likes to pay attention to me now." She shakes her head. "But I didn't want to do that to Rowan. I didn't think he'd want him in this house, much less when he isn't here."

Makes sense. I wouldn't want my father here either after everything he did. And I know Rowan wouldn't be okay with not being next to me when his father and I meet.

"You stayed," I say, possibly pushing boundaries. "After all the things Mr. King has done, you stayed."

She huffs out a laugh, watching me with a sidelong glance. "A statement, not a

question. You spend too much time with my son.” I flinch slightly, but then she clarifies, “Oh, I’m just teasing you. He never asks for the things he wants. He takes them like they belong to him already.”

“Is that... Do you think he’s wrong to do that?”

“No. I think it’s smart.” She places her half-empty cup of tea on the table. “I stayed because I was afraid. Afraid I couldn’t raise Rowan alone back in the countryside where I was born. I didn’t want him to grow up without a fatherly figure... and hoped that Barrett would one day change.”

“But... he didn’t,” I add.

“No. Not until Rowan grew up, anyway. I made a mistake... And maybe I was a bit naive, too. I loved Barrett—we had the kind of love you see in movies.” She smiles reverently, as if she can see flashes of their life before her eyes. “But it ended when Rowan was born. We weren’t right together and had huge differences about the way we wanted to raise him. We crashed and burned, and now we’re holding onto each other’s ashes.”

I only smile faintly and flatten my hands in my lap. I made mistakes, too, and I was—am —afraid. For losing Rowan, for facing the horrible things I’ve done. But there comes a day when you’re put to the test again, and history repeats itself until you learn whatever you were supposed to learn the first time.

By listening to Anne’s story, I know I never want to give in to the weaker parts of me again—to the cowardly, meek, insecure girl from the suburbs I’ve always been. And I can tell just from the way she looks at me that she’s hoping I can find that strength. The one she lacked back then, when her story started.

“You know, being a military wife won’t be easy...” She trails off. “And I don’t want

you to feel alone. Other women might not understand what it's like, but I do. The limited privacy you'll have in the public eye, the long, dreadful periods of separation when he's deployed to God knows where... I had to go through it twice. First with my husband, then with my only son. It's really difficult. Especially if you love hard."

And fuck, do I love hard.

"Thank you... Anne," I say, a sheer layer of tears forming in my eyes. Not from sadness, but from gratitude. I didn't realize just how much I needed to hear that. She leans forward, throwing her arms out to give me the warmest hug.

That night, Rowan comes home and strips me naked, leaving me only in my knee-high socks. The hearth glows from a well-stoked fire, glazing the bedroom in a soft, flickering light. Goosebumps pebble my skin as he rakes his eyes over me with a hunger so raw it makes my pussy throb.

"This is how I want my wife to wait for me every night," he murmurs, his naked body hard against mine.

"I'm not your wife yet." I breathe out a smile. "And we're not supposed to do this until our wedding night."

He hums as if he understands, but once I'm naked, there's no turning back with Rowan. And I don't want there to be. I shiver when he runs his knuckles along my bare arm.

"Lie down, angel. I want to eat your pussy."

My walls clench at his words, begging me to do what he says. But I swallow the thought for just a bit longer because I want to feel him too tonight. Looking into his eyes, I lower myself to my knees and grip his hard erection with my small, ringed

hand.

“Angel...” he groans, his cock twitching in my grasp.

“A little self-control, Commander. Surely you can do that, can you not?”

Another groan, louder this time. He huffs like a bull penned in too long, ready to charge at the slightest touch, and this is when I realize that I’m quite enjoying having him under my command. I push out my tongue and wrap it around the head of his cock, licking it lightly. Teasing him. His cock hardens more, filling my mouth to the brim. I love it when I struggle to take him and my body finds a way to adjust.

His fingers stretch into my hair, on the top of my head, burying themselves between my strands. It hurts a bit, and he smells like a god, and we’re back in our dynamic that I love so much.

“Such a good girl.” He pets me as I take him deeper into my throat.

I gag, but I breathe through my nose like he’s taught me. My body relaxes around his cock, and he moans, making my hand reach for my pulsing pussy. I push a finger inside and keep it there, unmoving, the same way he does sometimes when he’s busy working but still wants to feel me.

I slide my slippery mouth back and forth, my lips pressed tightly around his cock, my drool and his pre-cum coating more and more of my tongue. I lick him up and swallow, making a sloppy mess on my face that makes me feel proud. Proud for being his breaking point. Proud for making him lose control. Proud for claiming him as mine in a way I’ve never had the courage to do before.

“Fuuuuck ,” he groans, his head dipping back. “Angel, stop . Stop, I want to fuck your pussy before I come. Please, let me have it.”

Please.

Two small figurative horns poke through the top of my head as he says that. I increase my pace, gagging and sucking, until I feel him shake in my grasp. He fists my hair, pulling me hard against his shaft. And then his seed spills into my mouth and down my throat.

I swallow as best I can, listening to his raw voice above me as he laughs.

“Poor little bird,” he says and pulls me by my hair until his cock is out in front of my face, stiff and veiny and coated in a sheer layer of cum. “You’ve just earned yourself a chastity belt and a horny, licked-up pussy you won’t be able to touch.”

“Rowan...” I plead.

But he shakes his head, amused, as he saunters over to his side of the bed, where he often keeps the sex toys he buys in the spur of a moment without my knowledge. The drawer of his nightstand slides open, and I gasp softly when I see him pull out an actual chastity belt with a leather strap and small metallic band which I assume is there to cover the pussy. The belt includes a clasp with a lock and keys dangling from it—keys that Rowan takes into his other hand as he saunters over to me.

“Lie down,” he commands me.

“Come on.” I laugh gingerly. “There’s no need for this. I only wanted to... p-play around.”

He throws me a serious look and I gulp, knowing he won’t be swayed.

I think I fucked up. I fucked up bad.

My breath hitches as I back into the bed, my naked skin making contact with the soft sheets behind me. I haul myself up slowly, never leaving Rowan's stare.

"Don't make me repeat myself, Dove. Spread those pretty legs and do what I asked."

Fuck.

I part my knees and show him my pussy, the warm air in the room caressing me from my clit to my entrance. My back lowers to the bed, and I just lie there, waiting for whatever he wants to do to me at this hour of the night. I follow him with my eyes, but he's no longer meeting my gaze. He's all focused on the heat between my legs, his fingers clutching the items tightly, as if he's trying to reel in his impatience. The next thing I know he kneels in front of the bed, his now-empty hands digging into my thighs, pulling them farther apart.

A groan rumbles from his direction, then his face presses against my sensitive spot. First his nose, then his mouth, then his flat tongue. I shiver, goosebumps spreading on my shoulders and down my arms, making the little hairs there stand up.

My lips part and a high-pitched moan comes out. After giving my pussy a slow lick, his tongue curls, making itself smaller to fit inside my channel. I rock myself into it, feeling the soft tissue entering me as deep as it can go. He starts fucking me with it, and I clench around him as my arousal drips on the bedsheets beneath me.

"Christ. You're drenched," he murmurs. "Did the little power outburst turn my wife on?"

I nod, knowing he can't see it. My chest heaves, and my pussy begs for that tongue to go back inside. My thighs are shaking. I bring my hands into his hair, gently tugging him closer. To my surprise he obliges, and takes my entire pussy between his lips, letting his tongue caress in the middle, then up and down.

“Rowan. Please , oh my God.”

More and more tendrils of pleasure creep in as he resumes fucking me inside my channel. His fingers join in, long and rough, twitching above my clit. I writhe and arch, moaning uncontrollably, the scent of my arousal floating over to me through the heat of the hearth.

“That’s my girl,” he coos, lifting his head from between my legs. He stares at my wet pussy, smiling, right before giving it a smack. I jolt from the feeling, the little pain he caused quickly turning into pleasure. I whimper. He does it again. Slap after slap, my pussy takes everything, rubbing itself on his skin every time his palm makes contact with my clit.

More. Give me more.

My release builds up, and I know that all I need is a longer touch, just two more seconds of his skin on mine before I shatter in front of him. But that touch never comes. Instead, the feel of a leather strap slides up from my shins to my thighs until it reaches my pussy.

“Lift your hips for me, beautiful,” he says.

“Rowan...” I mumble his name, but my body follows his command like a loyal slave.

Vicious, traitorous thing.

The chastity belt moves up, covering my slippery and overly aroused pussy. The cold metal does nothing to soothe my throbbing clit. I try rubbing myself against it, but there’s no friction, nothing. I curse under my breath right as Rowan clasps the lock in place and twists the key inside.

“Rowan,” I say again. “Please. I’m too horny for this. What are you doing?”

“I apologize if I gave you the impression this was a reward. You know I love tasting you—it wasn’t for you, and you don’t get to come after what you’ve done.”

“After I’ve made you come,” I pout.

He shakes his head, hiding the key to the chastity belt in his chest pocket.

“After you deprived me of this cunt that I now have locked up.”

I bring my hands around the belt, trying to take it off, but I know there’s no way to do it without the damned key. He watches me struggle, amusement lining his eyes.

“You will wear it until our wedding night. And you will not touch yourself, angel. If you need to wash, you will call out for me, and I’ll watch you do it. But anything more than that...” He smiles. “Your pussy is mine, and you’ll never make yourself come until I allow it. Is that understood?”

I feel around for the small holes in the metal band, my cheeks flushing as I understand what they’re for—so I can use the bathroom without taking it off. It’s degrading, and possessive, and humiliating, and it makes me hornier than I’ve ever been in my life.

“Is. That. Understood?”

I gulp. “Y-Yes. Yes, sir.”

twenty-five

Rowan

I 'm back in front of the church where Dove and I sinned two nights ago to officiate our marriage before God.

Save for the president and his wife, who are about to arrive, everyone else is already in there, finding their seats. They're all waiting for us, for me to take my place at the altar. I took a moment outside to make a call, but now I'm ready to go in and see the prettiest woman in the world walk down the aisle... and be mine.

I don't know how the fuck I got here, but I've never felt more accomplished than I feel at this moment. None of the ranks, recognition, or riches I've worked for feel as rewarding as knowing I've got the woman I want. And nothing else will come close to knowing I'm the one she craves just as much.

I've won. I've fucking won.

I'm taking in the Gothic archways and the sharp towers of the church when behind me the screech of a car makes me lower my gaze back down. It's a black van, and it's followed by two more just like it. We specifically hid the wedding date from the media, not wanting any press around. So if this isn't journalists and reporters, it only leaves me with one other thought.

The vans come to a stop, and a single person comes out. My body tenses and my pulse ramps up. I almost laugh to myself at the gravity of the situation—of course

they'd show up early, wanting to take my last bit of happiness, wanting to shit on my dreams and drag me into that hole with them. Why wouldn't they?

The man opens the back doors to the van then comes before me, folding his hands in front of him. I swallow, feeling my tux tighten around my lungs, making it hard to breathe. This isn't even about me. If it weren't for the wedding, I'd be fine with it. I've made my bed, and for Dove's sake, I'm willing to lie in it. But not now, not when she's in there and she's waiting for me to make her mine.

Fuck.

"We can do this the hard way, or you can play nice and get inside," the man says.

I step forward and shove my hand in my pocket, where I'm hiding a knife.

"Leave now, before I call in the others and you all die," I bluff.

He knows I can't do that. Not in the public eye. Not with so many government officials present. The smug face he makes tells me I'm right.

I sneer. "Two days from now. It's what we agreed on."

He shrugs, looking to the side. "Plans change, Commander. Salister needs you now. Get. In."

I clench my jaw, staring him down while trying to come up with a way out. Cole and Hawke are in the church. I could dial Hawke's number and he'd come out. But then... what? It would turn into a fucking bloodbath right here on the sidewalk. The police would come. Reporters. My angel's perfect day would turn into a nightmare, and everything would go to shit.

Everything has already gone to shit the moment you came up with this plan.

“My wife is in there,” I tell him. “Give me one hour, and I’ll go with you then.”

He nods, smiling, making me want to push his head into the streetlight pole nearby. “Funny how you still think you’ve got the upper hand. We gave you the cure. Now you come with us. You know what happens if you refuse.”

Hunt her down until the day she dies.

And the only way I can stop them... is if I finish what Cole started when they faked his death. My only advantage is knowing they won’t kill me. They need me alive, even if just for a while, and working with the White House has ensured that. I know things they don’t, and that’s my true bargaining chip.

But knowing I’ll be forced to leave Dove at the altar fills me with a wave of indescribable rage. Just like that night in those fucking tunnels, when I thought she was nowhere to be found. When I thought I’d lost her.

The black presidential car approaches the church from the right, getting my attention. And all it takes is that one fraction of a second for this man to strike. I bend over from the punch in the gut, then push my body into his, trying to knock him down. Car doors fly open. Two men slam me into the van. I smash one’s nose with a headbutt and wrestle free.

Maybe I can fight them off quietly. Maybe I can stop this before it starts.

I can hear Maddox’s voice calling out for me in the distance.

But he won’t make it here in time, and neither will the secret service.

I'm stabbed in the side of my abdomen with something sharp.

It twists, leaving me breathless for just a second.

And in the moment it takes for me to acknowledge it, I'm already shoved into one of the vans.

Dove

Sterling, my mom, and Rowan's mother are waiting with me in the chapel by the main church. The same church Rowan brought me to two nights ago to do something I can't tell anyone about. My cheeks flush at the memory, and I know part of why he did it was to remember it as I walk down the aisle. We fucked this morning too, before I put on my wedding dress. His cum is soaking my panties, just like he wanted, so I can walk down the aisle knowing he already owns me. I still feel the heat of his touch, and I can't wait until we're alone again.

"He'll be here, honey," my mom says from her wheelchair. "Stop pacing like that. You're making me nauseous."

I sigh. "Sorry. It's just... He's always on time."

He wouldn't be late in general, much less to our own wedding. But it's been twenty minutes past the time we were supposed to start, and he's nowhere in sight. Something is wrong. It has to be.

Sterling sneaks over next to me. "You think something happened?" she asks quietly.

We both look outside through the window, at the sunny park surrounding the chapel.

"I don't know. Maybe I'm just being paranoid. Maybe—"

Cam bursts through the door, her face pale as death. My knees buckle under the weight of her words before she even speaks.

“Dove,” she says, swallowing. “I’m so sorry. But you need to come with me.”

Instantly my heart drops, and I know today is about to turn into the worst day of my life. With Cam’s and the Secret Service’s help, I figured out what Rowan was up to, what he didn’t tell any of us he was planning to do. Rowan may be paying attention to everything about me, but I pay attention to him, too. I know when he’s keeping things from me, and my suspicions turned out to be true.

I now know exactly what he did to save me. That the reason I’ve been feeling better isn’t because of the IV drips, but because of the cure the doctor administered to me silently.

Panic coats my hands in a light sheet of sweat. Panic... and the rage that’s screaming at him in my head.

How could you do this? How could you let them take you from me?

Rowan

I lie on the cold concrete, spitting blood from my broken lip as I welcome another kick in the liver. Although sudden and blinding, I laugh through the pain, because at this point, it’s euphoric. This isn’t meant to break me, not yet. But they fucking love seeing me move closer to death right here at their feet.

Images of my perfect little angel wearing her wedding dress flash through my mind. I haven’t seen her in it—not once. But my mind conjures it up, and every time it does she looks like the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen in my life. I wish I could tell her, but I’ll probably never get the chance. Even if I make it out alive after ending

Salister's reign, I'm pretty sure she'd never wear a wedding dress for me again.

She'll never forgive me for walking away to save her life. My only consolation is her being healthy and having all the money she needs to live the life she wants—the life she deserves. And even though I was desperate, desperate to tamper with her birth control and breed her during any of the past nights, I couldn't bring myself to leave her with a baby in her care. A baby she'd have to look at and hate for the rest of her life—because it would remind her of what I'd done.

I push my side and hip into the concrete, lifting myself up to my knees with a groan. They took my knife and phone and cuffed my hands behind my back. Blood drips down my face, making my hair stick together and hang above my eyes. I kneel in the middle of a large, abandoned warehouse, struggling to push air in and out of my lungs.

A pair of black polished shoes enters my visual field. I don't lift my head to see who it is. I don't give a fuck. "Rowan King... on his knees. For me. Now this is a sight to see. Look at me, boy."

A hand fists my hair and pulls my head up from behind. I grunt, fighting it with my upper body, but my vision blurs as I dip in and out of life, the last drops of my adrenaline running out. A face I know too well pokes through my consciousness.

Ash-green eyes.

A smile that doesn't reach the smirk on his face.

And not nearly enough lines on his face to justify his old age.

"There you are," Salister says, his eyebrows raising in question at the sound of my muttered words. "Speak louder. I'm an old man, Commander. Let me hear you."

“I said...” I spit out my blood to the side when the hand in my hair retracts. “I kneel for no one. And especially not for the man who tortured my wife.”

He barks out a sharp laugh. “What noisy vermin you are.” He walks somewhere to my right, and I still don’t care enough to look at what he’s doing. He returns, crouching in front of me with his red robe pooling around him. “And an arrogant one. This is my victory, whether or not you’re man enough to admit it to yourself. Just like it was my victory when I took Dove. And Cole. And thousands of other soldiers I’ve recruited over the years.”

My eyes snap to his. Cold metal touches my skin when someone else wraps something around my neck. I grunt and thrash, but a loud click tells me it’s now set in place and I won’t be able to take it off.

“We own you now.” He smiles broadly, sweetly, then nods at the men behind me. It takes everything in me to lash out at him with my teeth, but he moves away just in time. “The big, bad wolf of this country. All mine.”

“It’s gonna take...” I inhale, my breath ragged when I let it out. “...a lot more than a fucking collar around my neck to break me.” I straighten up, grinning, tasting the metal on my teeth. “Now who’s being arrogant?”

“Oh, I’m well aware of that.” He hums. “Maybe I’ll make you dig your own grave after starving you for a month, like I did with Cole. Or maybe I’ll convince you that you’re a fucking murderer, like I did to that whore you call your wife.” My blood roars back to life, threatening to flood this fucking room with everyone in it. “Every single person in this room has a breaking point. I think yours might be losing every ounce of control you have. I suppose we’ll find out.”

Pain like nothing I’ve known erupts through me when the collar burns like fire against my skin, sending shockwaves that sear through my veins, twisting my

muscles into submission. A scream ravages my throat, and I know that all I can do is wait it out.

One.

Two.

Three.

Breathe. Breathe. Breathe.

“Again,” he tells them.

I curse, low and vicious, as I writhe in pain on the ground. The pain stops for another second, long enough to conjure the image of Dove in my mind.

“See how easy it is?” he laughs. “And I’m only just getting started. You’re strong, Rowan, I’ll give you that, but we’re about to make you stronger. And then... then you’ll help us get Every. Single. Thing. We want. One global government. One system. No borders, no wars,” he drawls. “No crime.”

No freedom. No love. No life.

My bones feel as if they’re shattering when my body bends under more electric shocks. A foot lands on my ribs afterward, urging me back to life.

“Or maybe I’ll just kill you. You murdered my people, after all. Been a goddamn thorn in my side for so many years. Maybe I don’t need you at all.”

A lie. A blatant lie.

“Your people?” I laugh as I cough, my voice slowly dying out. “You didn’t lift a fucking finger. You knew I was hunting them. And you lured me into that shithole to get Dove, wanting me to take her back in the state she was.”

“Get the car ready,” someone says.

“You killed your own people,” I groan. “Deceived them, then killed them like they were nothing.”

Salister admits calmly, “They were nothing. Nothing compared to the mission we have ahead of us—everyone serving our cause understands that. Again.”

Another wave of electricity, far more powerful this time, strikes me. My vision blackens, and I fight to remain conscious. I fight, but I don’t know why... he’s either going to kill me or he won’t. I just wish I knew beforehand.

Water splashes on me from a bucket somewhere to my side. It’s ice cold, and it makes the wound in my side sear with pain. A shiver runs down my spine, my tux and my white shirt clinging to me like a second skin. I jerk my head left and right, getting rid of the excess water from my hair.

“Let’s see if you , perhaps, are something more than the vermin you look like right now.”

“Sir, we might need him alive. He could die—”

“Silence!” Salister shouts, his voice reverberating against the walls. My heavy breathing is the only sound after that. “It’s up to him if he dies or not. Let’s see... let him put up a fight. He always finds a way... don’t you, Commander?” He spits out the last word.

I say nothing. Fragments of my life flash through my mind at the speed of light. I want to catch a thought and bring it close to my heart, but they're all moving so fast. So unbelievably fast.

I push into my lower body again, trying to get up, as my father's voice booms in my mind.

"Stand up. Do it again. Embarrass me in front of everyone and see what happens."

My hand slips on the blood-slicked concrete at my back.

"You think we can do it?" Cole's voice whispers in the recesses of my mind. "Think we can rise to power and fight them off?"

And then, Dove's voice, soft as a prayer as I groan.

"Rowan, I... I love you."

"It's okay if you want to kiss me."

"You asked me to be your wife."

"Show us, Rowan," Salister says, "show us all you've got."

twenty-six

Dove

Rage and panic twist together in my gut, dancing with each other to the tune of my misery.

I knew this day would come, when the EFW would come and get him after the deal they struck, but it wasn't supposed to be until after the wedding. Until after we were back home, pretending all was fine, and that the rest of our life together was about to start. Neither Cam nor I expected them coming to retrieve him sooner. The only thing I pray for now is that he's still alive. That's all I want.

Cam and I ride together in one of the Secret Service cars, the driver using the bus lane to get ahead. Cole and Maddox are close behind—they didn't know about our involvement, but they were quick to figure it out. We didn't want them to know, thinking they'd tell Rowan and betray us. But in reality, it turns out they didn't know the true lengths of his plan either. We've all been lied to so he could sacrifice himself for all of us. For the country. For... me.

"How much longer?" I grip the seat in front of me, my wedding dress getting in my way of moving freely. I take the veil from my hair and let it fall to our feet. Rowan's phone's GPS location flashes on the screen positioned on the car's dashboard—we've been tracking him with the help of the Secret Service for a few days now, listening to his phone conversations, and full-on following every move he made. He had no idea we were on to him. It has stopped moving, so we know exactly where he is. It looks so far away that I worry we might not make it in time.

In time to get him back alive, a petrified voice says in my mind.

“Come on, come on, Henry,” Cam urges the driver.

The minutes stretch into an agonizing eternity, where all I do is bite the inside tissue of my lip and fume through my flared nostrils as we finally stop a few feet away from a large warehouse, hidden in the cemetery next to it.

Cam’s hand comes on top of mine, squeezing my fingers. “Take this,” she says, slipping the grip of a gun beneath them. “Just like I showed you.”

I look into her eyes, placing my other hand on top of hers and on the gun.

“Like you showed me,” I nod.

Then Henry, the driver, gets out and bombs the warehouse a few feet in front of us—real explosives outside and nothing but smoke bombs into the building, since we didn’t want Rowan to be harmed. It’s a diversion, and the signal we need to get out of the car. My hands are shaking, and I’m in over my head, but I start moving. One step in front of the other.

“Camelia!” the president’s voice shouts angrily behind us. Cam didn’t give him one chance to stop her from coming here with me, from being the one who gets to kill her father by putting a bullet in his head. Car doors get slammed, and the president keeps shouting, “Turn. The fuck . Around!”

“Dove,” she says to me, grabbing my shoulders. “If this were a movie... now would be the part where we run.”

And we fucking run .

Toward the warehouse, toward danger, because it's the only way. And I'd do anything to save the bastard who just broke my heart.

A few men stumble into the street, coughing through the thick smoke. They pull their guns out, and so do we, but bullets are already flying from behind us—the Secret Service are doing their part. My brother passes us, slamming his shoulder into the metal door of the building to see inside.

“Stay close,” he tells me. I nod frantically, following him.

I peer through the thick smoke, struggling to make out the figures moving around. Pure adrenaline courses through my veins as gunfire echoes from all around me, the deafening sound reverberating against the walls.

A silhouette emerges from the chaos, the red robe wrapped loosely around his otherwise normal attire telling enough. He charges toward us, wielding a knife. Without hesitation, Cole points the gun at him and shoots him in the head.

My gun feels heavy in my hand, and another dam of anxiety breaks free in my gut. I've never used one before. Cam showed me how through a video call, and I've practically got zero practice. Still, I point it forward and walk by him, maneuvering it as best I can.

“Get him out of here. Get him out!” a voice cries out.

More people emerge from the smoke, running toward us.

And then... I see him.

Rowan lies on the cold, hard floor in a puddle of blood. His clothes are wet and sticking to his body as his hands are restrained behind his back. And there's

something... something wrapped around his neck. It looks so tight. So painful. I bring a hand to my mouth, fingers shaking uncontrollably.

“R-Rowan. Rowan!” I call out.

He’s not moving. Not immediately.

I almost start sobbing when I hear him begging me to run back. He stirs and struggles to get up on his knees. I rush toward him, aching to feel him in my arms. But someone grabs him from behind, and Rowan thrashes, the fight in him almost gone.

With no time to think, I lift the gun, pointing it at the man’s head. I breathe in, and with my exhale, the bullet goes out. The man stops for a second, seeing me, realizing I’m targeting him. Showing me I missed.

Fuck.

I hiss and take more steps forward, gripping the gun firmly with both hands.

Bang.

Bang.

Rowan collapses on top of him as they both fall down. The well of despair inside me is infinite—it feels as though it gobbles everything in its path.

“Oh my God,” I whisper. “Rowan. Rowan !”

I run to him, falling to my knees. I set the gun down and take his face in my trembling hands. He winces in pain, somehow unlocking his hand from behind his back. When he brings it above mine, it looks broken. Dislocated. Tears swell in my

eyes at the sight of him—bloodied and beaten up like I’ve never seen him before.

“Angel...” He forces the word out. “What did you do?”

“You bastard. You goddamn bastard,” I cry, softly placing my palms against his chest.

Cole crouches next to me, inspecting him. “God fucking dammit, Rowan.”

He coughs and coughs, and shivers from what seems to be nothing but unbearable pain through the lengths of his body. Around us, the smoke has dispersed. Dead bodies form a sinister carpet on the concrete—I don’t recognize anyone. But there, right up against the farthest wall, I recognize the eyes that keep haunting me in my nightmares. Cam holds a gun to Salister’s face, while Maddox and the Secret Service surround the scene, ready to strike at any moment.

“Camelia,” Salister—her father —says tenderly. “We’ve missed you in Velum. You were always such a character.”

She shakes her head slowly, her eyes piercing as they lock into his. “I grew up at The Hive. You know that. You sent me there... to whore myself out.”

Behind her, Maddox stiffens, barely containing himself. He wants him dead. In fact, not a single soul in this room wants this man to still be alive.

“I sent you...” he says, extending a hand forward to brush her cheek with his knuckles. She dodges it, and there’s no hurt on his face at the gesture, as if he expects it. “So you could be strong. So you could make something of yourself. And look at you now.” He smiles. “First Lady of the United States of America. You should thank me, really. If you had been just a little bit loyal to our cause, you would’ve inherited everything. Quite frankly, my dear, you would’ve had the world at your fingertips.”

She lets out a bitter laugh, and the gun sways in her grasp.

“Thank you?” She flinches as if the memories are hitting her like physical blows. “Thank you for torturing my friends? For tormenting us? Thank you for letting my mother die, and for corrupting the country with dangerous ideologies that make people afraid to speak their minds?” Her voice rises, trembling as her chest heaves with the effort of swallowing back tears. “What exactly should I be thanking you for, Father?”

“For making you into the woman you are.”

The gun’s hammer is pulled back with a click. I tighten my hand around Rowan’s arm.

“It’s okay, angel,” he murmurs. “This isn’t your fight.”

But it became my fight the moment this monster faked my brother’s death. The moment he pulled me away from Rowan, then lured him in here to kill him like a stray dog. It became my fight when Sterling’s mom died of cancer, and he had the cure to himself all along. When my mom was ambushed on the street and fell into a coma. When I found out about Cam’s tragic past.

“You’ll die today. And when you do, you won’t be seeing my mother’s eyes. Because she’s up there.” Cam motions to the sky with tears in her eyes. “And you’re going straight to fucking hell for everything you’ve done.”

Salister’s eyes close, as if he’s voiding his mind of the entire notion that they’re related at all.

“Even if you kill me, Camelia, the EFW will live on. So it has been for centuries, and so it will be for many more. A new ruler was appointed before I was even placed into

the role.”

“No,” I say, getting up to my feet and picking the gun back up. “It won’t.”

Rowan’s painful grunt reaches my ears, but he doesn’t object to anything I’m doing otherwise. Everyone turns to look at me, including those eyes that have been haunting me in my nightmares. I walk toward them, forcing myself to smile.

“I would’ve assumed a man like you in your position ought to watch the news all the time,” I say. His eyes narrow on mine. I want to look away—desperately want to look away. But I hold his stare, refusing to feel the fear gnawing at me.

“What did you do, little Dove?” He smiles back, as if the situation doesn’t bother him at all.

Cam’s laugh fills the air—crisp and focused, all her tears now gone. “She did what we should’ve done years ago. Exposed you to the world for exactly who you are.”

“There is no evidence of anything malicious that the EFW have ever done.”

She cocks her head. “Isn’t there?”

I inch closer to them, and Maddox nods to the Secret Service to let me walk next to Cam.

“ Defense Contract Fraud: Billions Funneled to Shadowy Network .” I recite the news article title published half an hour ago on all major blogs. “ Mass Surveillance Program Exposed: Secret Society Monitoring Citizens .” Another one. “ Insider Claims Secret Group Funded Domestic Terror Attack in the Sylvestrian Ridge. ” And another one. “They’re all over the news.”

“And thanks to the man you so willingly took under your wing for five long years,” Cam says, gesturing toward my brother, “the rebellion he started has likely turned most of your men against your cause by now. Not to mention your allies—the corrupt presidents you lured into your sorry-ass plan. What will they think when they see your entire agenda plastered everywhere the eye can see? They’ll back off. No one’s going to risk being by your side when you fall.”

“How did you—” He frowns. “It doesn’t even matter. None of this matters. The kinds of roots our organization has—”

Bang.

His leg bends under the pressure of my bullet, his scream bouncing against the warehouse walls. He curses, stooping to touch his bleeding wound as he moves all his weight on the other side. Cam turns her face to me, shock reading on her features before it turns to pure delight.

“That was for killing Magnus,” I say, my voice trembling. “The only man who dared to help me when I didn’t see a way out of your town. For taking my husband away from me on my wedding day. For taking my brother. For running my mother over with a car, and for killing Sterling’s mom.”

Bang.

“For killing my mother,” Cam whispers after shooting him in his other leg. “For leaving me without the person I loved most in this world when I was only five.” Her whole body trembles, and the sight hits me like a slap—I’ve never seen her like this. I worry about her, and so does Maddox, who approaches her from behind.

“Cam...” he murmurs, gently bringing her chin toward him.

“I have to do this, Maddox. Please... it has to be me.”

He holds her stare, his eyes soft and understanding before his jaw clenches under the weight of not knowing how this will affect her later. But he presses his lips to the top of her head and steps away, allowing her the freedom to choose what she wants to do.

I turn back to Rowan, my job here done. He watches me approach, a plea already in his eyes—for my forgiveness, no doubt. But I have no space in my broken heart to give him what he wants, not this time. The sight of him broken sends a jolt of anger surging through me— anger , for what he’s done, not pain. A lump forms in my throat, making it difficult to swallow, but I don’t yield. And every step I take feels heavy, as if I’m dragging the weight of my shattered heart along with me.

“You okay?” my brother asks.

I nod, not having the strength to say anything more. And maybe because he’s equally as upset about his friend as I am, he lets me be and hauls Rowan’s arm around his neck to pull him up. I walk with them to the car outside, my movements numb and mechanical, as the last bullet flies out in the warehouse behind.

twenty-seven

Rowan

One month later

It's been weeks, and she refuses to talk about what happened. She refuses to let me touch her, to hear me out, to understand why I had to do what I did. Being in the hospital for so long was the hardest part, after they took me out of the warehouse. It meant she was in control of when I could see her, of how much I got to talk to her. I don't blame her at all. She's hurting... and without her love, so am I.

"Are you sure you're up for it?" I ask her as she goes through the last of her boxes that I brought over from her apartment. The fact that she still hasn't fully unpacked drives me mad. She's not leaving me. I won't allow it.

"Yes," she says, without bothering to turn around. Her voice is curt, clipped, as if she doesn't want to waste another breath on me. Pain tightens my face muscles, but my obsession with this woman has only grown stronger since last month. I didn't think it could, but look at me now—standing in our bedroom with my hands in my pockets and running out of ideas about how I can bring her back to me. Home .

She finally finds a jewelry box in the chaos and opens it up to retrieve a necklace. Not the one I gifted her two weeks ago, but her own. Another blow—right in the fucking heart.

"Let me help you," I say when I see her struggling to put it on.

To my surprise, she lets me. My fingers brush the skin on her neck for just a second before she flinches and moves away yet another time. She's punishing me, and fuck me, she's doing a phenomenal job.

"I can't..." I close my eyes, my breath hissing out through my flared nostrils. When I open them again, she's putting lipstick on, giving me the briefest of glances through the mirror. "I can't go out there and face the world knowing you can't even look at me."

She straightens up, letting the lipstick fall into the small purse she has wrapped around her wrist. And when she turns around, it's the first time she looks into my eyes.

"You're going to have to, Rowan."

My name. She says my name.

"You won the war in the Ridge. And as your wife, I'll be there to support you. If I can do it, so can you."

Not another word spills from her lips as she walks past me and I hear her heels walk down the stairs. Her perfume still lingers in her wake, and I just stand there, breathing it in. Pretending that if I reach out my arm, I can grab her, pull her to my chest and press my lips to hers. But when her scent finally disperses, I'm left with only the memory of her.

Dove

We ride to the White House in silence. But I can feel him next to me... restless, frustrated, and annoyed. He wants to tell me things, but I won't listen—not when I know exactly what he has to say. That he had no choice, that my life was more

important than anything, that he couldn't live without me. And I... I understand, but I can't accept that. So I keep putting off the talk for as long as it takes to come to terms with everything that happened over the past few weeks.

When we arrive, he gets out first and extends his hand toward me. It's the first intentional touch we've had in weeks, because I haven't allowed it so far. He probably thinks I'm punishing him, but honestly, I can barely be around him, and that's mostly why I've stayed away. The pain of knowing I could've lost him—that I could still lose him at any point because of his impulsive nature and the secrets he keeps—hits me like a goddamn hurricane. And right now, I have no idea how to deal with the fact. Maybe this will show him... show him how wrong he was to do what he did. A small part of me tells me he might. But the rest? It tells me he'll never change.

I suck in a breath and give him my hand. He squeezes it lightly, pulling me out of the car, and I know we both relish this small moment of connection, losing ourselves a little in the gentle touch. He guides me inside the building, and I put on my smile—for him, and for everyone who comes and greets us. The Secretary of State, the Chief of Staff, and other people working here that I don't recognize. Then we're in the State Dining Room, where both Cam and Maddox welcome us.

"I'm so glad you're here." She leans in, giving me a soft embrace that smells like amber and cashmeran. I pin her down with my stare, expecting to see some horror in her eyes from what she had to do last month, but only a peaceful glance meets me. She seems rested—amused, even.

Good.

The president's hand extends forward, taking mine. "Welcome. I'm glad you could come," he says, and I don't fail to notice the change in his tone at the last words. As if he knows Rowan would've declined the invitation if I hadn't felt like coming tonight.

“We wouldn’t have missed it,” I say, reminding him that my inner turmoil doesn’t cancel out the love and respect I still have for my husband.

My husband . He married me without my knowledge, as I later found out. The wedding would’ve been... just a formality. Just a way to announce it to the world.

We walk into the ballroom, my arm entwined with his, and I feel naked, exposed, with so many eyes on us. I keep my chin up and smile as I grip Rowan tighter, both for strength and for show.

“I love you, angel,” he says, tilting his head toward mine. “With all my heart.”

I swallow hard, fighting back tears at the sound of his voice saying the words.

I love you too, you goddamn bastard.

Familiar faces come into view, and a twinkle of relief blossoms in my aching heart. I’ll take any chance to avoid my pain, and the way I’m constantly searching for the server with drinks proves it.

“Mr. and Mrs. Gutenberg,” I say sweetly. “It’s so good to see you again.”

Smile, and laugh, and don’t let them see how brokenhearted you are.

Mrs. Gutenberg analyzes me from head to toe, but I get the feeling it’s not because she wants to take in my attire. She doesn’t seem to be interested in stuff like that.

“Congratulations,” she says, raising her glass of champagne toward us. “For the war.” She looks at Rowan. “And for freeing this country.” She turns to me.

“Quite impressive. The news took everyone by surprise. And what about Aleander?”

Isn't he going to take over now that Salister is gone?" Mr. Gutenberg asks.

Rowan answers, "Cole hunted him down. He's dead. As is the next successor, and the next one after that. The EFW is done for, or at least... in the form we've known so far."

"My brother has decided to go back," I explain, refraining from showing my true feelings about his decision. Their eyes widen slightly at the sound of it. "The people there trust him, and it's better than them organizing themselves into a group again with their old ideologies. The EFW can be an asset to the American government under his leadership."

Mrs. Gutenberg hums. "Fascinating. Really well done. I look forward to seeing it play out. I'm sorry it ruined your wedding, though." Her tone is soft, regretful. I swallow and nod in response, not knowing what to say. "Would you mind if I borrowed your husband for a dance? I'm dying to hear more about winning the war for the second time."

Rowan turns his face to me, probably looking for any sign of disapproval in my gestures. But I simply smile as I say, "Of course, though I worry he might out-dance you just to prove he's fully recovered now."

She laughs, grabbing my husband's arm. "Come then, Commander. Tell me more about..."

My attention drifts from her words as my hand slides off of Rowan's other arm. He smiles my way, and of course I return it before they both disappear into the crowd. I miss him even when he's in the room with me. I never want to feel that utter desolation again. I never want to find out that he's gone again.

"You'll have to excuse me, Senator," I tell Mr. Gutenberg. "I need a few minutes to

freshen up.”

He nods in understanding, and I breathe out, making my way to the nearest server. I pick up a glass of champagne, then retreat away from the crowd. Anxiety roils in my stomach, and I’m not sure why. The classical music should soothe me, but it only reinforces the pressing sadness washing over me. I down my drink in two big gulps, knowing full well it will mess up my head.

Good.

Another server walks by, offering me a fresh drink. I place my empty glass on the tray and pick another one up. This guy gets it. Then, plopping down on a random chair, I watch the party happen like a fly on the wall—the laughter spilling from their throats, the white teeth showing when they talk, the gulping of drinks and chewing on the aperitifs. I don’t realize it when someone plops down next to me.

“Damn, and I thought I was a major introvert,” a voice says from my right. A voice I recognize too well, even if we’ve only talked once in the past. “You’re in my hiding spot.”

“Hello, Odette,” I say, my tone void of emotion. “Didn’t realize someone like you needed one.”

She laughs with that loud, chirpy laugh of hers from last time. “I am glad my mask is deceiving enough. This is how we play the game of politics, Dove. We pretend all the damn time.”

I acknowledge that and uncross my legs, only to cross them back the other way.

“And what are you hiding from tonight?” she muses.

I sneer. “People who pry into my private life.” A low, hateful blow, but... it’s all I can muster right now.

Maddox and Cam take to the dance floor, and everybody makes room for them. The ice in Cam’s eyes has melted—she watches her husband as if he’s everything she’s ever wanted now. No longer with defiance... no longer with the promise of a long, painful death.

“I’m sorry,” Odette says, getting my attention. “For what I said to you that day, about Rowan and I screwing behind your back. I was in love with him, and he didn’t love me back.”

I turn to look at her for the first time since we started talking. Her dress, a deep emerald that brings out the brightness in her eyes, flows gracefully over her crossed legs. And her expression... she looks as though she’s peeling back a layer of herself she doesn’t show often. I wonder what has got into her—I wonder if perhaps I was too blinded by jealousy that day and misjudged her.

“But he married you,” she says, disarming me once again. “He shows you off everywhere and looks at you as if you’re a treasure of sorts.” She scoffs, but I no longer take it personally. Whatever storms brew behind Odette Chevrier’s cool facade, I now know it isn’t about me. It’s about her. I can only hope she finds peace one day.

She brushes an invisible piece of lint from the skirt of her dress as she says, “Look, I don’t know what happened between the two of you, and I don’t need to know. But if I can give you some unsolicited advice... make up with him. Because I see the way you look at him too, and it’s just the same.”

“What makes you think something happened between us?”

She smiles and stands up, her body turning away from me as she says, “It takes one to know one. Only someone good at wearing masks can spot another during their act.”

One hour later, I’ve already danced with Rowan twice and held up my act. Now I’m back in my hiding spot, on the same chair from earlier, downing my fourth glass of champagne.

He keeps coming back—through the goosebumps on my skin, the flush in my cheeks when he touches me gently and guides me through the crowd—he keeps coming back to the front of my mind. And no matter what I do, no matter who I speak to or where I go, he’s always there, haunting me, waiting for me to open the door and let him in like I never pushed him out.

And I’m caving.

The high walls I built around my heart are chipped, scabbed. They were never meant to last, and we both know that.

Rowan’s hand brushes my thigh under the table, trailing up. My breath catches in my throat, a shiver running down my spine like wildfire. His heat is home to my body, and goddammit, I can’t stop from wanting it all over me. I blame it on the champagne, knowing full well it’s a lie.

“I think you’ve had enough,” he murmurs in my ear from behind.

I pull my hand with my drink away from him. “And I think you should mind your own business.”

“Aren’t I?” His cruel smile catches me off guard as he leans to steal my glass.

He’s either doing this to provoke a fight from me... or he’s been paying attention to

the amount of alcohol I ingested, and it truly concerns him. I tend to think it's the former.

The glass is back on the table, and I could reach for it if I wanted to. But the truth is... I'm tired, and I no longer want to pretend I'm all right. The champagne bubbling up inside me conjures up my despair instead of willing it away.

Thanks for nothing .

"I want you to fight me," he says, placing a tender kiss on my naked collarbone. I shiver, watching a few curious eyes glance our way from the crowd. "I want you to curse me and spit in my face, and do whatever it takes to make you forgive me. And then, when you have exhausted every bit of turmoil from that pure little soul of yours, I want to spread you open on the president's couch and fuck this attitude out of you until I know it's all gone. Here. And now."

I muster up the words between heavy breaths. "Quite commanding for someone who's in the wrong."

"Yes. I want things from you, and you're going to give them to me on a silver platter. Because I own you."

Fire licks down my veins, spreading more and more through my body as his words fuel it. How dare he? How dare he demand these things of me when... when...

"I have been patient, and I have shown you nothing but tenderness this entire time. But I told you, repeatedly —I am not a patient man. And right now, Dove, you are seriously testing my patience by shutting me off and denying me the only thing in this world that keeps me alive."

Servers glide through the room like ghosts, and the crystal glasses catch the light

from the chandeliers with every hand that picks them up. People shift and talk, and I watch them bewildered, wondering if anyone has heard us. But Rowan doesn't seem to care about any of that.

"Let's go," he murmurs one last time, the timber of his low voice reaching down to my core.

When he takes my hand in his, I let him. He guides me through the crowd, and we leave the party through the doors leading to the Cross Hall.

I don't look back once.

Rowan

"Sit down."

"Dove..." I plead with my eyes, because I don't want to fucking sit right now. I want to touch her, be all over her, and take what's mine.

"Sit. The hell. Down."

I shut the doors to the Lincoln Bedroom, making sure no one can hear us. And then... I oblige.

My cock grows harder at this new side of her. I love using her, making her do things the way I want. But fuck, I quite enjoy this other side of her just as much. Every day she surprises me. Every day she brings me to the edge of my sanity, then takes my hand and pulls me over to where we both fall.

"How could you?" She crosses her arms over her chest and brings a trembling hand to cover her mouth. Tears and rage spill out of her as if the walls she built around her

heart have finally collapsed after weeks of keeping everything in. I'm here to gather every fucking drop. "How could you leave me? How could you even think to do something like that?"

I take in a long breath, choosing my words carefully. "Angel, you know I didn't have a—"

"Don't speak to me right now," she snaps. My mouth pulls up in the corner, but I make an effort to refrain from smiling.

There you are. Fight me. Fight me and take what you need from me.

"You lied to me. Lied to your friends. You were so goddamn lucky I found out about your idiotic plan."

I was.

"You know what hurts the most, Rowan?" She shakes her head, a disappointed smile on her pretty face. It breaks my fucking heart, but I'm aware it only shows me how much she cares. "That you didn't trust me. You didn't think of me highly enough to discuss that plan. Because if you had, I would've told you it's the worst and most disgusting thing I've ever heard in my life. No, don't touch me!"

I'm back on my feet, closing the space between us until our lips are inches apart. I can practically feel her anger rolling off of her. Despite every muscle in my body begging me to do so, I keep my hands to myself and refrain from touching her. Consent is always given, and right now, I don't have a single fucking ounce of it to my name. She breathes against my chest, and I tilt my head down to catch her teary gaze.

"You are all I think about," I say, my voice shaking with a violent burst of my

obsession for her. “You walked under my skin one day and made a home there. I am possessed by you in ways I can’t begin to describe. I gave my life to save yours, yes, because there is nothing for me to come back to if you die. I am a selfish, wrathful man—but I am yours, and you are mine, and nothing else matters to me but that. You want an apology?” I shake my head. “Yes, okay, I’m sorry I couldn’t come up with a better plan. But if I had to, I’d do it again because it kept you breathing. It kept you alive.”

“I didn’t want that! Who are you to decide my life weighs more than yours?” She presses against my chest, getting away, and rounding the small table behind her. Torment flickers beneath my skin—I urge it to quiet down. She buries her face in her hands before looking up at me again. Wrapping her arms around herself, she asks, “How am I supposed to be with you from now on, to live in constant fear that one day I’ll wake up and you’ll be gone? That you won’t do something like that again? The thought hurts so much, Rowan...” She aches, visibly aches under my eyes as she refrains from crying. “It hurts so much that I don’t know what to do. I don’t know what... to do...”

“Dove...”

A sharp scoff exits her flared nostrils as she looks anywhere but into my eyes. “You didn’t do this for me. You did it for yourself. I hope you can at least understand that.”

My brows furrow at her words. I’ve never heard something more obscene.

“H-How could you think that? You’re... you’re wrong—”

“No . You did it for yourself, Rowan. Because your father treated you the way he did, told you that you were never good enough to walk this earth, and made you believe it. I understand your obsession. Oh God, I really fucking do. But what you did... turning yourself over... you did that because you never feel like you do

enough. Like you are enough. You gave in to your father, and look what it's done to us."

The blow is sharp, and it hits me out of fucking nowhere. She might as well have slapped me across my face. I take a second to reel in the right words, but only the wrong ones come out.

"My obsession with you," I mutter. "You don't understand it, Dove. That's why I did—"

"Oh!" she laughs, turning with her hands on her hips. "I don't understand it? Right. Because how dare I feel the same way about you—about a man who truly has no value and doesn't deserve anything from what he has—right?" Her voice lowers, and she makes a step toward me, every move charged with pure rage and a madness I recognize too well because I bask in it myself.

"I'm obsessed with you too, you goddamn bastard. It's... it's... like an intoxication holding onto your flesh, scurrying down your veins alongside your blood, entering every cell that keeps you alive and eating you up from the inside out. You can't get it out of your system, nor do you want to. It consumes you, chews you up, and spits you out, then does it again. And again. And again. And it's the scariest, most beautiful feeling I've ever experienced in my entire life. How's that? Did I pass the fucking test?"

I keep silent, taking her blows, knowing I deserve each one. It kills me to see her so wounded by what I did, but I can't shake the fact that she's still alive because of it. Things could've turned out differently if I hadn't done it. I could've lost her.

And she could've lost you.

"I understand your obsession, Rowan," she says. "But you can't ever do something

like that again. You die, I die. It's as simple as that. And if nothing else, perhaps this... this should prove to you that whatever bullshit your father stuffed your head with isn't true. I know who you are, what an incredible man you are. The whole fucking world knows it now. I can only hope that one day, you'll see it too."

My eyes close after a long inhale, my fists clenching at my sides as I try to reel in my control. There's that feeling again—the hurt, the need for her to soothe me in the ways only she can.

"Come here," I command her.

But she does anything but. She takes a few steps back, shaking her head.

"Dove. Angel ... please. Please come into my arms."

"No."

I thought I knew what pain was when I convinced myself I couldn't have her, when I was just a ghost in her life, following her, watching over her, and never being able to make her mine. But the way my chest tightens now... this pain... the one of her rejection... It hurts a thousand times more, and I admit. I don't know what to do with it. How to handle it.

"You'll only make it worse," she mumbles, searching my eyes. "It will get worse." Her chest heaves, and I furrow my brows, not understanding what she means.

"What will?" I ask.

"How much I want you."

Jesus fucking Christ. Fuck this!

I pick up the table between us and smash it into the wall. I rush toward her, breaking any restraint, any promise I might have made to myself about not touching her. Then her skin is against mine, and her body pressed against me, her self-control just as gone.

I breathe in her sugared strawberries scent and stoop to pull up her long, beautiful gown. She wears white lace underneath—lace that I’m about to rip off with my teeth.

She fists the sides of her gown, helping me by keeping it up. I rake my teeth over her panties and they tear. She gasps, and I can feel her pussy against my lips. I open it up with my tongue, licking it roughly a few times, wanting to touch as many parts of her as I can in as little time as possible. She breathes hard and moans my name as she stands there with my tongue up her cunt. I dip my finger into her ass, stretching her a little, knowing how wet it gets her. Then I’m back on my feet, pushing her against the wall.

“Put it in. Just put it in. Please,” she breathes, tears falling down her cheeks.

Molten need flows together with her words. I rush to unbuckle my belt, her hands meeting mine as she tries to do the same. It’s a tangled mess around my waist until I finally break the damn thing free, unbutton my pants, and take my throbbing cock out.

“Hook your leg around me,” I whisper through shallow breaths, helping her do it.

I push her up onto the wall and she holds onto me, her slender hands around my neck and her hair a mess against the white paint of the room. Her leg is around my waist, and her pussy stretched open—just for me.

I find her cunt with my cock and slam myself inside her. It feels like coming home after a long, exhausting trip. Like hooking myself up to a lifeline after being dead for

weeks. I thrust in and out, her walls squeezing my cock and smearing it in the creamy layer of her arousal. We're both panting, cursing, and devouring each other like starving wolves tearing into a fresh kill as we fuck. Raw and desperate, as if it's the very first time.

My mouth finds hers, and she moans as she tastes herself on my tongue. I only break our kiss to rake my teeth against her skin, to taste her everywhere I can.

"I hate you," she says, panting. Her words send waves of pleasure through the length of my cock.

I smile against her tear-streaked cheek. "Then give me more. If this is you hating me, angel..."

She writhes against me, fisting my hair, wanting me closer even though there are no inches left between us.

"Give."

Thrust.

"Me."

Thrust.

"More."

She comes with a sharp cry. I pick her up, throw her on the meticulously arranged bed next to us, then pull my suit jacket off as I stare her down. My eyes selfishly skirt all over her, at the gown she pulled up for me so I could see her juicy pussy and her toned thighs as they press together before opening for me fully. My sweet little angel

knows I love to watch. She's always been the woman of my dreams, and now I finally get to have her till the day I die.

I tower above her, pulling the top part of her dress down until her breasts sway out of the material. Her rosy, taut nipples taunt me, and I stoop to take one into my mouth. I bite, and kiss, and lick, and work my cock back inside her warmth at the same time. She arches her back, and I can feel her hands between us, pulling her pussy lips open so she can accommodate me again.

I'm about to make a fucking mess of her with my cum, and I dare anyone to come knocking at the door of this room when they hear her calling my name between her loud moans.

Rowan

Three months later

I 'm standing in front of the main window that oversees the front yard. The first snow of the season falls from the sky, and everything around the house is white. It's so quiet, so still—and for the first time in months, so is the chaos in my mind. Tendrils of heat sear around my body from the hearth below the flat screen TV that we never watch. It's so fucking warm inside, and normally, I would've turned it off. But my wife loves the heat, so I always leave it on.

Footsteps approaching from somewhere else in the house get my attention.

“Sir,” Saint says carefully, followed by the sound of something heavy touching the wooden floor.

I turn my body to see him standing in the middle of the living room with his two suitcases waiting nearby. He keeps his face neutral, but I can sense the restlessness rolling off of him. He doesn't think he's really leaving tonight. I've tricked him before, after all.

“How are you getting home?” I ask him. “Anyone picking you up?”

“I haven't... I didn't know...”

I sigh. “You should've.” I take my Bentley key out of my pocket and throw it his way. He catches it with one hand, giving me an incredulous look. “Leave it at

whatever garrison you live close to. I'll arrange for someone else to bring it back."

"You're giving me... your car?"

"Lending you my car. And if I see as much as one scratch on it—"

I'm not really worried about it. But with Saint, you always have to keep him guessing, keep him on his toes. It's how I managed to teach him discipline—the kind that both he and his father will be thankful for, and not the kind my father wrecked my entire childhood with.

"You won't. Thank you, sir."

"Go now. And I hope it goes without saying that I never want to see your face around here again. Next time I hear about you, it better be something to be proud of. Got that?"

My words may be cutting, but my tone is not. I keep it light this time, and he senses it, offering me a smirk as he says, "Yes, sir."

I turn back to the window and hear him pick up his suitcases again. He distances himself from me, and right before I glimpse him open the main door, I lower my voice and say, "Just don't get it twisted, Saint." He stalls. "If I ever hear any rumor about anything that went on in my house, I'll blame it on you. And I will hunt you down and make sure you're never getting anything you want in this life. Do you understand?"

I expect him to quiver, to be taken aback by the threat. But it seems my work here with him really is done.

A grunt of understanding, and then, "I respect you a lot, sir. And I always have, even

since before you brought me into your home. This experience humbled me, yes... but it also opened my eyes to the kind of man I want to be. You've got everything. And one day, I hope to have the strength to get my everything, too."

My lips curl into a faint smile. I nod, knowing he won't be saying a word to anyone. Then he's gone.

I breathe out, relieved that it's just me and Dove in our house now. The chef has gone home, and so have the maids. I'm drooling on the carpet at the filthy thoughts I have in mind for me and my wife. As if on cue, her sweet voice reaches my ears as I feel her hands wrap around my torso from behind.

"You didn't need to be so mean to him," she says.

I smile fully now and bring her in front of me, then wrap my hands around her thighs to perch her up on the window ledge. She gasps but melts into me when she's seated.

"You're sweet enough for both of us," I tell her.

My hand comes on top of her head, caressing her beautiful hair as she looks up at me with her big brown eyes. They flicker with playfulness—and they have been for the past few months now. It's now one of my favorite things about her. To see no worry cross her mind and no tears from a sinking of her heart—unless they're from coming so hard her world rocks a little and she feels the need to cry.

"Cole called. Said he needed to talk to you about something. Why didn't you pick up?"

I was already on my way to him when he called our home line, actually, but I don't want her to know that. We went back to that town where Salister kept her, since a bunch of the men who fought by Cole's side refused to leave their homes and move

somewhere else. They're rebuilding it now, bringing new life to it. I hated the sight of it—hated knowing they were there and didn't help my wife when she needed it, even if they fought in the rebellion after I took her out. I can't forgive that, but after Cole told me what he went through and how Salister broke his own people, I can understand it. At the very least, they fought by our side. And yet, to me, they're all as good as dead, which is why I gladly agreed to Cole's decision to lead the groups from now on.

I bring my hands on either side of my wife's face and press a kiss to her forehead. She mewls from the warmth and brings her arms around my torso, nesting herself into me.

"Don't worry about it," I tell her. "Already talked with him."

She leans back and narrows her eyes at me, not buying it, then yawns. I know the questions will come later when she's more rested, but right now she's too exhausted from organizing yet another fundraising event. Supporting the families whose men lost their lives in the Sylvestrian war has been her main priority since the state dinner three months ago. I don't tell her to do any of this, but I know how much she cares about her work... about doing good in the world. I won't be the one to stop her.

Whatever my wife wants, she gets, and that's how things will always be.

But I will always keep secrets from her if I have to, and this hasn't changed at all. Not because she's not strong enough to handle them, but because she shouldn't need to handle anything as long as I'm still breathing. Even in death, I've ensured she's well taken care of. All that's left to do is for us to get there—slowly, while we spend our days pouring life into each other until there's no more left to give.

People confuse her kindness for weakness, but out of the two of us, she's much stronger than I'll ever be. In the midst of the chaos, she brought herself back together,

stitched her own wounds, then put herself back in danger to save my life. All the while she was threatened with death not once, but every single day until I got that fucking cure in my hands. She's a force, my wife, and I couldn't be prouder she's here by my side.

"So? What have you decided about the honeymoon? Japan?"

She shakes her head. "Nothing yet. I just want to do two more events before the year is over and then..." She blinks, taking a slow breath in. "To be honest, I wish I had time to do more for the veterans' wives. I can't even imagine..."

"Slow. Down," I drawl, my hands now resting on her bare thighs. I was hard from the second I saw her walk into the living room in nothing but my white shirt—just like she did that morning after we first slept together. "You are doing more than anyone could've asked of you. Okay?"

"It's not..." She sighs. "It's not that easy. The press..."

I scowl, a gentle warning in my gaze. "I thought I told you not to read the papers."

"I know. And I wish I'd listened." She drops her hands from around my torso and looks to the side. "All they talk about is how I arrange the fucking cutlery or how I dress at these events. They don't care about how much we raise, and they do nothing to help us promote the events so we can raise more. It's frustrating."

"They'll never care. We have a few outlets that do, but the rest... That's why I asked you not to read them. I've been in this game for so long, and they still get to me sometimes. I don't want you to feel scrutinized."

"I know. Yeah." She nods. "But the honeymoon? I think maybe we should wait a bit more. You know, just until we make sure we've—" Her words come to a stop, and

she huffs a laugh. “It will never be enough though, will it?”

No, it won’t. But that’s okay.

After our wedding got crashed three months ago, we organized it again, and she became my wife in front of the whole world. But I still can’t convince her to take a break so I can take us on our honeymoon. I get that. I never feel like my work is done. But if there’s one thing this year taught me... it’s that I’m never going to feel like I’ve done enough. So I might as well do the best I can and force myself—and her—to slow down when we can.

I trail my hands upward until I reach the crease of her thighs, surprised to see that she isn’t wearing her panties. Surprised, and fucking hard as a rock. My wife likes to play now. Now that she knows me, really knows me, and trusts me with her pleasure and pain. She’s become more courageous too, in her own little ways in asking for my affection. This is one of those instances, and I intend to reward her generously for it.

“You bring me your soft pussy on a silver platter and ask me to postpone my honeymoon with you,” I say, feeling the wetness from her cunt with my fingertips, “thinking you could sway me?” I cock my head. “It’s the other way around, angel. Because right now, my answer is no. We’re not postponing an entire month of fucking on tatami mats just so we can work more.”

She laughs. “Is that where we’re going to fuck? On tatami mats? I thought those were for fighting and drinking tea.”

I unbutton my pants and take my cock out, pushing it against her clit. She gasps softly.

“I’ll fuck you everywhere and anywhere,” I tell her. “Until every corner of this world knows you’re mine.”

I wrap my hands around her thighs again, this time to angle her upper body against the window and her cunt toward me.

“Use your hands. Open your pussy for me.”

She does so without hesitation, and my eyes are now glued to the small, creamy slit and her engorged clit that’s visibly pulsing for me. I push my cock in slowly, savoring the sight and the feel of her around me. Her eyes flutter closed as she holds her pussy in offering and loses herself in the way our bodies move together.

“I’ll never...” She gasps, her brows drawing together as I ram myself inside her, all the way to the hilt and hiss. “I’ll never understand what you do to me. You...”

I rest my forehead against hers and start fucking her with hard, hungry strokes. Her tight cunt takes everything, which only makes me want to give her more. She whimpers and brings her hands around my arms, holding on and milking my cock like the good girl she is.

“I know, angel. I fucking know.”

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 2:59 am

Rowan

Five years later

I open the door of the Bentley and step outside into the sun. It's the start of summer, and all the peonies I brought into our garden five years ago have bloomed again.

Their sweet scent tells me I'm home, and quickens my pace toward the sliding glass door at the back of the house—already open, like we leave it every time it gets warm. The curtains sway lazily with the gentle wind, bringing laughter and voices on its trail.

“Yes, just like that. Now move it a bit from side to side and... That's it. You did it!” my wife exclaims, followed by the sound of a smooch. I smile and push the soft curtain to the side, leaning against the window frame.

There, at the marbled kitchen island, my wife stands next to our four-year-old son, whose cheeks are almost entirely covered in flour. Arvin's big brown eyes—his mother's eyes—look up at her from his kitchen stool, more questions pouring out of him like a faucet with a broken handle.

I laugh to myself, knowing exactly just how bottomless his curiosity is. I love watching them when they don't know I'm here.

It always looks like a dream, and it feels that much better when I realize I can step into it and live there forever.

“Why can’t we eat the cookies now?” Arvin mumbles.

“Because they aren’t cooked yet,” Dove explains patiently as she sprinkles chocolate chips on the dough. “And we’re waiting for Daddy to come home so we can surprise him. It was your idea, wasn’t it?”

He nods, retracting his small hand from the cookie tray. His little legs stomp a few times before he reels in his control and picks up a teaspoon instead, fidgeting with it.

“But... but why do we need to cook them?”

Dove wipes her hands on the apron she’s wearing and retrieves a towel to clean our son’s face. Surprisingly, he lets her, probably because he’s more invested in the cookies than not having his face touched. A rare sight, indeed.

“Because cooking makes them soft and yummy, and safe to eat. Will you help me put them in the oven?”

He nods, then climbs down from the stool. Dove’s eyes accidentally slide over to mine, and her face lights up. A soft blush creeps in, adding a touch of warmth to her already radiant features.

Her smile widens as she unwraps the apron, and her wavy hair sways from the movement as she comes toward me. She’s wearing white and pink, and she’s more beautiful than ever. My chest shakes with the force of the love I have for this woman. For our family.

“Liar,” she says, pursing her lips. “You said you’d be back later tonight.”

Arvin sees me, and his face lights up too. “Daddy!”

How the fuck did I get so lucky?

“We can’t eat the cookies because they aren’t cooked yet,” he says, reciting the new lesson he just learned.

He collides with my leg, and I wrap my arm around him, pulling him close. Dove presses her body into mine, and I give her a long kiss, her lips molding to mine and opening up for me.

My wife always gets the first kiss—without her, I wouldn’t have my son. She whimpers, and I release her, though I can barely contain myself. We were apart for an entire week. I had work to do in Canberra, and she had to stay in Washington, meeting with Congress to steer things in the right direction.

The criminal justice reform bill is about to get a much-needed update, and it’s all because of my wife’s efforts at the White House.

I pick Arvin up, kissing the top of his head as I walk into the kitchen to where the cookies lie on the tray. I pick one up with my free hand and pretend to eat it.

“Nooo!” he shouts. “Daddy, it isn’t safe and yummy!”

“Nonsense. It smells so good. Surely it must be.”

I bring it to my mouth once again. He wraps his little hands around my wrist, and pulls it away, sheer determination reading on his face. “Mommy said we have... have to wait.”

Dove sighs from behind us and picks up the dough in my hand.

“Enough, you two.” She huffs a laugh as she puts it back on the tray, then shoves everything in the oven. “They’ll be ready by the time you wake up,” she tells Arvin with a smile.

My gaze shifts from her to Renee, the nanny, who timidly steps into the room.

“Oh, good,” she says, bringing her hands together. “I was just about to take Arvin upstairs for his nap.”

I look at him, expecting a few little protests. He’s a good kid and doesn’t fuss about things too much—but he’s still a toddler, and like all toddlers, he has his moments when he couldn’t care less about what we ask him to do.

“I want to stay with Daddy,” he tells her, hiding his face in my uniform jacket. His voice is heavy with the spell of sleep, but his excitement still pokes through the haze.

I run my hand through his soft hair and press another kiss to his forehead. “You’ll go with Renee,” I tell him, my voice firmer this time. He makes a sound of frustration, but it dies down. He knows when I mean business and when I let him fool around. “And when you wake up, we’ll all eat cookies together and watch Badger & Fred . How’s that?”

He lifts his head and looks up at me, a new spark in his eyes.

“Promise?”

“You know I never lie to you,” I tell him.

He knows it, indeed, and it shows when Renee moves closer to pick him up and he doesn’t object this time. She carries him out of the kitchen, and when they’re out of sight, my eyes slide over to my wife.

“Hello, angel,” I say, walking closer to her and pushing her against the counter.

My hand brushes her cheek, bringing her face closer to mine. The sunlight seeps through the large windows, casting shadows on the surface of her hair. I fist my hand

in it, as if I'm trying to catch them.

"I missed you." She gasps, bringing her palms behind my uniform and sliding them down my chest.

I bring a hand down under her skirt, finding her warm pussy. She wiggles, trying to get away.

"Renee is here," she whispers. "We can't just—"

"She knows not to bother us when it's just the two of us," I say, turning her around and bending her over the counter. I press a hand to her mouth, feeling her soft lips against my skin. She moans, but the sound comes out muffled. "You can be as loud as you want now." I lower myself to her ear, whispering, "No one will hear you when you scream for me."

She brings her arms to her sides and hides them under her skirt. When they come back into view, she's dragging her panties down to her thighs. I smile behind her, loving how needy she is for me. I know that if I touched her pussy she'd be drenched, but I'm not sure what part of her I want to claim first.

"Yes, that's right, angel. When your husband comes home, you bend over and give him your holes to fuck. What a good, perceptive girl you are." I pull her skirt up and her round ass welcomes me. The sweet scent of her arousal envelops me, making my cock twitch in my pants.

"What should we do with you, hmm?" I muse, petting her head. "A good wife deserves to take her husband's cock in her cunt. But a whore likes it better in the ass. And you, angel..." I smile. "You are both at the same time. My beautiful wife. And my needy little slut."

Bringing her hands out in front of her, she holds onto the edge of the counter, waiting

to see what I'll do. The truth is, I want her tied up, gagged, and fucked in all her holes while I praise and degrade her all night long. And then, I want to fill her with my cum, and have her belly swollen with life again. There's time for that later, when I take her out for dinner and we spend the night at the hotel below the restaurant.

For now, I simply take my pen out of the inner pocket of my uniform and start sliding it between her pussy from behind. She moans into my hand, rocking into the pen's touch. The metal must be a little cold, bringing short-lived relief to the warmth between her legs, reminding me of the day I pushed ice cubes into her aching little cunt. I drag the object out, watching her thighs tremble from stealing away her pleasure.

Then I push the pen inside. She cries out, and something wet makes contact with the hand I have on her mouth—fresh tears. The kind she gets when she's had enough. When I edge her too much and too hard, and she doesn't have a voice to beg me to come... because I take it away from her in some way. This time is no different. I fuck her with the object for a few seconds, knowing full well it's not thick enough to create enough friction. It's just a pen, after all. But every time I pull it out more wetness clings to it, showing me just how horny she is right now.

"I'm going to leave this pen inside your pussy," I say, doing just that, but holding it in place with my fingers. "And I want you to hold onto it. Don't let it fall, angel, or I promise you won't get to come at all today. Is that understood?"

Hesitantly, she nods, and I praise her as I retract my fingers. As expected, it points out of her pussy, clutched in place. I leave her there, bent over the kitchen counter for just a minute, and come back from my office with lube and a gag in hand. I squirt some of the liquid over her asshole and toss it aside.

"Rowan..." she whispers, trying her best to be quiet. "Please—"

"Open your mouth."

She obeys, and I position the harness of the gag over her head.

Moments ago, she was a pretty little angel with a pink skirt and an innocent look on her face while she taught our son how cookies are made. Now, her cunt is holding my pen, her mouth is sucking on the gag I brought her, and her lubed ass is practically begging to be fucked.

I know I've lived a sinful life. I've murdered, slaughtered our enemies for everything we now have. But when the devil sees me at the gates of hell one day, I don't know that he'll let me walk inside. Because I have sinned, yes, but I have also loved. And I have done so with all my fucking heart.

This woman is my salvation... and not even the devil can deny that.

Thanks for reading Under His Wrath.