

A MISSION MERCENARIES NOVEL

MARIE JAMES

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Mistakes Made A Mission Mercenary Novel Marie James

Copyright

Mistakes Made: A Mission Mercenary Novel

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Mission Mercenaries

Lessons Learned

Mistakes Made

Bridges Burned

Depravity Delivered

Redemption Refused

Confusion Cleared

Other Series in the Same World Cerberus MC

Blackbridge Security

Ravens Ruin MC

Hale Series

Synopsis

The worst thing you can ever do is make an assumption about me, despite my job resting solely on making people think I'm someone I'm not.

I know that makes me crazy, narcissistic, and a little out of touch with the reality of how the world works.

I'll never argue that fact with anyone.

Maybe it was the hundred-degree Texas weather.

Maybe it was overstimulation from the crowds at the beach.

Maybe it was one of a million other things that irritated me that day.

But when Raya Reed looked me up and down, finding me lacking on some scale I'm sure no man in her life would ever live up to, I snapped.

It wasn't until she was tied up in my house that I discovered she was Senator Thomas Reed's daughter. A normal person would let her go.

I've made a lot of mistakes in my past, but making Raya MINE will never be one of them.

Note to Readers

You don't have to suspend reality.

You only have to dig deep inside of yourself and let those monsters out to play.

Chapter 1

Liam

"This is the worst fucking idea," Hollis grumbles as he leans down and sweeps sand off his cast for the hundredth time since we met up today.

"This was your idea," Nash reminds him.

"Still a bad fucking idea," Hollis says. "I'm never going to get this shit out of my cast."

I keep my eyes on the ocean. South Padre is where I called home. Well, at least that's what the guys sitting beside me think. No one knows where I really live, and I'd never give that information up.

I would consider these guys friends, but only on the surface. They're fake friends, if you will. Social interaction is a requirement in order to look normal.

I'm anything but normal. The guys sitting beside me are anything but normal.

We're all just keeping up appearances, being who those around us expect us to be. I'm sure my blond hair and tanned skin give off a surfer vibe because that's the goal. The truth is, I can look like anyone I want, anyone I need to be, for whatever occasion I may encounter.

"Why won't you tell us about him?" Nash asks.

I don't even have to speculate on who he's referring to.

Angel Guerra.

The man is our boss. Not that Hollis and Nash have met him.

They haven't, and I think that pisses them off a little.

I don't know how I got an actual meeting with the man, but it was brief, lasting only a few minutes. The only reason I think he ever gave me the time of day after that meeting is because of what we have in common.

We don't work a regular nine-to-five job. What we do is dangerous.

Many would look at our profession and think that we're saviors, heroes.

But we're not.

I can't count how many times someone has looked up at me from a dirty floor after months of abuse, like I was Jesus walking the earth.

Taking time out of my life to make sure that others are safe isn't why I do what I do, but I don't correct them.

That's not what they need at the time.

They don't need to be told that I'm there for a paycheck.

That I wouldn't bat an eye if I showed up in front of them, and they were dead.

I don't tell them that I would just walk away a little disappointed that I wasn't getting paid, but not heartbroken.

I don't internalize the bad jobs. We all have shitty days at work. It just so happens that my shitty days usually end up with someone dead.

Hell, I don't even celebrate the good jobs.

Work is just work.

"We all work for him," Hollis says. "There's no reason you can't tell us what you know."

Nash grunts his agreement.

"He's dangerous," I tell them not for the first time. "Just do your damn jobs and leave the rest alone."

"We're all dangerous," Hollis argues, but the man has no idea.

I sigh in irritation, the sound getting lost on the ocean breeze.

"I only met him once," I remind them.

Nash scoffs. "We all know how much you can tell about a person by just meeting them once."

I look over at the two of them, wondering why I even showed up in the first place today.

"He's deadly." My eyes dart back and forth between the two of them so they know how serious I am. I'd never tell them how I know he's deadly, but since Angel and I have had similar experiences, I know he has to be. You don't survive what we did and walk away unchanged. "Not to be fucked with. Not to be researched. Not to be tracked. Just get your jobs, get them done, get paid, and leave it alone."

I can tell by the look on both their faces that this isn't something they're going to give up on easily, and that makes them stupid and deserving of whatever they may get as a result.

But why should I care if they want to track Angel Guerra? If they want to end up dead on the side of the road, then who am I to stop that from happening?

"He met with you," Hollis says, the sound of his voice like nails on the chalkboard, like a stubborn child who just won't take no for an answer. I have no doubt that Hollis is an only child, that he's been given just about everything he's ever wanted. I wouldn't be surprised to discover the man only works for the thrills the job provides, for that adrenaline rush when you're staring down the possibility of death, and how it makes you feel when you survive.

"You met him so you know more about him than we do," Hollis continues.

"He's my boss just like he's your boss," I tell him. "I haven't gone out of my way to find out information about him."

That's the truth. I'm not gonna hunt Angel Guerra down. I'm not going to try to find out more about his life.

Not because I care, despite our shared history, but because I don't give a shit about Angel Guerra. So long as I keep getting those jobs in my email, I'm happy.

I don't want to be his friend.

I don't wonder what the man does at night.

I don't even care about the jobs that he takes that could get him killed. I only care about how it affects me.

I just want to get paid, stash my money away for when I feel like not doing this anymore, and move on.

"You honestly think that he would hurt us if we found out more about him?" Nash asks.

It's my turn to laugh.

"I'm pretty sure that Angel could've killed me sitting right here on this beach several months ago and no one would have noticed. He's that dangerous. He's that deadly. I like life too much to chance crossing the man."

"We deal with deadly shit on a daily basis," Hollis says.

He's right. We do the jobs that lead us to the darkest, dangerous, most sinister places in South America.

What he's not saying is that each and every one of those trips could find us dead, and I don't think that Angel would blink an eye if it happened. Hell, the impression that I get from Angel is that he doesn't even care if we work for him or not. He doesn't care if we die.

We're not in any form a liability nor an asset to him. He's making fifty percent off our backs, but if we don't take the jobs, the man is more than capable of doing them himself.

It doesn't bother me though. He finds the job. He pays for the expenses.

I get paid, he gets paid, and I don't have to waste my time trying to find the next job to do. There's always work. There's always someone willing to pay an insane amount of money to get their loved one back.

"I think you're lying," Nash says.

I turned my eyes from the waves to glare at him. "I'm not fucking lying, man."

"You don't seem like the type of person who's going to work for someone that they don't know, at least on some level."

My smile is slow.

Neither of these men really knows me. We're not friends.

I'm not working under the assumption that either of them feels

differently than I do.

"He has to at least be from Texas, right?" Hollis prods.

"No clue," I answer, turning my eyes back to the waves.

The sun is beating down on all of us.

Summers in Texas are brutal, but for some reason this summer seems hotter than normal. I haven't even gotten into the water, and I can feel the salt from the sweat clinging to my skin.

I'm agitated and annoyed about even being here and the heat is only acerbating my mood. The guys trying to grill me about Angel aren't helping either.

Conversation halts, and a normal person would want to fill the silence. They would want to give more details. They would want to make excuses about why they aren't saying more. They'd feel the need to apologize.

I'm not a normal person. They're not normal people either, so it's ignorant for them to even think that way.

"You don't have a fucking chance," Hollis says. "She's a fucking ten."

I look over at Nash, tracking his eyes across the sand to a gorgeous brunette.

I can see the appeal. I'm a man, after all.

She has long golden tanned legs and dark hair floating in the wind. She swipes it away instead of pulling it back despite it continuously getting in her eyes.

That woman knows exactly what she's doing. She's caught the attention of damn near every man in a thirty-foot radius.

That tiny bikini clinging to her skin would be see-through if she actually got into the water, but she's not here to swim. She's here to entice. She's here to feed her ego.

"I'm a fucking ten," Nash argues. "Tens date tens."

"Date?" Hollis scoffs.

I have to smile. Men like us don't date. We don't have any bonds other than fake ones.

Connections are dangerous.

Connections are how the enemies hurt you, how they control you, how they're able to bend you to their will.

I don't do connections, and I never will.

They're hazardous.

"I use the phrase date loosely," Nash qualifies. "I don't want to date her. I want to fuck her. It's that simple."

Hollis grumbles again, still sounding like a petulant child as he reaches down and swipes sand off the cast on his foot.

"That girl has the pick of any man on this beach, and you really think it's going to be you?" I look over at the two of them, slightly annoyed but also distracted by their banter.

"I think I have as good a shot as anybody else," Nash says.

"I'd rather be working," Hollis complains, and I understand the feeling. Idle time for men like us is dangerous.

We don't do well with free time.

"How much longer do you have in the cast?" Nash asks as he lifts his chin in acknowledgment at the woman when she looks in our direction.

"Three more fucking weeks," Hollis complains.

"And you broke your ankle on a job?" Nash asks.

Hollis nods. "I'd like to tell you guys that I hurt myself being a badass in some epic fucking fight scene, rescuing that last girl, but I stepped off the porch the wrong way and snapped my ankle."

Both Nash and I laugh.

"That's usually how it goes," I say, a genuine smile on my face for the first time today. Getting at least some kind of injury while working is pretty normal for our line of work.

"What did Angel say about it?" Nash asks.

"Not a fucking thing," Hollis says. "It's not like we have workers' comp or medical insurance in the job that we do."

"I'm surprised he didn't ask you what time you were returning to work," Nash says, his eyes once again on the brunette playing in the sand as if it isn't obvious that she's vying for the attention of every man around her.

I have to laugh and look over at Nash. "If you think he cares if we're working or not, you're sadly mistaken. That man doesn't need us."

I don't know why my eyes lock on the blonde, twenty feet down the beach.

I wouldn't consider myself a people watcher, although I do notice everything going on around me. It's a skill I've mastered and an extremely necessary one in our line of work.

I don't know that I've ever considered any twenty-something-year-old female demure, but that's exactly what she is. Maybe that's why she stands out.

Maybe that's why I can't seem to take my eyes off her.

I'm just glad that it seems like I'm looking in Nash's direction rather than staring at this woman.

Her one-piece bathing suit fits like a glove.

It leaves a lot to the imagination.

It makes me curious.

Every woman here wants attention, and they're getting it by wearing the skimpiest bikinis imaginable.

They don't care that there are families here.

They don't care that there are children playing in the surf and building sandcastles.

Family vacations and laughter don't matter to them.

A lot of these women not only don't give a shit about the people staring

at them, but they also encourage it. They crave it.

They want the men to look at them regardless of their relationship status. If a man looking at them has a wedding ring on their finger, even better.

They want to know that their body, their laughter, the way the sun glints off their hair, and the way that the sand sticks to their skin makes an otherwise faithful man look in their direction.

It's the highest compliment, isn't it? What says I'm the hottest girl on the beach other than a man, who should be paying attention to his wife and children, who's staring at them.

It's what makes men like the one I used to be want to snatch them up. It makes them want to break them. Makes them want to prove that they're the ones in control.

Bad men desire women like the one in the white bikini. It does something to their brain that tells them they have to have what she's offering. In their minds, it's not only attention those women seek, and even if it is, they're going to get that attention in whatever way the devious man decides. A beautiful woman brings a lot of money on the black market.

The woman in the white bikini that Nash can't seem to pull his eyes from heightens that instinct for me as well, but for some reason, the blonde in the modest bathing suit somehow does the same thing, but on a different level.

Almost anyone here can have the brunette.

The blonde? She's a challenge. It would take work to get that woman alone.

I can picture myself trying to break her, trying to make her scream, and that's dangerous. I've done well tamping down those urges over the last couple of years.

Looking at a woman that way puts me on the same level as the guys I kill while working. The guys that take liberties with a woman's body before they sell a woman into sexual slavery.

I never wanted to be that man, although every man walking the earth

has the potential to abuse, to hurt, to rape.

I know for a fact I'm capable of it, and any man that denies he is, is a liar. Any woman who would argue it for the men in their lives just doesn't know how the right situation has the ability to make anyone do things they never imagined.

The sight of her digging her toes into the sand—even in a bathing suit that doesn't reveal any cleavage, one that covers her entire ass on a beach full of half-naked women—makes me curious.

And curiosity is danger.

But I also know myself.

I know that if I don't get closer, if I don't learn more about her, I'm going to be obsessed with the idea of her. I can't allow anybody to have that sort of real estate in my head.

It leaves me distracted.

It leaves me open to making mistakes.

I hate making mistakes.

I pride myself on being able to work and accomplish the goals that I set out, on not looking back and wondering what I could've done differently.

When Nash's eyes dart in my direction, I refocus on the waves rolling against the shore, praying he didn't notice that I was watching her.

The last thing I need is for either of these guys to give me shit after Hollis gave Nash a hard time for paying attention to the woman in the white bikini.

Despite not looking at her directly, I still track her in my peripheral vision.

She's alone. She's not here with a group of friends. She's not smiling and bouncing around or even trying to get involved in the volleyball game that the girl in the white bikini is recruiting for.

"I'm about over this bullshit," Hollis says as he pushes himself up from the beach chair. I glanced down at his foot. Sand is spilling from the end of his cast as he raises his foot and tries to shake it free.

He's never going to get the sand out of his cast, and it's going to be a constant irritation for the next several weeks that it's still on his foot. This makes me smile, and I know it makes me an asshole. But they've both annoyed me today, and a little discomfort on his part is just the level of retribution I need to make it worth it.

"Leaving, man?" Nash asks.

"Yeah," Hollis responds. "I've got better shit to do than sit here and get sunburned on the damn beach."

I give him a half-assed wave as he turns to leave, praying that Nash will find something else to do so I can put my focus back where it seems to want to go.

The girl walks further down the beach, and there's no way for me to continue watching her without making it obvious, so I try to give up on the idea of her.

I feel Nash's eyes on the side of my face, and reluctantly, I give him the attention that he's seeking because God knows how he'd respond if I ignore him.

"What?" I ask when he just grins at me.

He angles his head in the direction of the girl in the white bikini, and without looking in that direction, I sense her walking toward us.

His grin is wide as if he's won some sort of prize as she closes the distance with a volleyball in her hand. The man really seems like he's won some competition, and I know the next time he sees Hollis, he's going to give him shit for even mentioning that he couldn't score this girl. The man has to know that he hasn't scored her yet.

"Hey there, sweetheart," Nash says, his fake country accent out in full force.

The girl walks up, bouncing on her feet, tits jiggling for the world to see.

"Do you want to play some volleyball?" She holds the ball out as if both of us are too stupid to know what she's referring to.

Nash doesn't respond immediately. He simply gives her a wicked smile, a knowing smile, an invitation that lets her know he'd rather she got down on her knees right now than play in the sand.

It's a smile that I'm certain with her more-than-likely extensive experience she's very capable of understanding.

"I won't go easy on you," Nash says. "I'm a very competitive man."

A glint fills her eyes, as if he's telling her that he will fight any man on this beach just to spend more time with her.

"You're not the only one who's told me that today," she counters.

Nash stands from his beach chair, holding his hand out for the ball when she readily offers it to him.

He tosses it back and forth from one hand to the other as his eyes skate down her body.

"Don't say I didn't warn you." He steps up closer to her. "No complaining if you don't like how this turns out."

I hear the threat in his words. The man isn't talking about the damn game they'll play for a while as a pretense of the night he has planned for the two of them.

She giggles, a grating noise that I'm sure works on many men.

Nash doesn't even look over his shoulder as he walks away to join the group of people that she's gathered for the game.

With his attention averted, I'm now able to look around for the woman in the one-piece bathing suit, but I don't see her anywhere.

It's better for all involved, I think as I stand as well.

I walk away from the beach because I feel like I've done my due diligence today. I've acted normal long enough.

Nash won't care that I'm gone. The only thing that man cares about is where he's going to spend his night, and more than likely from the level of

attention he's got from the woman in the white bathing suit, it's going to end up exactly as he had planned.

I swing by the surf shop before heading to my SUV in the attached parking lot.

It's hot. I'm sweating. I'm fucking thirsty.

I never should have come today, but at least it kills a couple of hours before I go back to the house alone.

I don't believe in fate. I don't believe in coincidences.

Most all situations that seem like déjà vu are created.

They're generated by the people who are hoping to get the outcome that they're seeking. That's always been my mindset. Someone is always controlling the narrative.

I give a passing glance to the two guys standing outside of the surf shop.

They aren't traffickers. They aren't the type of men that are here looking for trouble.

Despite the heat, they're both dressed in dark suits, completely out of place for a Texas beach.

They're private security detail for someone they're tasked at protecting, and it becomes blatantly obvious exactly who they're here for.

When I see her again, she's now wrapped in a coverup from her elbows all the way down to her knees, standing in front of the drink cooler, trying to make a selection as if it's a big decision.

I don't know who she is. I don't know if she's important. I don't know if she's a B-list celebrity or if she's just some rich man's daughter. Hell, she could be some rich man's wife for all I know.

"Having a hard time deciding?" I ask as I step up beside her.

She doesn't even look my way, but I do notice the small, weak, *fake* smile on her lips. It seems rote, as if it's a habit, as if she has to smile when approached in public or there will be consequences.

I reach past her, pulling open the cooler door to grab a water, but I don't step out of her way.

I don't give her the common courtesy of distance as I turn around to face her.

A lot of men would probably chat or flirt as they hope for a first date, but at the end of the day, they're just taking steps to get lucky, to get laid, to not have to spend the night alone.

I've already established that I'm not a normal man.

She steps back when I step closer to her, her eyes raking down my chest as she assesses me, and I grin as she takes her time.

I know what she sees—blue eyes, blond hair, tan skin. Her eyes don't linger on my eight-pack abs, nor on those muscles on the side leading down into my swimsuit that most women get lost in.

She doesn't care.

I don't know if this woman sees hot guys all the time.

But she seems indifferent.

And when her nose scrunches up, as if she smells something foul, as if she can't believe that someone like me would approach someone like her, it rankles. It annoys me.

It makes my mind go to places that my mind never should go.

"Excuse me," she says, an air of aloofness in her tone

She steps to the side, pulls open the cooler door, and reaches in for a diet soda.

The woman doesn't spare me a second glance as she turns and heads to the cashier at the front of the store.

It took her seconds to assess me, to find me lacking, and to decide that I wasn't even worth a polite conversation.

I'm not Nash.

I'm not Hollis.

My ego isn't hurt or bruised by her dismissive attitude.

I'm annoyed.

I should focus that annoyance on where it belongs, and that would be on myself at thinking that I could just smile at this woman. I should be irritated at myself at assuming that she would be just like any other girl that I would encounter on the beach, but no, I need to blame her.

I need to direct that anger and irritation somewhere.

It doesn't belong pointed at me because I don't make mistakes anymore.

Annoyed, I shove the bottle of water back into the cooler and leave the store.

I'm seething inside, irritated to the extreme.

Thinking I'm done with this situation and knowing that I need to just go home and find something else to do, I can't help but linger outside of the store at a distance as not to alert the bodyguards and wait for her.

I watch.

I'm good at watching. I'm good at waiting. I'm good at reading a situation and knowing exactly how I need to respond very quickly.

This woman has caught my attention, and things are not going to end well for her.

Chapter 2

Raya

"I hope that attitude of yours changes before the event tonight."

I glance at my mother's reflection behind me as I face the mirror.

"Sorry," I apologize. "Too much sun today on the beach."

"I told you it was a bad idea before we allowed you to go," my mother says.

Allowed.

It's not just a turn of phrase. I literally had to have permission to spend an hour on the beach today. I wasn't even alone. The two guys hired to protect me against known and unknown threats are never far away. I've gotten used to them by now, but it's still annoying that I can't even be trusted to visit a beach without supervision.

My life isn't my own.

Every interaction, every second of every day, is orchestrated, scheduled for them. I should be used to it by now, but I'm not. I don't know if I ever will be. I can smile and play nice and tell people what they want to hear.

I can behave like a Southern lady is supposed to. I have been trained to do just that.

You see, my father is a Texas senator, and in less than six months, according to nationwide polls, he will be the president of the United States.

He will be the most powerful man in the world.

I'm not on this earth because two loving parents wanted a piece of each of them in one person.

They haven't said as much, but I'm smart enough to read the context clues. I know that my mother's pregnancy just happened to coincide with a time in my father's political career when there was chatter, whispers, and news stories that he was cold and indifferent. That he didn't care about the

people that he promised to serve.

Having a baby fixed that. Having a baby turned him into a family man. Having a baby made him more relatable to the constituents in the state. They no longer saw him as a man with no roots. They no longer saw him as a man with nothing to fight for other than power and fame.

I haven't been abused. I haven't been mistreated.

But I also haven't had loving, doting parents, either.

I've been told *you need to smile more* so many times I lost track of how often by the time I was five years old.

"The public is always watching," my mother would warn. "Make sure you have that pretty smile on your face at all times. Be polite. Be nice."

Be accessible without being attainable. That's what they expect from me.

Everything I've done, every concession that has been made, has been for them. I was homeschooled, so I wouldn't be stuck to a strict regimented schedule that public or even private education required.

My college degree in political science was obtained strictly online, other than a handful of times I was required to be on campus, and even those were scheduled according to my father's plans, not the school's.

It gave me the ability to be available to travel with my father and mother for various political requirements for his career.

I knew at an early age not to hope for a life of my own. I knew that a degree in political science wouldn't go any further despite most political science majors going to law school after they graduated with their undergraduate degree.

I'm expected to go to college, but I'm not expected to be a smart woman.

I'm expected to marry well, and that, of course, will just be another staged event for my father's political career.

I'm supposed to date but not fall in love. I'm meant to marry a man of my parents' choosing, in a world of growth and opportunity for others.

Long ago, I stopped voicing my opinions.

I stopped asking for things that I needed or wanted.

It always fell on deaf ears. It was never good for my father or it was never the right time for his career for any of those things.

I date, or should I say, I'm seen dating, because I'm supposed to, because I'm told to.

Because it would be weird for a twenty-two-year-old woman not to be seen out in public with a man.

That would make people talk. That would draw focus away from my father's political career, and heaven forbid other people live their own lives.

I have no doubt that's how I managed to get one hell of a crush on a professor despite only having met him once in person.

That wasn't sanctioned either.

I'm not gonna say I haven't gone through a rebellious stage. My freshman year in college was the wildest I've ever been.

If you can even call sneaking out a few times to meet the professor who returned the feelings that I felt. That situation had the potential to turn into a scandal, but my parents caught on very quickly. The man was paid off and instructed never to contact me again, and he hasn't.

It wasn't the first time I've realized that my father had power over every single second, every single situation in my life, but it was the time it cut the deepest.

Finding out that someone you cared deeply for was only in it for the thrills of sleeping with a student has the power to affect a girl. It has the power to demoralize her.

I guess most would dig their feet in. They'd fight for change, to insist on being able to make their own decisions.

They'd ask for more, but I'm not allowed. My father would have a coronary if I voiced a different opinion than the one he gave to me.

I shake my head at my reflection. I'm just in one of my moods.

Another thing my mother never falters at pointing out. I guess I should just be glad that she hasn't traveled down that path of complaints yet today.

It's not all bad. I have the material things that I want. I have some acquaintances that I don't just completely despise. There are people in my life I don't mind spending time with.

It doesn't negate the fact that every decision I make has to be carefully analyzed.

I've gotten very good at assessing a situation. I'm quick to determine whether it would be something that my parents approved of, or something that could be construed in a poor way by any news outlet.

"This is why I didn't want you to go," my mother says, pointing out the redness on my shoulders. "You know how that's gonna look in pictures, and tonight is a big deal for your father. Tonight is very important."

I meet her eyes in the mirror. "I understand, Mother."

She nods, knowing that I'm trained well enough not to argue or fight back. I know not to give an opinion.

I'm like a puppet, and she and my father control the strings. She's so sure of my behavior, so sure of my responses, that she doesn't even notice the sarcastic way I've been calling her mother instead of mom for the last couple of years.

Raya isn't allowed an opinion.

Raya is a good girl.

Raya does what she's told.

Raya thinks of her family above all others.

And I do.

I think that I would be the same even if this wasn't the life that I've been told I'm going to lead.

I'm a nice person.

I'm a kind person.

I do care about the welfare of others.

The unfortunate thing about all of this is that it doesn't seem like there's anyone out there who cares about me, other than how I can help, how I can benefit someone else's career.

It's not only love that keeps me obeying. It's the hope that after my father makes it into the White House, he'll have what he wants.

I have no ideas of grandeur.

I know that he's going to make a run for reelection four years later, but I also know that most all presidents are hardly ever in the news after they leave office.

I can give it eight more years. I've given it twenty-two already.

Women these days aren't getting married or having children or serious relationships until their thirties. I can be just like one of them. I still have time to have a life after my father's political career comes to an end.

I refuse to think of some of his plans I overheard—how my husband will be selected for their own political trajectory. He envisions my husband also becoming president, and if he chooses right, he'll have even more time in the White House.

Mother walks across the room, her fingers skating over the row of clothes brought in for tonight's event.

"I was thinking about the black one," I tell her, trying to shift her attention away from the mistake she feels I made by spending a little time with my toes in the sand earlier today.

"The venue is open air to the beach. I'll wear that cute, lacy, black shawl on my shoulders and no one will be the wiser."

Mother nods in acceptance.

"And by the time we're in Houston on Tuesday, the redness will be gone."

"Don't forget," she says as she crosses the room to the door that joins mine and my parents' suite. "Jackson Smith will be there tonight to meet you." I drop my eyes to my feet, not wanting her to read the irritation in my eyes. It would only end with her complaining about my attitude once again.

"I look forward to meeting him," I tell her, lifting my head and giving her the same practiced smile I give everyone.

She's either tired or a little off her game tonight because normally, she would never miss an opportunity to chastise me for something else before walking away. It doesn't mean she won't, eventually. It just means I'll get twice as much of a lecture at another time.

"I've already taken up too much of your time," I say with a gentle smile as I touch Emily's arm. "I'll let you get to the rest of the party."

I don't give her a chance to make an excuse. I don't give her the opportunity to tell me that it's fine that she'd like to continue talking to me. I don't have time.

I saw the look in my father's eyes and knew exactly what it meant.

Jackson Smith is my focus tonight. Jackson Smith's parents are rich, so wealthy, it's beyond comprehension of many people.

His family is a prime donor for my father's political campaign, and despite having millions of dollars in donations already, there's no such thing as too much money.

I cross the room, full glass of champagne in hand, smiling and nodding as I pass others in attendance. I get stopped several times before I can close the distance between myself and my parents.

Jackson, whom I recognize from pictures online, smiles as I approach, but I won't make the same mistake I've made in the past of thinking that he's a kindred spirit. His smile is just as fake as the one I give him, just as fake as the one I've given to every person here tonight.

He may not want to be here.

He may not want to meet me.

He may be in the same situation with his parents that I'm in with my own parents, but that doesn't make him my friend.

It doesn't make him an ally in life.

Jackson's a man, one I know for a fact who has political aspirations of his own from online research.

I've learned through experience that men in the political world will step on anyone to see their goals realized.

As much as my father is using him and his family's money for political gain, this connection is a benefit to Jackson as well.

Jackson will use the connection with my father and his campaign to advance his own career. I have no doubt about that.

"Jackson," my father says, angling a hand in my direction as I approach. "Have you met my beautiful daughter, Raya?"

Jackson reaches for my free hand, and as I've been trained, I hold it out for him in greeting.

The kiss he presses on the back of my hand should make me cringe. It should make me pull away from him. It should make me want to slap him in the face.

But it's customary. It's habit. It's expected.

I won't start a long tirade about how disgusting I find it, that upon meeting someone for the first time, it's okay for them to press their lips to a woman's skin.

"The pleasure is all mine," Jackson says as he pulls his head up to look at me, his fingers still clasped in mine. "I'm honestly surprised this is the first time we've met."

"Is that right?" I ask, playing coy as my father expects.

"It's my understanding that we run in the same circles."

I don't have a circle. The people I associate with are usually at parties like the one I'm attending tonight. I don't have girlfriends that I call when I have good news. I don't have close relatives with shoulders to cry on when I'm upset.

I have events.

I have my schedule.

I have my expectations, and that's it.

"Jackson just got back from an overseas trip," my mother interjects. "He probably has jet lag because he just flew in tonight."

"Just in time to meet you," Jackson says, his eyes glimmering under the chandeliers in the room.

Laying it on there a little thick, buddy.

"We'll let you guys get to know each other better," Mother says as she pats our joined hands.

It's a sign of approval, and I have no doubt that it garnered the attention of others in the room. Everything is strategic, and tonight is no exception.

Within seconds, my parents disappear, walking a few feet away to greet another couple.

Jackson doesn't release my hand. Rather than sighing and leaning in conspiratorially to voice his opinion about these types of events, he looks down at me with the same fake-ass smile in place.

"How about we go somewhere a little more private so we can get to know each other better?"

Knowing I'm safe, knowing I don't have to worry about his intentions because of who his parents are, I allow him to escort me out of the room.

A real smile takes over my face when I realize his intentions. I love the beach. I'm excited every time the campaign brings me within even thirty minutes of the water. But the salty air wrapping itself around my skin doesn't hold the same appeal as it did earlier today.

Right now, the scent of salt is masked in the air by the putrid smells of sea life left behind after high tide.

It's not unusual for me to walk someplace in private with a guy. I'm not wearing a chastity belt or anything, so I don't feel like I'm doing anything wrong, but it doesn't keep my stomach from turning. I don't want to be here with him. I don't want him to somehow manage to ruin the joy I feel while at

the ocean.

Some level of privacy, or at least the false sense of it, is expected by my parents.

Unreal bonds with people are very difficult to maintain for long periods of time. The charade of acting like you know someone when you really don't is always questioned in the media. So it's not unusual for Jackson to be leading me out closer to the water.

The sound of the party floats on the breeze, fading to nothing the further we walk. Jackson still hasn't released my hand, but I also don't want to be seen as a shrew.

I don't pull my fingers from his grasp. I can do what's expected because I know what's coming.

Jackson and I will share a polite conversation. He'll probably ask me out on a date, something official of course, something that can be tracked by those people that are always keeping an eye on my father.

"It's a nice night," Jackson says as he pauses his long stride to give me time to pull off my high heels. "Do you get to the beach often?"

I want to scoff. I want to look at him and say really? Do you come here often? Is that a line that actually works with other women?

But I don't.

I can't. My breeding and my training assure that I won't.

"Not as often as I'd like," I respond, instead of saying what I really want to say. "I love the beach. I'd like nothing more than to live full time here."

He hums as if in deep thought, as if he's considering that same type of future for himself.

"Senator Reed told me you majored in poli sci. Any aspirations of going to law school?"

There's a question behind his question. One, that his own breeding and training doesn't allow him to ask but his anticipation of my answer is still the same.

"No plans for law school," I tell him. My answer is truthful. I'm not lying.

What I don't say is that I never even wanted to major in poli sci, and had I been given the freedom to choose on my own, I would have gone to school for veterinary science or social work. Both of those degrees require longer than the requisite four years that are required to be considered "educated."

"You're happy with just a four-year degree?" he asks.

"Of course," I tell him. "My energy is best spent helping my dad. It's important that I'm on the road with him."

I look up at him.

The man is classically handsome, and I can see the appeal. If this ends up in a situation that's a relationship sanctioned by my father, I guess it wouldn't be so bad to spend the rest of my life with a guy like him.

I can only hope that he's a decent enough human being.

I can hope that there may be a chance at love in all of this.

But if not, I just have to accept that too.

It's not like I grew up watching a loving relationship. My parents' marriage was also arranged. I know mine will be as well. I've always known it.

"So, you're happy?"

I want to answer him honestly.

I want to tell him that there isn't really a time in my life that I could recall being genuinely happy despite all the smiles, despite the laughter, despite the laugh lines at the corners of my eyes and near my mouth that tell other people that I'm a happy person. But I can't tell this man the truth.

I can't open myself up for a situation where it gets back to my mother.

I can't be seen as an angry, upset, bitter woman.

Those women aren't marriage material.

Those women end up losing their minds.

They're the ones that make the headline news after spending decades at the beck and call of someone else, only for their final straw to come, in line at the coffee shop. When the last straw breaks, they end up on the evening news, ranting and raving about everything that's wrong in the world.

I don't want to be that person. I don't want to end up as that person.

"Yes," I lie. "I'm very happy."

His phone rings in his pocket, and rather than ignoring it or pulling it free and silencing it, he answers it, giving the person on the other end of the line a quick greeting before holding it to his chest.

"I've been waiting for this call for three days," he says, giving me a small smile. "Give me just a minute?"

I nod as an answer to his question but it's not really a question, is it? It's not like he would hang up if I told him that I wasn't comfortable with him getting a phone call right now. The man wouldn't care if I voiced my opinion about how rude it is.

I don't care that the man gets a phone call.

I don't care who's on the other end of the line.

I feel a sense of relief wash over me when he steps away.

Silence isn't something that I'm awarded very often.

I see this as an opportunity.

As Jackson walks in one direction, I turn around and walk in the other.

I don't consider this rebellious.

I'm doing what my father told me to do. I'm out here having a polite conversation with this man. It's not my fault that that conversation isn't important enough to Jackson.

These are the arguments I have in my own head.

These are the conversations I plan for.

It's always in defense of myself.

It's always I did this because of this. I did this because of someone else. It's never because I wanted to. Because *I wanted to* is not enough of a good reason for my father.

I wanted to give him privacy is what I would tell my mother if she asked me why we were walking in opposite directions of each other. He said it was important. I didn't want to make him think I'm a nosy woman. Nosy women don't make good wives.

All these thoughts run through my head as darkness shrouds me.

I don't know if I would be a perfect wife. I don't even know if I want to get married. Honestly, what I do know is that I have to be perceived as the perfect wife, as a woman willing to sacrifice everything for her husband, as a woman who is expected to turn a blind eye to the extramarital affairs, as a woman who supports her husband without blinking. That's what I'm expected to be.

Just thinking of the what-ifs, just considering how my life is going to end up, makes me want to run right into the ocean.

It makes me wish a wave would carry me to a deserted island where I could live in peace.

I want to convince myself that things will be better, that things will calm down once the presidential race is over, but I have too much experience with the day-to-day life of politicians to fully convince myself of that.

There's always another campaign. There's always another election. There's always another donor to meet with. There's always another person to smile at, always another person to convince to align with my father's political ideals.

I hate it.

I'd never say that out loud, and it took me a very long time to admit that even in my own head, but some days I wish I was never born.

My toes dig into the sand, much like it did earlier today, but it's been hours since the sun went down, and the earth is no longer warm under my feet.

Just being here, just walking along with the sound of waves lapping at

the shore, makes me think back to earlier.

It makes me want to be one of those other women that I saw.

Not specifically the women with their husbands or the women with their families, but the women who could laugh and flirt. The women who get to make their own decisions. The women who don't have to worry about what the next person is saying about them.

Just for a day.

Just for a day I'd like to be one of those women. I'd like to see what it's like to not have to care about anything but having a good time.

The sad truth of my reality is that I will never be one of those women, and even thinking about it is a waste of time.

Chapter 3

Liam

I nod at the waiter in thanks as I pull a glass of champagne from the tray he's carrying.

He doesn't notice.

He doesn't care.

He's here to do a job, get paid, and go home.

I understand the concept. I know what it's like to do that very same thing day in and day out. I have no idea why I'm here. I don't belong, but the people surrounding me don't know that. My tux is just as designer as the next. My smile is just as bright as I greet people and nod at them.

This is some sort of political event and considering it is, it honestly surprises me on how easy it was to just walk up off the beach and come inside.

It took me less than a minute to track her, and half that time to sweep my eyes over her. The hemline of her dress flirts with the bottom of her knees which seems on par with her age, but the shawl wrap ages her quite a lot. If I had a grandmother, I'd expect her to wear something like that. There's a distinct difference in the young women here than I saw earlier at the beach. The room is full of understated elegance. It feels dry and stuffy, boring even.

She's here giving everyone she meets that same fucking frustrating smile she gave to me earlier at the surf shop. It doesn't take me long to realize that it's instinct. The fake smile is what is expected.

She's different than I assumed from the first time I looked at her walking along the beach.

She isn't demure.

She's beaten down. She's fake.

It's the eyes that tell me the truth. It's the way they look soulless even as she smiles. It's reminiscent of the smile of the man that walked away with the tray of champagne.

She doesn't want to be here anymore than he does.

She's not having a good time.

The only thing that woman is looking forward to is getting away, going to bed, and going to sleep, only to have to get up and do it all over again tomorrow.

She laughs like she wants to be here.

She smiles like she's enjoying her time, but she's not.

I don't feel at all hypocritical for making these judgments about her.

She did it to me first with the assumption that I wasn't worth a second of her time earlier today.

I would have left it alone.

I would have left *her* alone, but she wasn't interested in civility. She was quick to turn her nose up and walk away.

She'll learn after tonight.

She'll realize the mistakes she made and hopefully after tonight, she'll learn to never make the same mistake again.

I'm normally the type of man that considers himself live and let live.

I don't get involved in other people's lives.

I don't stick my nose where it doesn't belong.

I don't cause unnecessary problems.

I'm easygoing.

Earlier today just hit me the wrong way.

I won't be able to settle, to calm myself, to sleep, until I do something about it.

She seems like the type of girl that needs her life shaken up a little bit, and, lucky for her, I'm just the man for the job.

I take a sip of my champagne as I walk past a woman who opens her mouth to greet me. I don't want to be noticed. I don't want to be remembered.

I know coming here is a stupid idea. I know nothing good will come out of tonight, but I also know myself enough to know, I can't just walk away.

It'll eat at me.

It will fester.

It will cause problems in my daily routine, and that's what pisses me off.

It pisses me off that she has the ability to affect me in any type of way, and I hate that about myself.

I hate that she has the ability to get under my skin.

I hate that I'm in a tuxedo, in a stuffy ass room, despite the front wall being open to the beach.

I'm not exactly a bad guy.

Well, that's not true. I'm not a good guy, but for the last several months, I've been saving people... for a price, of course.

Then again, I will also kill someone for a price.

Killing for a price was the old game. I've changed tactics, and it's not really because of morals.

I've discovered that people pay more for someone they love. People pay a higher price for a rescue than they're willing to pay for revenge against someone who wronged them.

Maybe I'm a piece of shit for switching from assassin to rescuer, but I'm still able to get blood on my hands either way, so I consider it a win-win situation.

I continue to watch her, wondering what she's going to do next, when she smiles and speaks to the woman she's been standing near for the last couple of minutes before walking away.

She's the star of the party, although I have no illusions that this event is for her specifically. It seems like everybody wants a piece of her time.

Are they chipping away at her? Are they taking tiny bits and pieces

that will eventually leave her with nothing? You can't tell it by looking at her. Each fake smile is just as vibrant as the next one she gives, even after being stopped five times on her way across the room.

She walks up to a man that looks familiar to me, but I can't place him, and that annoys me as well.

I'm usually really good about knowing where people are from, about knowing who they are, what kind of danger they pose to me or if they're even a threat at all. This man is throwing up a flag, but I just can't pull his information up.

I once again blame her for having me so distracted.

There's a younger guy there, and I watch frozen in place across the room as he lifts her hand to his mouth and presses his lips there. It shouldn't annoy me. I've seen several men press their lips to her skin, and it didn't cause such a visceral reaction as this last one does.

Is he the type of man she wants—a stuffy asshole in a tuxedo with an over-bleached smile?

I can guess he's a politician, but if we weren't in a classy hotel with red, white, and blue decorations everywhere, I could also easily assume he's a car salesman or an insurance salesman and be just as right as guessing that he's a political candidate.

It doesn't take long for the older couple that initially greeted her to walk away to talk to others.

And it takes even less time for him to escort her out of the room.

This just won't do.

My anger starts to simmer below the surface.

I got nothing from her at the store earlier today other than a slap to the face by her ignoring me, and this man gets to guide her outside into darkness? This man is worthy of a conversation and a slow walk on the beach?

Inside, a sinister chuckle fills my head.

She may be smiling now.

She may be carrying on polite conversation with this man.

But it's my goal, by the end of the night, to have her screaming, crying, and begging for help.

I won't help her. I'm not the savior in this story.

In this story, I'm the monster and I'm going to enjoy every single second of it.

By the time I'm done with her, she'll realize that a little courtesy goes a very long way.

As I keep to the shadows, a very difficult task due to the twinkling fucking lights everywhere, I keep an eye on both of them.

I'm not close enough to understand what they're saying.

I can't even get a good read on them. I have no idea if this is her boyfriend, or if they just met tonight.

She doesn't seem alarmed at being alone with him, and for some reason that annoys the shit out of me too.

I'm running scenarios of how to handle this and what I should do with him when they pause at the edge of the sand long enough for her to pull her heels from her feet.

He never lets go of her hand despite it looking difficult for her to work the buckle on her shoe with only one.

I could kill him. It would be easy enough to slit his throat, but I don't know if she would gasp in surprise or scream the fucking stars out of the night sky.

Getting caught is never part of the plan, but I'm also not really the type to just kill someone who doesn't pose a threat to me.

I'm thinking I may have to follow her home, but luck is on my side tonight when his phone rings.

He answers and speaks briefly to her before walking away. She doesn't stay in the spot he leaves her. Instead, she turns and starts walking in the opposite way he does.

It seems like fate, although I don't believe in that shit. I'll just consider it an ounce of luck as I keep hidden in the dunes as she walks. The further she gets from her male companion and the ritzy hotel, the less chance of getting caught.

Insidious thoughts fill my head as I continue to watch her.

This wasn't the plan.

The plan was simple.

I was going to snatch her up, drive her far away, and drop her off a hundred miles from where I grabbed her.

Of course I'd leave a note—something along the lines of *you didn't* notice me, but I noticed every move you made.

I want to scare her.

I want her to take pause the next time she's out alone.

I want her to stop and realize that everyone else in the world shouldn't be looked over.

We matter just as much as she believes she matters.

But as I watch her, as I see the ocean in the backdrop, I want more.

I want more of her than just being scared for a couple of hours.

It's a dangerous change of plans. It increases the likelihood of getting caught, but I just can't let the idea go.

I don't want to keep her forever. That would be ridiculous.

But maybe a couple of days or a couple of hours.

Just long enough to torture her, to torment her mind to make sure that, as easily as I was forgettable in the surf shop, she won't go another day of her life without remembering me.

The beach is quiet with only the sound of the waves brushing the shore, but I know better than to get complacent.

There's always someone around. There's always a chance that there's a witness lurking in the shadows, but what I've also learned in my line of work

is that people are selfish. They're usually only paying attention to themselves.

She doesn't look concerned. I can tell she doesn't feel unsafe. She isn't looking over her shoulder or pausing to listen to noises made in the distance.

Her ego won't allow it. It's obvious she's been sheltered. She believes in the protection of her two bodyguards, but they are nowhere to be seen now.

Her mistake is stupid, really, this false sense of security. She has the idea that no harm can come her way because there are dozens of people a quarter of a mile down the beach, inside the hotel, but I've seen it happen.

I've seen people disappear right out of thin air with witnesses standing nearby, minding their own business, trapped in their own thoughts. I've seen people watch a full kidnapping unfold and they just stand there blinking as if they can't wrap their head around the idea of what they had just seen, and then they go on about their lives. They don't report it. They don't call the police.

There's a chance of that happening tonight, that someone will be brave enough to say something. I don't want to risk it.

My eyes drift from her to the different shadows on the beach and sand dunes, and although she's not paying attention to the sounds around her, my ears home in as I assess the situation before taking that final step.

This is it, I realize, the single moment in time where I have to decide do or don't, but I already know the answer.

I know that I'm not leaving this beach tonight alone.

What I'm not certain of is what happens after.

I creep along the sand slowly, making my way toward her.

Almost everyone has a sixth sense. They get this feeling in their stomach when they're being watched. Normally, it sets a person on high alert, but when that washes over her and she turns around, facing me for the first time since we were in the surf shop together, she's got that fake smile on her face for a flash of a second.

She thinks that I'm him, the man who left her unprotected on the beach.

I feel a rush of pride when that smile fades, and it thrills me.

Before she can open her mouth to scream, I'm on her, one arm wrapped around low on her back, the other pressing the needle into her neck.

She better pray I don't plan on keeping her for long.

Chapter 4

Raya

Waking up feeling weighed down isn't new for me.

Usually when this happens, I blame the pace of the day before.

I blame the tasks I had to accomplish in a short amount of time.

I blame being tired.

I blame being unhappy.

Today is no different, only it takes longer for clarity to come back to me.

I never get enough rest, but right now is worse than I've ever felt. My throat is dry and scratchy as if I spent hours breathing with my mouth hanging open, but I can quickly tell it isn't an allergy or sinus issue.

I groan, my head throbbing as I roll it on the pillow.

Is this a hangover? If it is, why would anyone ever drink a second time?

I have enough misery in my life. I would never welcome feeling this way.

I feel just off, like I'm not myself today.

But it can't be a hangover. Although I've never had one, I hardly drank last night.

I'm only allowed one glass of champagne at any particular event, and I didn't even drink the one I had in my hand last night. Jackson took it from me and set it aside on the table on our way up to the beach.

I squeeze my eyes tighter, trying to recall what could have happened to leave me waking up feeling so terrible.

I don't remember anything past the phone call Jackson took before walking away.

I try a full body assessment, starting at my feet. I can still feel sand

between my toes, but that doesn't make sense.

I wouldn't have gone to bed dirty, covered in the beach. Mornings on the campaign trail are always hectic. We always have breakfast planned, and last night was no different. The Smiths were on the schedule this morning. Meeting with potential donors the morning after makes them feel important, and it also gives my parents the opportunity to either get a donation they were unable to secure the night before or attempt to increase the donation made.

Flexing my calf muscles, I test them for soreness.

When I sense someone else in the room, I open my eyes to complete darkness.

Nothing makes sense right now. There's no light filtering in from outside which is strange. It's nearly impossible for a hotel to keep all the lights out, especially lights in the city, and there are plenty of lights in South Padre. Even in my room facing the beach there were lights our first night here.

"Hello," I say into the darkness. "What's happening?"

Maybe a storm knocked out the power.

Maybe that's the reason why it's so dark.

I can't see city lights because there are no city lights.

I try to brush my hair off my face. My heart races, a pounding beat inside of my chest when I realize my hands are tied down.

This is a dream.

It has to be a dream, right?

People don't wake up feeling hungover, tied to a bed, but as I blink into the darkness, the reality doesn't change.

I don't wake up.

This is reality.

Not a nightmare.

"Wh-What's going on?" I stammer, my throat scratchy and raw, as if

I've spent hours screaming or crying.

A bedside table lamp turns on and futilely I try to escape, but my restraints won't allow it.

A man stands beside the bed in an unfamiliar room, and all I can manage in this moment is blinking up at him.

It's a nice room. The king-sized bed isn't overpowering because of the spacious interior.

I have no idea why my brain wants to focus on such trivial things when it's clear that I'm in danger.

I don't know what to do. I don't know how to react or respond in a way that will make this a positive outcome for me.

I've never read a news story where someone was taken and the abductor later on was just like *ha ha*, *I'm kidding*, before letting the person go.

My chin trembles as I try not to think about the possibilities of the things that this man could do to me.

I don't want to consider if death would be better than the other things I could suffer at his hands.

As a woman, I know there's a litany of things that he could do to me, to my mind, to my body, that would make me wish I were dead.

I struggle for calmness, all the while trying to assess the situation and determine how he needs me to react for this to have the best outcome.

It doesn't stop me from flinching when he sits beside me on the bed, the mattress dipping under the weight of him.

There's no way I can hide the fact that I'm terrified, but as I watch his face, he doesn't seem to be thrilled at my fear. He doesn't seem... anything.

His face is calm, but I still cringe, terrified even more when he lifts his hand and brushes my hair off my face.

He doesn't smile.

He doesn't placate me with soft words.

He doesn't threaten me nor ask anything of me.

I don't know what any of this means. I wasn't trained for situations like this. My parents never let me out of their sight, or the sight of my bodyguards, long enough for something like this to happen.

Maybe he's an obsessed fan of my father. That's what I have to think right now because the alternative would be catastrophic. If this man took me to hurt my father, things are not going to end well for me.

"Hi," I whisper to him, my voice trembling.

He doesn't say anything, and that scares me more than if he were yelling in my face.

He seems familiar, but I'm unable to place him. I see so many people. I meet so many people. Every day there's a new face in my life. Years ago, I had the ability to remember everyone I crossed paths with, but as time went on, those numbers grew exponentially. My brain just couldn't handle storing all that information any longer.

"Do I know you?" I whisper, but he doesn't answer.

He just stares down at me like I'm a science experiment or a bug. It's as if he's curious about my existence.

"Have we met?"

His lips form a flat line, the first sign of any emotion from him as he continues to stare at me. At first I think he doesn't like the questions, and then it hits me.

He doesn't like the fact that I don't know who he is.

I'm good at assessing people, and it's clear that this man is irritated.

He fully expects me to be able to place him, and I try. I dig deep. I run through the many faces I see on a daily basis, and I have to swallow to prevent a gasp from escaping my lips.

The surf shop. This is the man that tried to engage me in conversation while I was at the beach earlier.

The interaction lasted less than thirty seconds, and yet somehow, he

thinks that gives him a right to take me, to have me.

I dig a little deeper into my memory, thinking back further, considering that maybe that was the first time I saw him but not the first time he saw me.

I can't recall a single other moment in time where I would have seen him.

He looks different now.

He's not some bro jock in swim trunks without a shirt on, thinking he's going to score some girl.

The golden skin of his throat peeks out of the dress shirt he has unbuttoned at the collar.

His hair is no longer windswept like it was at the surf shop.

He looks respectable.

He doesn't look like a beach bum.

He's even more handsome now than he was the first time I saw him.

I would have engaged this man in conversation if I weren't who I was, if I were allowed to date freely, if my entire life wasn't under a microscope.

I would have chatted back with him at the surf shop if every interaction I've ever had didn't affect my father and his political career.

I would have given this guy the time of day.

But as I watch him, I realize none of that matters now.

Any explanation I could come up with won't work on this man.

He has a plan, a goal, and I don't know that there's anything I can do to knock that off course.

I have to do something.

I can't just lie here tied to a bed and allow myself to be victimized further by him.

So I do the only thing I can, I smile.

Kill them with kindness.

Isn't that the saying?

Isn't that what you do when someone is mistreating you? Isn't it supposed to make them reconsider the pain they're causing?

My smile doesn't garner the same reaction it normally does.

He doesn't grin back.

He reads me like an open book.

He knows I'm being fake, and a tear strikes down my cheek when I realize that I'm not going to be able to fake my way out of this situation.

Chapter 5

Liam

I don't know why I held out hope that she would open her eyes and recognize me, but she doesn't.

It grows increasingly difficult to manage that anger as I watch her.

She's trying to hold on to her grace, despite the tears now flowing freely down her cheeks.

She doesn't wrestle against her restraints.

She's a smart woman.

She understands her reality, and it should make me feel a sense of pride that she's capable of holding on to her dignity despite the situation she's in.

But it's just another irritation to add to the long, growing list of things that are annoying me about her.

I despise fake people and, believe me, I understand the hypocrisy of this entire situation.

I know that I'm fake.

A hundred percent of the time, in every social interaction I have, I'm fake.

I have to be. People would run screaming if they knew the real me, but even amid the fear that's so blatantly clear in her eyes, she's doing her best not to give in to it.

I realize that there's a good possibility that I'm a true psychopath because I swear I can see a hint of curiosity tangled with the terror in her eyes. And isn't that the worst part about being fake, being unable to show who your true self is to those around you?

It makes me want to ask her if she's more scared of who I am, or if the real fear lies in who *she* truly is.

I reach for her once again, garnering the same reaction, and I rage inside.

She has the audacity to pull her face away from my touch.

I know this wasn't part of the plan, bringing her here to my home, a place no one else has ever been.

Dropping her on the street with a note attached to her no longer held its appeal after placing her lifeless body in the backseat of my SUV.

Sure it would terrorize her. She would look over her shoulder at every turn.

She would increase her security.

She'd definitely never walk alone on the beach again for the rest of her life, but it doesn't seem like enough.

I want more from her, and I plan on getting it.

A slow smile spreads across my face as another plan begins to form in my mind.

Taking from her would be easy.

I could overpower her.

I could drug her again, but where's the fun in that?

The true manipulation would be convincing her to give me what I want willingly. At the end of the day, I want to see her true self.

I want to chip away the prim-and-proper demeanor she carries like a shield.

I want her to eventually cast off all the fake responses.

When she leaves, when I finally let her walk away from this, I want her transformed.

She needs to be the woman she's meant to be, not this fake paper-doll cutout that her life has created.

I want her raw and real and true to herself. I don't care how long it takes for that person to emerge.

I've got nothing but time to see it through and make it happen.

I reach for her again, and for the third time, she pulls away from my touch.

All I can do is nod and give her a little fake smile of my own.

She may not want me to touch her now, but before it's all said and done, she's going to be begging for it.

I stand from the bed, turning the dial on the combination lock until it releases. As her left arm falls free, she doesn't move it.

She attempts to grab her wrist with her other hand. I don't know if it's because she's tied up and cognizant enough to know that she can't touch it.

People usually reach for the untied limb the second that happens.

It's a natural instinct.

Her instinct is to keep her eyes on me, to assess my every movement, and what I wouldn't pay to have access to her thoughts right now.

"Sit up," I tell her.

She doesn't move, and I have to hold a smile back.

Getting her to bend to my will is going to take time, and I'm going to enjoy every second of it.

"I'll make you stand," I tell her as I make my way to the other side of the bed to unlock the chain from the bolt in the floor.

She moves slowly now, sitting up but making no effort to climb off the bed opposite of me.

It wouldn't be possible because of the length of the chain, but at the same time, she's smart not to get closer to me.

"Is it still nighttime?" she asks, her eyes darting to the curtain on the far side of the room.

I don't answer her as I give her chain a little tug.

Physical violence really isn't my thing. I lean more toward mental manipulation than anything else. It takes more skill to hurt someone by getting inside of their head than it does to beat them into submission.

She's cautious as she climbs off the bed, keeping the full length of the chain between us.

She doesn't argue or beg when I connect her chain into another bolt in the floor across the room.

"Sit," I command, pointing to the chaise.

Her hesitation is shorter this time, and an illicit thrill runs through me. When she blinks up at me, it's as if she's waiting for her next command.

Honestly, I'm a little disappointed in her lack of self-preservation. She should be fighting or at least begging me to release her.

Her throat works on a swallow as I pull a collar from my pocket and inch closer to her.

Once again, she doesn't fight when I strap it around her neck.

She doesn't argue when I release her right hand from the chain and connect it to the buckle on the front of the collar.

She doesn't try to escape when I release her fully to pull the combination lock from my pocket and secure all of it in place.

She continues to lock eyes with me when I take a step back, fear marked with a hint of defiance in her eyes.

Collars usually aren't my thing, but the security of it is what I'm going for.

"You'll eat," I tell her, pointing down at the tray of meats and cheeses I brought in before she woke up.

She takes a moment to glance down at the food before drawing her eyes back up to mine.

"It'll help get the drugs out of your system faster," I explain, unsure of why I'm offering her any sort of explanation. "Make sure you drink both bottles of water."

She doesn't look down at the offerings again, but she also doesn't argue.

Her defiance rests solely in her eyes.

"Is there a problem with the food?"

Her jaw clenches but she doesn't respond, and I can't decide if she's honestly as big of a bitch as she's portraying herself to be or if this is part of her fakeness. Is her bravery false or is she just so fucking hoity-toity that she thinks petulance is what's gonna save her from this situation.

"You'll speak when I talk to you," I say, a warning clear in my voice.

She licks her lips as she blindly reaches for the bottle of water.

My patience is wearing very thin as she takes a sip from the bottle, but at the same time, I'm a little distracted at the sight of her lips wrapped around the plastic.

"Are you asking for a ransom?"

I tilt my head to the side as a slow smile creeps across my face. "There's no amount of money in this world that would be better than the plans I have for you."

"So this isn't a political move?" she asks as she recaps the water. "This isn't because of who my father is?"

"Sweetheart, I have no idea who you are, much less who your father is."

She has the gall to look confused, her head tilted to the side as if I'm crazy or have been stuck under a rock to not know who she is.

"I'm Raya Reed," she says matter-of-factly.

"Is that supposed to mean something to me?"

She scoffs, the sound a grating noise, as if she's got the upper hand in this situation.

Her nose scrunches before she speaks.

"Look me up," she says, her words a challenge.

I pull my phone from my pocket and type in her name.

I consider myself a man capable of controlling all of my emotions at all times. I know that she can read the surprise in my mannerisms, at the way my

body locks up with what I'm seeing.

She is not only Texas Senator Thomas Reed's daughter, the man who will be the next President of the United States, but she's already been listed as missing.

I swipe up, scrolling past article after article with details of her disappearance.

"Fuck," I whisper.

I'm not known for making mistakes, but this could possibly be the biggest mistake of my life.

Chapter 6

Raya

He didn't stick around long after discovering who I am.

Normally good at reading people, I had no idea what his thoughts were before he left.

I have no clue what this means for me.

Will he let me go?

Will he kill me because I've seen his face?

Have I watched too many crime shows?

Does it really happen that way?

I thought maybe I had leverage. If he wanted to trade me for a big payday, then he'd be less likely to hurt me, right?

All of that flew out the window when he pulled my name up online.

My mind holds onto a story I read about years ago.

Another politician's daughter, Kaci Stewart, was abducted, and she was missing for over a year, after having been sold into sexual slavery. The news of that is what prompted my own parents to tighten their security on me. At least that's the explanation they gave. At the time, I thought it had more to do with the fact that I was a teenager and starting to feel caged and trapped. That was when I was still willing to argue with them about having more liberties.

Maybe they were right, and my stupidity landed me here.

I can't decide if being alone in this room is better than him standing right in front of me.

I try not to think about all the preparations he could be making right now to deal with me after finding out who I am.

I'm distracted by the opulence of the room. When I saw him in the surf shop, I never would've guessed he'd have a house like this.

I try to reason that I didn't misjudge him.

He could have easily broken into this house while the owners were away on vacation, but that doesn't explain how prepared he was to lock a chain around my neck.

My hands tremble, the plastic water bottle in my hand crinkling as I wonder just how many women he's brought here.

Does he torture them?

Rape them?

Kill them?

I can't decide which of those three options are the worst.

A whimper escapes my lips when I realize he could do all three to me.

I try to calm my nerves, telling myself that my parents have to be looking for me. My father would involve any agency possible for my safe return.

Kaci Stewart's father looked for her. If I close my eyes, I can still see his emotional plea for whoever had his daughter to return her safely. The man changed his entire platform because of what happened to his family. Like my birth helped my father's political standing, her abduction worked much the same way.

I shake my head, trying to clear it of the idea that my parents would be capable of doing this just to garner more time in the spotlight.

But then I freeze. Wouldn't that be the best outcome? Wouldn't it be beneficial to me if my parents had a hand in this? The man keeping me wouldn't hurt me, right? They would only do it under the guarantee that I wasn't hurt.

But then again, it doesn't explain his reaction to what he saw online.

The realization that my parents aren't involved is a doubled-edged sword. On one hand, I'm grateful they wouldn't go to such an extreme, but at the same time, I'm terrified of what it could mean for me.

My stomach growls, but despite the fact that I haven't eaten in what I

can assume is inching up on twenty-four hours, I don't reach for the food he demanded I consume. I want to be mad at myself for not having lunch, for only having the diet soda I purchased at the surf shop, but eating can lead to bloating, and it would've been unacceptable to look heavier in my dress on such an important night for my father.

Puffiness in my eyes and lower belly wouldn't automatically make people assume I had too many carbs for dinner. They'd automatically jump to the conclusion that I was pregnant. It happened once last year already.

Despite not wanting to eat the food he's offering, I can't keep my eyes from examining the tray. I've been eating expensive food my entire life, and I can easily tell that the items aren't from a local run-of-the-mill grocery store, and it only adds to my curiosity.

I don't expect an explanation from the man. He hasn't answered a single question I've asked yet.

I don't scream or beg for him to release me. I'm fairly certain he'd do the opposite of anything I ask.

I'm starting to wonder if acting nice is even going to work.

I know it'll be less likely now that he realizes how much trouble he's in because of who my father is.

Before I can work out a different plan, he opens the door and reenters the room.

I keep my eyes locked on him. If the man was upset that I didn't remember him, I can't imagine he'd like it very much if I ignore him.

He steps close to me but somehow also manages not to crowd me.

A shiver runs down my spine, making me realize that at some point tonight, I lost the shawl I placated my mother with earlier. I look toward the bed, but it's impossible to tell if it's there because the sheets are black.

"Are you cold?"

I swallow again as I look up at him, knowing I need to answer him but unsure if my voice will allow it.

"May I have a blanket, please?"

He watches me without speaking, and I'm familiar with the tactic. He's trying to figure out my reasoning.

He wants to know if asking him for something is a form of manipulation, and maybe it is. If the man is willing to help me with something as simple as regulating my body temperature and being comfortable, maybe he'll be more willing to let me go.

I've seen more than one interview with people trying to prepare you for different situations, and the one thing that sticks out in my mind is hearing one of them say to make yourself more human.

"I'm c-cold," I say, my stammer more from fear than the chill in the room.

"I think a warm shower would warm you up much better."

My head instantly shakes at the suggestion. "I'm not that cold."

His chuckle is low and menacing and speaks of his intent.

"I never thought I'd have a use for these when I bought the house," he says as he crouches and works the combination on the lock holding my chain to the eye bolt in the floor.

I'm shaking by this point, an uncontrollable tremor working its way up my spine until it's difficult for me to hold my hands steady.

I'm in a constant state of questions, wondering if doing exactly what he wants will be what's best for me. Is that what he expects? Will cooperating help me or will it piss him off?

Begging to be set free is on the tip of my tongue as he stands with the free end of the chain dangling from his fingers.

He changed his clothes while he was gone. Sweats instead of dress pants cover his legs. His button down has been replaced with a non-descript, plain t-shirt. This way he looks like a college guy, and I'm floored by how much his style of clothes makes a difference in how I see him.

The guy standing in front of me would've grabbed my attention on the video calls I attended when I was in college. I probably would've seen him and spent hours wondering who he was, what his personality was like. I

would've crushed on this guy.

What a difference certain situations make.

"You'll shower?" he prompts, giving the chain a little tug but not pulling it enough to jerk me forward.

Getting up isn't a suggestion. He fully expects me to stand and walk across the room.

"Do I have to remind you of the rules?"

I shake my head but not because I'm answering him. I don't recall him giving me any rules.

"Do it yourself, or I'll do it for you."

I swallow again, and the urge to beg is a physical thing growing inside of me.

I can only hope my understanding of his words are correct, that he won't touch me or hurt me if I shower on my own.

He begins to walk toward a closed door on the far side of the room, not pausing as I stand to follow him.

I'm unsteady on my feet as I cross the room, and I know it has less to do with the drugs still in my system and more to do with the fear that's threatening to take over my entire body.

Any chance of escape fades away as he bends down to relock the chain on yet another eye bolt in the floor of the shower.

We rotate positions as he steps closer because I can't stomach the idea of him touching me. The brush of his fingers along my cheek when I first woke up was bad enough.

He doesn't leave the room, and I don't even know why I considered that he might.

"Go ahead," he urges as if I need to be coddled and convinced like a small child.

It irritates me, but I'm not foolish enough to snap back at him. I know asking for privacy won't get me anywhere, so I don't waste the effort in

doing so.

I keep my eyes on him as I blindly reach into the shower to turn the water on, fully expecting to get sprayed with an artic blast. I find myself shocked at the water already being warm when it hits my arm.

I have no excuse about being unable to get undressed because my gown is strapless, but I don't reach behind my back to attempt to unzip it. I take a chance and step under the shower still fully dressed, watching his face as he leans against the doorframe with his arms crossed over his chest.

He doesn't say a word. He doesn't demand I strip and shower properly.

If anything, I think I read a hint of amusement in his eyes, but then again, I could be wrong. My ability to read people accurately these days doesn't seem to be working.

I didn't look at him in the surf shop and understand the danger I was in.

"Soap," he says, pointing past me, and although I'm hesitant to take my eyes off him, I look down.

My brows crease in confusion once again at the sight of the various bottles lined up on the wall.

He's not using a 3-in-1 like I'd expect. There are five different bottles here, each one a high-end name.

He said he bought this house, but it could still be a lie. It's very possible that my first assumption, that he broke in, could still be true.

I look back at him, making sure he hasn't inched closer as I reach for the bodywash.

Chapter 7

Liam

Even if I wanted to, I couldn't hide the erection forming in my sweats at the sight of her in the shower.

She doesn't look at it as she runs soapy hands over her bare arms. Maybe she thinks not acknowledging it will make it disappear?

I'm hoping for just that because I shouldn't be turned on right now.

She's fully dressed, and historically, it takes much more than the sight of damp skin to get a rise out of me.

The list of mistakes I'm making continues to grow where she's concerned because I assumed she was just another snooty fucking brat used to getting her way, but she's not. I can't pinpoint exactly why she's different but refusing to admit she is would be more detrimental to this already fucked-up situation.

A fucking senator's daughter?

I can't remember another time when I fucked up so royally.

When I left the room earlier, I tried to run every fucking scenario through my head. I tried to reason and convince myself it isn't as bad as it seems.

When I thought of calling Angel, I knew I was completely fucked.

I don't ask for help.

There isn't a soul on this earth that could do anything for me that I can't do for myself.

I don't follow the fucking news. That shit is depressing, just one negative thing after the other. I don't have to watch CNN to know how fucked up people are. I live a life and work a job that brings me face-to-face with the shit on damn near a daily basis. I don't want more of that shit in my head when I'm trying to relax.

The breaks I've taken from the world around me aren't helping me on

any level right now.

The fucking soon-to-be president's daughter?

"Jesus Christ," I mutter.

I wipe my hand over my face in frustration, only to look up and see her staring at me. Her hand has frozen on her right arm with my words.

And then I see it. I see the way her eyes drop to the front of my sweats, and despite the warm water rushing over her, she starts to tremble again.

I wish that her fear excited me. I wish that scaring her is what turns me on, but it isn't. It's the limited amount of push-back that appeals to me. The obeying turns me on.

But it also pisses me off. She isn't doing it because she wants to. She thinks that giving me what I want will endear me to her. She thinks it will make me happy, easy to manipulate. I saw it in her eyes when she asked for a blanket. I'd be a fool to read any of her actions at face value. She's a politician's daughter for fuck's sake. She's like a snake in the grass as far as I'm concerned.

I want to step into her, rip her clothes from her body in an effort to force those real emotions to bubble to the surface.

She knows she's been abducted, yet, she hasn't once asked me to let her go. She hasn't opened that pretty little mouth of hers to beg for mercy. It's what makes her different, what separates her from every other captive woman I've encountered. Of course, nearly everyone eventually complies either through pain or torture, or threats to their family.

"You're different," I say before I can stop myself.

She shakes her head as if rejecting the idea. "I'm not."

"Is that a lie you tell everyone or do you actually believe it?"

She blinks away the droplets of water that splash on her face after hitting her bare shoulders.

"I'm just like everyone else."

"If you were like everyone else, I wouldn't have noticed you on the

beach."

"Earlier today?" She continues when I don't answer. "Today was the first time you saw me?"

"Wash your hair," I demand.

Her hands continue to tremble as she reaches for the bottle of shampoo, and stubbornly she keeps her eyes wide open as she lathers her hair. She's smart not to take her eyes off me, but all that does is prepare her to see what's coming. She has no ability to prevent anything from happening.

"Conditioner," I tell her after she rinses the shampoo from her hair.

She obeys the order quickly, but as her hands work the cream into her hair, her demeanor begins to change a little.

Her scared eyes gather a hint of defiance, irritation at following my orders clear as she immediately rinses the conditioner from her long blonde hair. I know she'd let it sit for a few minutes if she were alone, but I don't make her repeat the process.

"Stop," I snap when she considers herself done and reaches to turn the water off. "Do you really think I'm going to let you out of the shower before you wash your pussy?"

She shows more emotion than she has, yet when she looks back at me, her chin quivers uncontrollably. I know she's crying, her eyes red from a combination of terror and the soap that had to have gotten in there in her stubbornness not to close her eyes to rinse the shampoo out.

I give her the same look I gave her earlier that says *you know the rules*.

A sob escapes her throat as she lathers more soap on her hands before pulling the front of her soaked dress up.

She doesn't show me a damn thing as she cleans herself. I didn't exactly expect her to lift the fabric and tuck it in under her chin as she washed, and I have to say I'm both a little disappointed and proud at the same time.

Surprisingly, she turns her back to me, risking taking her eyes off me to rinse herself clean, but I don't use the opportunity to showcase the power I

have over her. She'll get more of that soon enough.

"You can turn off the water now," I instruct when she turns back to face me.

She does so hesitantly, as if she's anticipating the really bad shit to happen now that she's clean.

"Get my floor wet, and I'll make you lick it clean," I warn as she lifts a leg to step out of the shower.

"May I have a towel, please?"

She says it the same way she did when she asked for the blanket. She's very prim and proper, very fake.

"You'll never get fully dry in that soaked dress."

She blinks up at me, smart enough to understand what I'm saying, but not willing to do any more than she's instructed.

"Strip," I say, making it easier for her to obey.

"Pl-please," she begs, and the sound of it makes my semi-erect cock start to thicken fully.

I don't step back. I don't give her any indication that she'll win this round if she refuses.

And once again the witch fucking surprises me by reaching behind her for the zipper on her dress. She struggles for a few seconds, the zipper no longer working properly now that it's wet.

The dark fabric falls to the floor at her feet, and that ounce of defiance I saw in her eyes disappears as she looks up at the ceiling.

Her black lacy bra is a perfect match to the tiny piece of fabric between her legs. I spend a solid minute staring at her, raking my eyes over her body. She looks fucking incredible, something I noticed even in that one-piece bathing suit she was wearing earlier today, but right now? She's fucking delectable.

She's still covering more in her underwear than the other woman was wearing in her white bikini, but that chick has nothing on Raya fucking Reed.

This girl is fucking trouble.

I knew after discovering who she was that I'd more than likely end up dead at the end of this.

I just didn't realize that she may be the one to actually kill me.

"All of it," I demand.

Chapter 8

Raya

He's going to rape me.

I'm certain of it. It's in his eyes, in the way his erection strains against the sweats he's wearing.

I never considered this would happen to me. Not once in my entire life did I ever think I'd be threatened in this way.

Of course there have been times when men my father introduced me to crossed a line. It's sad how young I was when I started getting looks, ones that said the man staring at me wished he had a few minutes alone with me. Men in power always think everything is theirs for the taking, but not once did I think I was unsafe. Creeped out, yes, but never this.

"P-please," I beg again, even though I know it won't work.

Will I survive this?

Would I even want to after he's done with me?

I'm to the point of not being able to control my emotions. Until now, only tears escaped, but as he stands there with that threat of *if I don't do it*, *he'll do it for me*, in his eyes, I can't stop the sob from escaping my lips.

I press my thumbs into the elastic waistband at my hips, uncertain why I choose to take my underwear off before my bra.

"Do it," he growls when I pause, and the constant threat just his presence brings moves me into action.

The fabric sticks to my damp skin all the way down my legs, but I'm quick to kick it free once it hits my ankles.

I fumble with the clasp of my bra at my back, but I eventually open it.

He keeps his eyes locked on mine when my bra joins my panties at my feet.

It's a testament to his control, the way he holds my gaze rather than letting his eyes rake the length of my body the way they did when I took off

my dress.

I see the desire in them, however, so him not taking the liberties he could doesn't give me any hope that I'm safe in this situation.

Hatred, anger, and, for some reason, embarrassment heats my cheeks, and I'd claw his eyes out if I didn't know what he'd do to me after would be much worse than any harm I could cause him.

His eyes move, first rolling over my shoulders before pausing on my breasts.

I'm doing nothing to entice him, but my ragged breaths cause my chest to rise and fall, and, for a brief second, he seems entranced at the sight of them before moving on to my stomach.

I fight the urge to close my legs in an effort to keep him from seeing me there.

The brief affair I had with my college professor was nothing like this. It wasn't romantic. Each time we met was a rush to do the deed without getting caught. I couldn't meet him at his house or in some discreet hotel room. It was always in his office, also always bent over his desk with my skirt hiked up only enough for him to pull my panties to the side.

He was selfish in the way he used me, but at the time, I thought that's how things were supposed to be. He didn't have to woo me or persuade me in order to have me. The slightest amount of attention from him drew me in.

A tingle I hate and would never openly admit to washes over me at the way he takes in every inch of my body.

I hate myself for it.

I hate my parents for never letting me have any sort of life outside of my father's campaigns.

How fucked up is it that even nefarious attention from a man who is no doubt going to end up killing me makes me react this way?

It's fear, I argue internally. I'm not aroused. I'm terrified. Even if I hadn't seen him shirtless at the surf shop, I'd know he is stronger than me. I have no hope of fighting him off if he advances. I might get in a few

scratches, but he'd leave me broken and bleeding.

If I don't fight, is it still considered assault? The educated side of me says yes, but that part of me that's always been told there has to be proof for people to believe it is also a big part of my psyche.

He's no longer appealing to me, and I had to have had a moment of temporary insanity to even consider for a second that he was good looking.

He's a monster, a villain.

No.

He's the damn devil.

"Out," he says, making me realize I'm still standing in the shower.

My body moves instinctively, his threats enough to control me.

He doesn't step in closer to me. Instead, he reaches to the side, pulling a towel from the rack before holding it out to me.

He isn't near enough for me to take it from his hand without walking closer to him. He's going to make me approach him, and I struggle with that as well.

I'm doing exactly what he says.

Will this be what he plans to use in his own defense? Will he tell everyone that asks that I wanted whatever it is he plans to dish out?

My hands shake uncontrollably as I take two steps toward him before reaching out to grasp the towel.

He doesn't pull it back in an effort to taunt me.

As quickly as possible I wrap it around my body.

"It's warm," I tell him absently, feeling only slightly better now that I'm not fully exposed to him.

A single layer of fabric won't protect me, but it's like blankets on you at night, a false sense of security. With what's happened to me so far, I'm willing to take any reprieve I'm offered and bask in it.

"I'm a criminal, a kidnapper, not a savage," he says in a bored tone.

"Now, dry off."

I do the best I can to soak up all the water on my skin without exposing myself again, but I notice the way he follows each droplet of water that runs down my skin from my soaked hair.

My eyes burn with fresh tears as I pull the towel from my body. I bend, wondering if this is the moment he attacks as I roughly swipe the towel over and through my hair.

In a different life, one before I became a victim, I would never do this. My haircare is a full routine, so extensive that I sometimes go an extra day or two to avoid the effort it requires.

I hear my mother's voice in my head about split ends and how self-care is important because people notice when you don't put forth the effort.

What does it say about how we'll take care of our voters if we're not taking care of ourselves?

"There's no point in that," he says when I try to wrap the towel back around my body. "Here."

I track him across the room, taking a step back as he approaches a cabinet near me.

He doesn't look pleased or annoyed that I'm avoiding him. He doesn't react the way he did when I flinched from his touch after I first woke up.

I stare at his hand when he holds out a pile of clothes.

It's the least he could do, but at the same time, it feels like a gift. It also feels like a test, and I have no clue what the right answer is. I'm terrified of the consequences if I fail.

"Thank you," I whisper as I reach for them, my eyes locked on his.

"I'll take the damp towel," he says when I try to pull the soft t-shirt over my head with it still wrapped around my chest.

I hand it over quickly before going back to getting dressed.

I feel his eyes on me as I lift the shirt over my head. They don't leave me as I slip my legs into the sweats he offers me.

He chuckles, a sinister sound, when I pull the drawstring so tight the effort hurts my hands.

We're both well aware that a simple pair of sweats wouldn't impede his ability to take anything from me.

While he's distracted, hanging the towel back up, I dart my eyes all over the room. I need to find something I can use to defend myself. I'll go insane if this continues much longer, but I come up empty.

I'd call his décor style minimal because there isn't a single thing in here that would help me.

My eyes land on the cabinet beside the sink. It's possible he has a razor in there, but I get the feeling a couple of slashes will only piss him off.

"Are you going to hurt me?" I ask against the argument in my head to just keep my mouth shut.

He turns, his face emotionless. "Do you want me to hurt you?"

"What?" I scrunch my nose up in distaste. "Of course not."

"You say that like there aren't people who like a little pain."

I'm not completely ignorant to the things that go on in the world. I own a computer and a television for Christ's sake, but him even hinting that I'd be okay with him touching me much less hurting me is absurd.

I realize as he steps around me to unhook the chain from the shower floor that even if I had a weapon, I'd still be trapped. I could kill the man, and the outcome would still be my death because I don't know the combination to the lock at my throat.

I follow him back into the bedroom, feeling utterly hopeless and defeated.

Chapter 9

Liam

Her compliance doesn't help at all. If anything, it's making the situation worse.

I still hear the echo of her begging in my head as she follows close behind me to the middle of the room.

I don't say a word as I crouch and reconnect the chain to the eyebolt in the floor. I don't spend an extra second before leaving the room.

I can't stay in there with her, seeing her naked. Knowing what she looks like completely bared to the skin was almost too much for me to handle.

I'm hard as stone in my sweats as I walk down the hallway, taking the first right into my home gym.

I don't prep my hands the way I normally would. I don't wrap them in tape before the first punch lands on the punching bag. I want to rage and scream but doing so would only alert her to the emotions that I can't seem to control.

I do my best to ignore my cock. I know it was sick to watch her shower, to insist that she strip naked in front of me. I know it was demented. I know how fucked up I am for what I wanted from her.

I've never crossed that line with a woman before... *ever*. I'm not saying I'm not capable, because I'm not accustomed to lying to myself.

What pisses me off the most is that I *want* to fuck her. I don't know if I want compliance and whimpers of pleasure, or if I want screams of pain.

I don't know if I want her to fight back or if I want her to give in. All I know is I want her, and that pisses me off beyond measure. I shouldn't want those things from her.

Wanting her that way makes me no better than the men I don't hesitate to kill while working. I wouldn't hesitate to put a bullet in a man's head if I walked into his house for a job and saw him doing exactly what I had just

done. I didn't touch her, and maybe that's a win.

Maybe tomorrow that will be enough to ease my mind for what I've already done to her, but I doubt it.

As I hit the bag over and over and over, my knuckles, wrists, and arms grow sore from the impact, but my cock never flags. He has a one-track mind and his attention is stuck on Raya.

I try to refocus that anger. I try to find a way to blame her rather than blaming myself.

I remember the way she looked shocked at the different items in the shower, as if it's unheard of for a man to have separate bottles of shampoo and conditioner, as if it's unheard of for a man to take care of himself.

Or maybe it's just me.

Maybe she was just judging *me* once again, the same way she did at the surf shop.

Her quickness to judge is what got her into this situation in the first place. The assumptions she made about me are what landed her with a collar around her neck and a chain connecting her to the floor, preventing her from leaving. I don't see that ending anytime soon.

Those assumptions from her seem ingrained, something she learned, something she was taught in life. And now that I know who she actually is, it makes a little more sense.

People in the political world are quick to judge, quick to assess, quick to *assume*.

Raya is no different from her father, who was no different from any other man that came before him.

They're manipulative and abusive and expectant. They may work hard for the power they have, but once they get a taste of it, they'll never relinquish it willingly.

I smile, thinking about the fight that Raya has in her, about what it means for the days to come.

It makes the situation in my sweats even worse. My cock throbs with

the potential. Sweat rolls down my temples, cresting my jawline and dripping down my neck before disappearing into the fabric of my t-shirt.

I don't know how long I stand there, strike after strike, hitting the punching bag.

By the time I step back, winded, my clothes are soaked.

It didn't work, getting my energy out this way.

I know what will work, but I do my best to try and find an alternative solution. I don't want to be that man. I've never been that man before, but there's just something about that woman that is driving me insane.

The idea of slitting her throat and dumping her body for her senator dad to find should be easy. It's not like it would be the first time I had to dispose of a corpse, but it's the sight of her eyes looking up at me lifelessly as I imagine it that makes me automatically reject the idea.

Plus, she's no fun if she's dead.

I couldn't taunt her.

I couldn't torture her.

I couldn't manipulate her until she bends to *my* will if I kill her.

I'm not completely rejecting the idea of that being the ending of what happens to her, but it's not something I plan to do anytime soon.

So long as she continues to obey.

So long as she gives me what I want.

I can let her live.

I don't have any grandiose ideas that I won't eventually be found. Her father is going to be the president of the United States. That means he has to have multiple agencies out looking for her.

It's only been a handful of hours since her disappearance and already the story is being covered by nationwide news outlets. I'm gonna get the most out of this fuckup that I can, because taking Raya could very well be the biggest mistake of my life. Why not enjoy it?

The biggest mistake, hell, she could be the very last woman I ever see.

I don't know that I would be shocked if, within the hour, the FBI kicks in my front door. It's not like I was exactly strategic in her abduction. I did my best to stay out of sight of cameras at the hotel, but there's no way to avoid them all.

I stood watching her in the middle of that ballroom as she spoke to her father and a man I now know as Jackson Smith after a brief internet search earlier.

I'm sure the feds have already been through the camera footage. They already know I watched her. They've already run my face through face-recognition software. They know the name I was born with.

They may not know it yet, but the name I go by now will eventually be discovered. It's not like I've spent my entire lifetime trying to bury the man.

It's only a matter of time.

That should make me nervous.

Knowing my time with her is limited should scare me. It should make me want to pack a bag and run.

But it doesn't.

It fills me with an urgency. One that says I need to get in as much of her as I possibly can before it all comes crashing down around me.

I growl in a rage, striking out and hitting the punching bag one last time so hard that the chain holding it to the ceiling rattles.

I refuse to grip my cock.

I refuse to touch it the same way that I refuse to touch her, but I don't know how long I can hold on to that control.

She's not even in front of me, and right now she's all I can think about.

I pace the room.

What else could I possibly do right now?

I can't leave the house. Imagining putting distance between the two of us makes me feel insane, which also pisses me off.

One run-in at the surf shop.

One upturn of her nose in disgust when she looked at me and this is where I'm at.

It makes no damn sense. This obsession seems uncontrollable. It seems unmanageable. It seems like *fate*.

"Fuck you," I growl, striking the punching bag again, but instead of standing there and trying to assess the situation even more, I trace my steps back to the room she's caged in.

I throw the door open.

I don't even flinch when it slams against the wall. I don't have time to worry about the damage it could have left behind. It's not like I'll ever get the chance to fix it. There's no time for trivial things like that.

Her eyes widen as I stand in the doorway, my chest heaving up and down, both from the exertion of my workout and the anger that's boiling inside of me.

She looks terrified, and she should be.

I felt like I've won a small victory because she's no longer trying to mask her fear. There's no soft smile on her lips. There are no timid questions coming from her mouth.

I don't say a word as I approach her.

I don't say a word as I pull down the front of my sweats.

I don't say a word as my cock points directly at her face, as if that's where it was always meant to be.

She tries to scramble away, but the chain connected to the collar around her neck will only allow her to get so far.

I don't hesitate to close that distance. I don't touch her. That would be crossing the line. I don't know if I'd ever be able to come back from that.

If I touch her, I won't be able to stop. I'll hurt her and use her up.

"Take your shirt off," I demand, losing control on being able to resist stroking my cock. My hand glides up my shaft.

It's easy to see that she can't figure out where her eyes need to be. I slow my hand as I witness the struggle. Her gaze darts from my eyes to my hand to the curtains on the wall. She wants to escape. There's no part of me that she's interested in.

Once again, I wish I could be inside her head. Ten minutes in there would give me all the information I'll ever need.

"Take your shirt off," I growl. "Now."

Her fingers hesitate at the hem of her shirt.

"You know the rules. Do it or I'll do it for you."

She's no faster at pulling the fabric free of her body with a threat than she was without.

"Pl-please," she stammers. "You don't have to do this."

"Do you even know what this is?" I snap. "I could—" My words halt completely at the sight of her tits.

I feel out of control as my balls draw closer to my body.

"This is your fault," I tell her. "This is what happens when you make assumptions about me."

I roll my lips between my teeth, biting down until I taste blood.

She doesn't deserve my grunts. She doesn't deserve my groans of pleasure. This isn't fun. This is torture. And she's the cause of all of it.

"I wanted a polite conversation with you at the surf shop. That's all I wanted. But you looked me up, looked me down, and decided I was no benefit to you."

I stroke harder, faster, swirling my thumb over the tip of my cock on the upstroke.

"Are you always that way? Or do you just dismiss the people who you determine are no benefit to you? Is that how your family is? Is that how your dad is? Were you taught to do that, to look at someone, spend two seconds

assessing them, and throw them away like trash when they can't help you?"

She cries, her eyes unfocused and yet still darting everywhere.

"I'm not like that at all," she says.

"Your actions prove differently," I remind her. "Hold your tits up."

She's to the point of sobbing, but she obeys.

"Look at me," I demand.

The second her eyes reach mine, I fucking lose it. I don't look down, despite wanting to see every spurt of cum land on her tits.

I wish I could say I was the one to look away first, but I'm stuck in her trance until she squeezes her eyes closed and her sobbing grows exponentially.

How is it that she's the one chained to the floor, yet she's the one who's in control?

"Open your fucking eyes," I growl, and she does, obeying me once again, making me question everything I've done since I noticed her on the beach earlier. "Don't you fucking dare," I say, as she releases her breasts and lifts a hand to wipe my cum from her skin.

"If you touch it before it dries, next time, I'll fuck your mouth and make you swallow it."

Her sobs follow me out of the room. I should feel like the biggest asshole ever. I should feel dirty and depraved and worthless, but I don't.

I liked it way too much to lie to myself.

Chapter 10

Raya

I groan out loud as I roll over on the couch.

This man doesn't even have to touch me to torture me. He doesn't have to lay a finger on me to cause my death.

There's no way for me to deny what happened last night. He ejaculated all over my skin. The remains of it are now dry and flaking off.

Maybe I should be grateful he didn't touch me. But that's insane.

He shouldn't be doing any of this. He has no right to keep me here.

I have realized very quickly that my captivity doesn't faze him. The man doesn't possess that part in his brain that questions if what he's doing is right or wrong.

He leaped out of this room so quickly last night he didn't even bother to attach my chain close enough so I could climb in bed.

My body is killing me this morning, every muscle sore. My eyelids are heavy and swollen from crying all night. The terror of being here is a drain on every system in my body.

I didn't pull the shirt back over my head, taking heed of his warning. I didn't want to risk the chance of wiping any of his cum that's staining my skin.

I'm locked in a sound deprivation chamber. I can't hear anything.

I can't tell if he's standing right outside of the door. I can't even tell if he's in the house.

It doesn't give me hope. It doesn't help me in any way.

I don't move when the bedroom door opens, taking just a little bit of pride in the puffiness in his own face.

It seems he didn't get any better sleep than I did.

I swallow as I consider what a bad night of sleep might mean for him.

Will it make him easier to anger? Will it make him more ready to hurt me, despite him not having touched me at all since those times he tried to brush hair from my face?

He remains silent as he crosses the room and removes the lock from the far end of the chain. The collar around my neck is itchy on my skin, but I don't reach out to touch it.

I don't want to give him the satisfaction of knowing how much it bothers me.

He's already taken so much from me just by me being here. He's as silent as I am as he lifts the end of the chain and begins to walk toward the bathroom. I follow him because it's the easier choice. If he yanks on the length of the chain, it has the ability to hurt me without him even laying a finger on me.

I don't want pain. As much as I hate my life, I realized I want to live. I want a chance for things to be different.

Instead of making a verbal demand, he lifts his free hand and points to the shower. I don't argue because I know it won't do any good.

He's not going to change his mind. He's not going to pull this collar off my throat and tell me to leave. Any effort, any begging, would only fall on deaf ears.

I drop my eyes to the floor as I shove the sweats off my body. I glare at him, more than a little irritated with being in this situation, but he doesn't notice my eyes.

His own gaze is locked on my breasts and his cum that's drying there. A little light and only what I can describe as arousal fills his eyes. Like a switch has been flipped, he no longer looks tired, and I know there's danger in that.

"Shower," he grunts, as if I'm wasting his time.

I kick the sweats away with a little more force than I intended, but his eyes remain on me instead of following them as they fly across the room.

The shower is a godsend for my aching muscles. I allow myself a little more time under the stream than I did yesterday.

Unlike yesterday, I don't hesitate to use the products lined up on the shower wall. I shampoo and condition my hair, waiting until the end to wash my body.

I give him my back when I go to wash between my legs, facing the showerhead until my body is free from the suds.

"Don't," he snaps when I reach for the shower knobs.

I turn to face him, ready to argue.

"Play with yourself," he commands.

I can't help the way my jaw drops open.

"You can't be serious," I say, keeping my voice as calm as I can manage, but I know he can hear the tremble in my words.

He doesn't speak. He just watches me. Silence is the repeat of his command.

The tears burning in my eyes don't take long to flow down my cheeks.

I swallow, my throat dry despite standing under the showerhead as my hand opens and closes, clenching into a fist repeatedly.

"I can't," I tell him, dropping my eyes to my feet.

Silence fills the room, forcing me to look back up at him.

He's unwavering in the doorway.

My hand moves to my stomach when he takes a half step forward. The threat is there. The words he's said more than once to me, *do it or I'll do it myself*.

The thought of him touching me makes bile rise in the back of my throat. I don't want that. I'll never want that from him.

Faking an orgasm for a man is something I've never done. Not because my life has been filled with great sex, meaning there was no need for it.

My college professor never took the time, care, or concern to even make sure I experienced pleasure at his touch. What I do know how to do is reach that peak on my own. It's the only satisfaction I've had in the last handful of years.

It won't happen today. Faking it is my only option, and the quicker I do that, the quicker I can put clothes back on.

I angle my head back, locking my eyes on the ceiling as my fingers slip over my delicate flesh, my chest heaving up and down, my raw emotions on full display as I touch myself the way he commanded me to.

I try for a fake moan, but it feels awkward on my tongue.

When I've touched myself in the privacy of my own bedroom, I've always felt ashamed. I've always imagined that someone could hear me and that wouldn't be unheard of in a house full of staff.

Never having a conversation about sex with my parents, I have no idea how they'd react, how they'd respond, if they were to catch me doing this, or even worse, if someone mentioned what I was doing behind closed doors to them.

I wouldn't put it past my father to put me into a chastity belt like it were the 1800s, had he been told that someone heard me pleasuring myself.

I jerk in disgust, my body trembling from head to toe.

As I pull my hand away and meet his eyes, I say "I'm done."

He scoffs, his head shaking a little. "The fuck you are."

"I-I can't do it twice," I stammer, my throat working on yet another swallow.

"You didn't do it the first time."

"I did," I lie. "I swear I did."

"If that's what you look like when you come, it only means that it's something we're going to have to work on." There's a threat in his words and it terrifies me.

"Does this make it easier?" he asks, pulling down the front of the sweats.

I may have faked it and that may have displeased him, but it didn't stop his body from reacting to me touching myself. The long, thickly veined erection pointing directly at me is a threat on its own, and I have no doubt that he will use it as a weapon if I don't obey his every command.

I'm also not under the illusion that doing exactly what he says wouldn't make things end in exactly that same way.

He's going to hurt me. He's going to rape me. I know it. As sure as I know my father is going to win the presidential election.

It's damn near written in stone, but I figure doing what he says, obeying every command, being compliant and complacent, will put it off as long as possible.

I want to look away, but I can't as he begins stroking the length of himself.

"Play with your cunt," he growls.

My hand trembles as I once again rub it down my belly to the apex of my thighs. I lick at my lips at the realization that it feels different this time.

I hate getting the small tingle of arousal at touching myself in front of him. I feel guilty and ashamed that my body is responding, despite the fact that I can't seem to look away. My eyes are locked on his working hand.

In my head, I'm disgusted. My mind knows this is wrong, but my body is not on the same wavelength as the thoughts in my head.

I let my gaze wander from his hand, up his muscled torso to the way his shoulder flexes with every stroke.

He doesn't look like a monster when he's pleasuring himself, even though his actions are inherently devious.

His eyes meet mine for the briefest moment, and I avert my gaze once again.

My legs begin to tremble as my fingers work faster of their own accord.

It feels good, the pleasure I'm giving myself, and that carries its own set of problems. I don't want this. I know I don't want this.

But I also don't know that I'll be able to stop if that is the next

command he gives me. My mouth hangs open, droplets of water catching on my lower lip, and I can almost pull myself from this situation.

I can picture myself doing this for a man that cares for me rather than performing for a man who only wants to hurt me.

I hate myself for being as turned on as I am. I'm disgusted as that spark, the tingle that always grows low in my belly, ignites. How fucked up is it that I want the impending orgasm as much as I want him to release me. I crave both in equal measure.

"That's a good girl," he says, his voice so low I can barely hear the words.

My first instinct is to growl at him. My next instinct is to pull my hand away but I'm a slave to the way it feels, to have something good happening to my body in such a terrible situation.

I once again chance a look into his eyes and realize he's not patronizing me the way so many others have that have sent an ounce of praise my way. He didn't say it because it's a reward for him. He didn't say it in an effort to get something from me.

He said it because he meant it. He's pleased with the way I'm touching myself.

He's pleased with the pleasure I'm feeling and that's something I've never had in my life.

Most people are fake and only out for themselves.

They say thank you because they know that increases the chances of getting more from someone.

A gasp escapes my throat, and that garners a reaction from him as well.

I find that when his hand strokes faster, when his grip gets tighter, I'm mimicking his actions. My fingers swirl faster. I press a little harder. My pleasure elevates.

"I'm going to come," I say more to myself than to him.

I'm shocked. I'm floored. I'm completely surprised that it's even happening. The muscles in my legs tighten and it happens, bliss swirls

through my body. The pleasure fades as quickly as it arrived. It doesn't take but a second for shame, for an absolute disgust, to wash over me much like the water dripping down my back.

He steps closer, his hands still working his cock, but instead of touching me like I fear, he grunts and once again comes all over my skin.

"Clean yourself up," he snaps, before rushing out of the bathroom.

Chapter 11

Liam

I needed to escape her. I needed to get away. I needed a few minutes to myself to think, to reevaluate every goddamn thing I've been doing since I brought her here. But I couldn't. Because once I made it out to the bedroom, I realized that she was still untethered.

I have no doubt after what just happened, she'd try to leave.

I don't even attempt to meet her eyes as I walk back into the bathroom, throw a towel in her direction and pick up the chain. She follows me, the sound of her wet feet on the bathroom floor.

I lock her chain back in place, not saying a word, and then I'm able to escape her.

"Jesus, fuck," I hiss, as I make my way into the kitchen, my hand scraping over the top of my head in frustration. Coming on her skin last night, made things worse.

After a handful of hours of tossing and turning in my bed, I came up with a different plan. Watching her touch herself had to be the best and worst thing that could ever happen to me. It didn't help things. It didn't scratch an itch. It made me want more.

It made me need to touch her fingers to my lips. It made me want to swipe my tongue along that glistening slit of hers.

It made me desperate for her taste. It made me desperate to feel the warmth of her skin pressed against mine. It made me insane.

I busy myself in the kitchen, throwing together a platter of food. I need to stay away from her but I know that I won't be able to. It's never been instinct for me to fight my urges and that's not going to change now.

She's wrapped in the bath towel, sitting on the sofa, when I reenter. Although I can feel her eyes on me, I can't bear to look in her direction. She makes me feel like a monster and I want nothing more than to feed that dark part inside of me.

That line I refuse to cross is getting thinner. It's fading and disappearing. But I have the ability to fight it just a little bit longer.

I place the tray of food on the end of the bed before turning back in her direction. I wouldn't say that the look on her face is expectant, but she's also not looking away from me. She's not ignoring me, the way I would expect. She's not begging me to set her free or demanding that I release her.

It surprises me. She could easily make threats. Her father could easily follow through with whatever threat she does make, but she doesn't open her mouth.

I lock eyes with her as I drop my sweats and kick them across the room much in the same fashion she did in the bathroom not long ago. Just like I was unable to look away from her, she doesn't follow the fabric as it slides across the floor before disappearing under the bed.

She gasps when I turn around to unlatch the chain from the floor. I know what she's seeing. My back is a map of scars and burns. Sometimes I forget that those souvenirs from my time in Mexico are still there.

I don't know anyone who spends any length of time turning around to look at their back in the mirror and it isn't until I'm agitated or until I witness horrific things while working that they tingle and itch. Much like they're doing right now with her eyes on me.

She doesn't ask me what happened. She doesn't placate me or tell me that she's sorry because of the sight of them and for some reason that surprises me a little too.

Maybe she's imagining adding more scars there. The threat of that makes my cock stir once again.

I'm not picturing her taking a knife to me or putting her cigarettes out on my skin. It's the scrape of her fingernails curled and drawing blood as I fuck into her that I imagine. My mouth feels dry as I stand.

"Get on the bed," I tell her. My grin is sly and hidden as I hear her stand from the couch. "Leave the towel."

She doesn't argue and when she walks around to the end of the bed, she's completely naked. I watch the muscles of her arms and legs work as she

climbs up on the bed. She doesn't hesitate to pull the blankets up to her chin and I don't know if I'm feeling generous or if I think her covering her body up would ease some of the aches the sight of her nakedness causes.

I climb in beside her, taking great care not to let our skin brush. It's not hard in this big bed.

I lean forward, grabbing the tray of food so I can situate it between us and I feel her eyes on my back once again.

Those scars connect me to Angel Guerrera and I know he has to have some of the same injuries on his own flesh. I find myself wanting to tell her about them, even though she will probably never ask.

There hasn't been a single person in my life that I've had that conversation with and I don't know why she's different. Why I want to tell her about the month I spent in South America, being tortured. It's as if I need to try and explain myself. It's like I need to tell her that I'm still a monster, but I'm not the same monster that was caught in the middle of an assassination job.

I want to explain that month changed my life. That was the switch that flipped. That's why I began taking jobs to help others, to save others.

She probably wouldn't believe me. It's not like my current actions and her situation right now isn't a complete contradiction to what I could claim is to come, but I'm not hurting her. I'm not touching her. I'm not raping her. And that has to mean something, right?

Her eyes are locked on me when I finally look up at her. Her hair is wet, a tangled mess around her shoulders. And although the blush I saw in her cheeks from her orgasm has faded, my memories of it haven't.

I feel like I need to get the upper hand. I want to taunt her and tease her. I want to chastise her for thinking even for a second that that fake little display she put on in the beginning would convince me that's how she orgasms.

I knew the real one would look different, but I never anticipated the thrill it gave me to watch her muscles seize, to watch her hands move faster over her body. My balls still ache from the power of my own orgasm from watching her pleasure herself. My lips tingle with the urge to praise her

because I saw the reaction she had when I did it in the bathroom.

The guilt I saw swimming in her eyes was also part of the reward. She did it because I told her to. She enjoyed it because she couldn't help herself and then she hated me for it. Each aspect of the entire interaction pleased me.

"Eat something," I tell her, pointing to the tray of food situated between us before reaching for the remote on the bedside table.

Raya doesn't look impressed. She doesn't ooh and ahh when I press a button, making the television glide upward toward the ceiling, out of the footboard. Expensive things, top-notch technology, isn't something new for her. She's lived a life of leisure and excess. Despite having all the things that I have now, it pisses me off the life she's been handed.

She's not the type of person who has ever had to worry where she's going to sleep at night. She hasn't had to concern herself with where her next meal is going to come from or what she would have to do to earn it. Hell, she probably thinks she's roughing it, to spend a night in line, waiting for concert tickets with a group of her friends. Her bodyguard would be there of course. They'd never leave her unprotected.

She'd be exhausted the next day and make a social media post about the trials and tribulations she suffered. She's nothing like me. She couldn't comprehend the things I've been through. The things I've had to do just to survive. I have no doubt Raya Reed is the type of person who would make a monetary donation to a women's shelter, brag about it to the people in her life, and honestly feel like she has made a damn difference in the world.

What I have now looks nothing like what I had fifteen years ago when I had to scratch and scrape and make sacrifices and give up bits and pieces of my soul to have what I have.

I take pride in my home. I take pride in the things I've worked so hard for. I haven't gotten them in the most legal way but I have fought hard to have everything I possess. Blood sweat and tears. Isn't that how the saying goes? Granted, it's not always been my blood, my sweat, my tears, that have earned me the things that I have.

But it takes a certain kind of person, with a certain level of dedication to hurt others in order to get what you want and what you need. No one

batted an eye when I was the person screaming and crying and bleeding for them to get us a leg up. Why should I care if I earned the things I have in the same way?

I point the remote at the television, scanning slowly through every channel. I pause and read the description of each and every pornographic movie on the listing. I don't want to watch porn. It wouldn't make this situation any better and being in the bed beside her with the echoes of skin slapping against skin wouldn't end well for either of us. Just as I expect, she doesn't say anything. She doesn't tell me that she refuses to watch anything that I would choose. She doesn't make a suggestion. She doesn't ask for a certain show. She just sits quietly like a little church mouse, hoping not to be noticed.

I settle on a syndicated television show, starting with season one episode one, before dropping the remote to the bed. She doesn't pick up something to eat from the tray until I do. Although it annoys me that all she's doing is mimicking my exact behaviors much the same way she did in the bathroom, only touching herself harder, only moving her fingers faster when I did the same, I don't say anything. She has to eat. I may be a depraved monster that has abducted her and forced her to come on her own fingers, but I don't want her to waste away into nothing.

She doesn't eat with the same gusto that I do. Maybe she doesn't feel like she's starving after an intense orgasm the way I do.

I'm in a generous mood, so when I notice her favoring the strawberries over the grapes, I eat the grapes, leaving the fruit she desires for her.

The television rattles on, neither one of us speaking even as I climb out of the bed and place the now empty food tray on the table across the room.

Her eyes are on me rather than the television when I re-approach the bed, but once again, she doesn't say a word as I climb up to join her. It only takes about ten minutes of my naked skin in the open air for me to begin to feel discomfort. I get the first real reaction out of her in over an hour when I shift my body and lift the covers, joining her under them.

I don't touch her, but that doesn't keep her from thinking that I will if I decide to take those liberties.

I don't make the mistake of thinking that she wants me there, even though she doesn't ask me to leave. That would be crazy. This woman may do what I want her to, she may obey my commands, but she's never going to want to.

I push the limits of her sanity as I inch closer. Still without touching, I close the distance until I can feel the warmth of her skin against mine. The heat radiating from her own body soothes me. It makes me once again realize that this woman may be more dangerous to me than I could ever be to her.

Chapter 12

Raya

I swear my heart is skipping beats every couple of seconds. I'm naked. He's naked. And we're under the covers of this big bed together.

He purposely scooted closer to me, but once again, he's not touching me. It's the threat of it that scares me so much.

He seems completely engrossed in the show playing on the television. I know better than to think that he's not paying attention to me. It's weird how attuned to me he seems.

With him this close, it's easy for me to dart my eyes to the left and take in his features. I do it cautiously, my eyes darting back to the television screen repeatedly.

I take in his facial features first. His eyelashes are long, brush the apples of his cheeks when he blinks. The blue of his eyes would almost be mesmerizing. It's a color a woman could easily get lost in.

If things were different in my life, I know I'm the type of woman that would get lost in such spectacularly blue eyes. It's impossible to do that now that I've seen the monster behind those eyes.

My second glance lands on his jawline. The stubble there is a golden brown no more than a quarter of an inch in length.

It makes me wonder how long it's been since he shaved. Three days, five days, a week? I have no idea.

It's not often I see men in the process of growing a beard. Either they're clean shaven or the beard is always in place. The process of it is fascinating to me.

I clench my hands in my lap, the movement concealed under the blankets. The tips of my fingers tingle with some weird urge to touch his face, to see what that stubble feels like against my skin, hitting me harder than it should.

Maybe, I'm fascinated by him. Maybe, it's my inability to understand

how a person can do what he's done to me and sit there, acting as if he has no cares in the world.

That's all that it is. It's not attraction, it's intrigue. It's that feeling people get when they see or hear something they could have never imagined knowing about until that very moment. It's surprise and shock and it's eating away at me.

I have so many questions. I want so many answers.

My third glance is at the pulse pounding on the side of his neck. I take the time to count them. His heart rate isn't erratic, it's steady, strong, while mine pounds in my chest as if I've run ten miles.

I swallow, looking back at the television when I realize that my own breathing and my own pulse are starting to increase. I spend long minutes watching the television without actually seeing or understanding what's going on. I guess I can be glad he didn't stop and purchase one of those pornographic movies he spent so much time perusing.

The next look lands on the mangled patch of flesh on the back of his neck. It looks painful and I know it had to have been. As evil as this man could possibly be, I know he would feel pain.

I want to ask him about it. I want to know how he got that scar. I don't know how I missed them at the surf shop. I shake my head, rejecting that thought. I know exactly how I missed it. I didn't pay him any attention. He wasn't worthy of it. I see them now and a little explanation of why they're there would go a long way in helping me understand who he actually is.

It would help me understand that he is either evil or he's a product of something society made. Did he get them there because someone hated him? Did he get them there because he's always been an evil man? Are those scars what caused him to be evil or are they a result of being evil?

I shouldn't care to know why he was hurt. It shouldn't make me wonder who hurt him. Those marks on the back of his neck, the circular scars, that could either be bullet wounds or burn marks.

They make me scared of him even more. But they also make me a little sad. The pain he must have gone through. Did he deserve it at the time? I dig deep, wondering if he would deserve them now. If I could stomach someone

coming in here now and marring fresh skin in retaliation for what he's done to me.

The thought of witnessing that makes my stomach turn. And that's terrifying on its own.

Shouldn't I want him to hurt?

Shouldn't I want him to feel terror?

Shouldn't I want him to be scared of me?

A fresh round of tears burns the back of my eyes because now I'm making excuses for him behaving this way.

Someone hurt him badly, and that's why he is the way he is. I just can't wrap my head around him being this way because he was born this way. Something created him. Someone made him into the person he is today.

The other half of me, the part I honestly do not want to acknowledge, makes me wonder if he can be turned into that if he can also be turned away from that.

Can you de-create a monster?

What would that even take?

Why am I even thinking of that?

It's not like I want to save him. I don't want to help him. He's holding me captive and I can't ever forgive that. But making him into something that he's not, trying to convince myself that he's behaving this way because he can't help himself, as if him taking me hostage and holding me here against my will, as if making me get myself off in front of him is the only viable outcome. As if it's always meant to happen that way.

That can't be possible. He can't be the type of person who hurts others in retaliation for being hurt himself. How sick does that make someone that they channel that energy and that pain and do horrible things to good people because horrible things had been done to them?

I don't open my mouth to say these things. He wouldn't listen. He wouldn't come around to my way of thinking. A light bulb would not go off in his head and him think, *you're right*. I should only hurt bad people

because bad people hurt me.

I press a hand to my chest, saddened even more to think that it might have been done by someone who was supposed to love him. That's the ultimate betrayal. My life isn't fun but my life has never consisted of pain, physical pain.

I shake my head, the argument inside making me want to close down completely. I've never been one to look for the good in people. Words stopped meaning anything early in life. Promises get broken, people get manipulated, and lies are told. All to further an agenda. All to get a vote. All to get a donation with the hope that those promises will be forgotten when it comes time to pay up.

"When will you let me go?" I ask, my words weak, my voice low.

"Never," he says without hesitation. He doesn't even look in my direction when he destroys my world.

I nod because deep down, I think I always knew that would be the outcome. Hoping for things has never been one of my strong suits either. I'm terrified once again at the thought of staying here until he decides differently.

Never doesn't mean he isn't going to hurt me and end things. Never could mean a lot of things. Never could mean he's going to get tired of me and kill me, and I'll never see the light of day again. Never could mean the rest of my life and it could still be a long life.

My mind wanders back to everything that's happened, choosing to focus on the fact that he hasn't really hurt me, other than leaving me here in the room alone last night and having to sleep on that uncomfortable couch. It honestly hasn't been that bad. I know people have had worse.

He's not making me sleep on the floor. He's not making me crawl around on hands and knees and beg for food. I've gotten to shower. I've gotten to eat.

I have to laugh, no humor in the sound, but he still ignores me. Is it possible for Stockholm syndrome to hit this quickly or is my life outside of this captivity just so bad that this doesn't seem as terrible?

"Do you love me?" I ask, feeling stupid the second the words fall out

of my mouth.

This gets his attention. He slowly rolls his head on his shoulders to look in my direction. "Do you want me to love you?" There's a sinisterness in his words, as if the type of love that he could give wouldn't be anything a sane person would wish for.

I shake my head no because that's absurd. Good love, bad love, his kind of love, I don't want anything to do with any of it.

I don't know what emotion he reads on my face but a slow smile, a sinister grin, pulls at the corners of his mouth. It's the same one he gave me when I came in the shower that says he thinks I'm lying.

I want to argue that fact. I want to tell him he's insane if he thinks I will ever fall in love with him. I may not know true real dedicated love but I know it looks nothing like this. Love doesn't start by getting taken from the beach. Love doesn't start with a needle to the neck. Love doesn't start with being forced to expose my body. Love doesn't look like any interaction we've had thus far, but arguing isn't going to change anything.

Just like asking him about his scars isn't going to make him see me as more of a person. For a man who gets pissed often and rattles on about assumptions, he has to know that he's guilty of it just as much as I am.

Without even thinking about it, I drop my eyes to his lips, wanting to see when that smile fades away. It isn't until he growls and throws the blankets off the both of us that I realize I've made yet another mistake.

Chapter 13

Liam

Love... what an unnecessary fucking emotion. I keep that thought to myself as I watch her watch me. I've been hard since I climbed into this bed with her, since I took a deep breath. With the warmth of her proximity washing over me, I've been hard practically since I brought her into my home.

I'd laugh at the thought of needing medical intervention if I hadn't been jacking off like a teenager since her arrival.

Love, I can't get the idea out of my head. I don't want it. I don't need it. What I need is empty balls.

My eyes lock on her hand. God what I wouldn't give for this woman to touch me right now.

Will there ever be a time she willingly does something? Will there ever be a minute where she doesn't hesitate with fear in her eyes when she looks at me? Probably not.

It's possible that after years of her being here, that she may just give into it, all the while never wanting it. But willing... no, Raya Reed will never be willing to touch me.

I find myself wanting her to make that decision on her own. I could force her just like I forced her to touch herself in the shower, but I don't think that it would give me the same satisfaction.

Needing all her attention on me, I don't command her to slip her fingers into that sweet little snatch of hers as I grip my cock. I guess I consider it a win that she doesn't pull her eyes from me. Her undivided attention is just as encouraging as the warmth of her body was under the covers.

I've had her attention for the last hour as I pretended to watch television while she watched me. I don't know what she was thinking, but I know where my mind wanted hers to be.

I wanted her imagining wrapping her lips around my cock. I wanted her imagining me on top of her. I wanted her imagining me hiking her ass to the air, slapping her skin as she fucked back willingly on my dick.

Oh God, the places my imagination can take me. I don't hold back the grunts and the groans as I please myself. At least while my hand is stroking

my dick, I don't have the urge to strike up a conversation with her like we're long-lost friends getting reacquainted.

I fought that urge and nearly lost several times over the last hour. She's the one who broke the silence, asking me if I was ever going to let her go. My answer wasn't impulsive. It was truthful. Not because I plan to keep her forever. I can't let myself even imagine that.

My answer was truthful because the way things end has nothing to do with me letting her go and everything to do with somebody coming here and taking her from me. We both know this isn't going to end well. Only, I don't think that our expectations or how we anticipate that happening is the same.

My eyes want to flutter closed as my balls tighten but I can't allow that either. I watch her watching me. Her mouth is slightly parted. Her breaths are low and noisy. Her eyelids are half-mast.

For a second, I let myself believe that she's enjoying watching me. I let myself believe that she wants this.

I know that I'm projecting those feelings. I know that she's a captive and an unwilling participant while I stroke off but the fantasy of her wanting it is enough to keep me going.

I don't know if it's the fact that my world is going to come crashing down around me sooner rather than later. Hell, maybe I have some kind of fucking brain tumor that's making me act completely out of character around this woman.

Another hiss of delight rumbles out of my chest and I have to squeeze the base of my cock to keep from coming so quickly. It could last forever if I had the stamina to stroke my dick for three hours. I would ignore the blisters it would no doubt give me on my palm.

Her eyes dart to my face, and without pulling my gaze from hers, I lean forward and let a little dribble of spit fall onto my cock. I can dry rub with the best of them but it's getting a little abrasive.

Her eyes follow the spit before locking right back on my hand.

"I could make you do this," I whisper.

"You could," she agrees. Was that a hint of desire in her voice or have I fully lost my mind?

I have to accept that it's the latter. She doesn't want me doing this to myself much less forcing her to do it.

I made a vow to myself last night when I couldn't sleep that I wasn't going to touch her, that I wasn't going to force her to touch me. But as

pleasurable as this is, it also doesn't feel like enough.

One of the main reasons I'm not making her do this is because I'm afraid that even with her hands on me, it still wouldn't be enough.

I know myself enough to know that I can take everything from her. I could leave her with nothing and I still wouldn't have met my expectations. It's not that I feel that she wouldn't be good at it. I know I would have come three times already if it were her hand instead of mine.

There's a desperation inside of me I've never felt before and as much as I want to explore that, there's a part of me that can't imagine hurting her any more than I've already done.

I know she'd never view my restraint as the gift that it is and that makes me want to apologize. I'm not a man who apologizes to anyone. I don't make excuses.

I stroke up my shaft again, the threat of an orgasm settling deep in my balls and drawing them closer to my body. I spread my legs a little but it provides no relief. I can't imagine slowing my hand, despite not being even close to this ending.

A wave of goosebumps washes over her skin, her nipples pebbling right before my eyes. If I hadn't climbed underneath the covers because I felt the chill in the air, I could possibly convince myself that it's arousal. I could let myself believe that it's desire that's making her body react that way, but I know better.

She moves her body, shifting just the slightest amount, the muscles in her thighs clenching.

There's no way she could deny how she feels as the top of her breasts turn pink.

She is aroused and I moan at the idea of knowing that she has to be glistening between her legs.

That desperate need to taste her consumes me. If I were the monster I imagine she truly believes that I am, I would pounce on her. I would spread those slender thighs of hers and bury my face in the apex of them.

If she thought the orgasm she gave herself in the shower earlier was incredible, the woman has no idea how good I could make her feel.

I bite my lip, because if I open my mouth, I'm going to insist on seeing it. Instead, I let my eyes flutter closed. I let my imagination take over, and that version of Raya, the version I'll never see in real life, leans back and does it without being prompted.

She spreads her thighs and uses the index fingers on both hands to open herself up for me. That's when I nearly lose control. "Jesus, what a pretty pussy," I whisper, my thoughts turning into real words. But I can't stop now. I can't pump the brakes. This train is close to derailing, and the crash is going to be epic.

She whimpers in my mind as the images unfold. I'm desperate for the taste of her on my lips, aching to know what her flesh against mine feels like. I'm driven insane by thoughts of sliding my cock inside of her.

The fantasy of her begging for more in my mind is what sets me off. My legs tense exactly the way hers did in the shower, and I don't open my eyes until the very last rope of cum hits my chest.

When I manage to open them again, she's staring down at me, her gaze locked on the cum marking my skin.

True to form, she doesn't say a word, but she also doesn't look away. I lie there for a long moment, just basking in the glow of such a powerful orgasm. Doing this in front of her is nothing like doing it to myself in the shower when the urge strikes.

I don't say a word as I climb off the bed and head into the bathroom. My shower is quick, effective, cool in temperature, due to the flush of heat still on my skin.

The towel is warm as expected when I pull it from the rack and I'm quick to dry my body and go back into the bedroom.

Her eyes track me across the room. They follow me like they always do.

I find that I love her attention but it also confuses me. That reaction I have to her is just one more thing to add to the list of things that surprises me where she's concerned.

Before Raya, I hated when people looked at me. I hated feeling tracked and observed. I wanted to be a ghost in the shadows, not someone on display.

We're both silent when I climb back into the bed. I'm the one to reach for the covers, not her, and I hide a smile when I realize that she never pulled the blanket back up over herself during my shower. She also didn't put the borrowed shirt on last night after I came on her.

"I'm not going to rape you," I confess. "You don't have to be afraid of that from me."

Her eyes watch mine for a long moment and I can tell she's trying to determine whether I'm lying or not.

"Thank you," she finally whispers. Now if only I can keep my word.

Chapter 14

Raya

Not long ago, I shoved down the idea that I was suffering from Stockholm syndrome. But I have to wonder if that was the case. What else would explain the reasoning for feeling more than just a hint of arousal, watching him jack off right beside me, the movement of his hand easily felt because we're sitting on the same mattress.

I'm losing my mind. I have to be going crazy for my body to be reacting the way that it is. That arousal faded quickly when he went to go shower, so does that make it temporary insanity? Is it the lack of sunlight? The lack of a schedule? The lack of large groups of people having expectations? Is it because he's the only one I have to focus on? Is it because I'm not having to spread my attention?

I don't have the answer to any of those questions. But I can't deny that it turned me on. I dipped my fingers between my legs when I heard the shower turn on. I was wet.

I could tell when he walked back in here that he thought I was just sitting here like a good little girl, and I pray that he never finds out that I climbed off this bed and used the corner of the sheet to clean myself up. I didn't orgasm. That would be even crazier than being a little turned on at the sight of him but I needed that arousal gone. I wouldn't put it past the man to challenge me, to demand that I show him.

It has to be coming, right? He can't be satisfied with just watching me get off. He can't be okay with just me watching him. He promised he wouldn't rape me but I can't allow myself to believe that. There's going to be more and it makes me want to cry, knowing that the appeal of everything we've done is there.

My heart continues to race at the same speed it did when he was pleasuring himself, but now it's because I'm scared. I'm scared of how it made me feel, of how it forced my body to respond to him. My mind keeps traveling back to his promise. But he doesn't have to rape me for it to be assault. He doesn't have to penetrate me for it to be assault. Not even including the abduction, what he's doing, what he'd just done on the bed

beside me, could be punishable by law.

Peeping Toms and men who pull their penises out in public get charged. They face criminal charges for doing such things. *But you liked it,* my mind forces me to acknowledge. I shake my head, wondering if he knows how much I'm struggling internally right now. Not that he would care. He doesn't seem like the type of man that would give a shit about anyone else's feelings, anyone else's needs, but his own.

I don't think for a second that he brings me food and water because it's a benefit to me. I would be hard to manipulate if I were too weak. This isn't my fault. He's to blame for this. And if not him, maybe it's my lack of experience. My body doesn't fully understand what's going on, what's happening, and what's appropriate, when to get aroused, when to feel desire. My lack of experience can be to blame.

I could also blame my parents for keeping me guarded so strictly. That's who I blamed after the near scandal with my college professor. Had they given me a little freedom, if they allowed me to experience life, on any level, I don't think I would have been as susceptible to the small amount of attention I was paid as a freshman. I wouldn't be turned on by a psychopath if I had been given a chance to go out and live a normal life.

Tears streak down my face for my own depravity, and I have to dash them away with the back of my hand. He doesn't say anything. He doesn't smile or taunt me because I'm upset. He also doesn't look pleased. The worst part of all of this is that he watches me the same way I watch him. His eyes graze down my cheek, following the multitude of tears that I can't seem to stop.

His promise means nothing as he tugs the blanket a little bit higher up on his chest. He said don't be scared of that, of that type of assault. But he's in bed beside me, and that is all I can think about.

He pulls his eyes from mine as he lifts the television remote, pointing it at the screen. It goes black before a whirring sound fills the room as it slides back into its hidden spot in the footboard. He turns over, angling his back in my direction, and turns off the bedside lamp.

He's not afraid of me. He's not scared or worried that I'm going to hurt him in the middle of the night. There's no reason he should be, despite what's happened. My mind keeps going back to the fact that physically, he hasn't hurt me. I don't know if I can fight him. I don't know if I can hurt him, physically. Even though he hasn't done that to me, I know I wouldn't win.

I refuse to think about the fact that's not the main reason why. I don't know if he changed his mind or if he's just uncomfortable, but he rolls back over, the overhead light still shining bright. His eyes are closed, those sandy brown eyelashes resting fully on his cheek. When he moves again, I startle, a knee-jerk reaction.

He twists in the middle, grabbing a different remote, and then the room goes dark. I'm left sitting, staring into emptiness, my heart pounding in my chest. If he has nefarious plans, I'll never see it coming. I can only assume he's going to hurt me when his body moves again, but all I feel is a soft touch —a brush, probably the tip of only one finger, on my leg and then it's gone. It was so brief, I could convince myself that I imagined it. That it didn't happen. That he didn't finally cross that line.

He doesn't apologize. There are no whispered words in the darkness, but he also doesn't reach for me again. I sit there for what feels like hours, adrenaline rushing fast enough to give me a headache, but he doesn't move again. His breathing is low and steady, rhythmic enough that I convince myself that he's asleep.

I wonder if I'll ever get the chance to look back at this moment. If I'll be rescued and asked to tell the full story, to give every single gritty detail about my stay here. Would they ask me why I didn't try to smother him or why I didn't try to hurt him to get away? Because I don't touch him, and I don't know the answer as to why I don't.

I tried to imagine myself being free of him. I tried to picture what it would look like, but overpowering him, for some reason doesn't seem right. It doesn't feel right deep inside of me as that's what I need to do. I want to shake him awake and insist that he leave. I want more promises from him. I want an agreement of sorts. I want to be able to ask for things and get them—like him sleeping in another room, which he did before now. I want privacy to shower and use the restroom. I want meals that don't consist of things I'd never pick for myself if I'm going to be his captive.

I should have more accommodations. I scoff, covering my mouth with

my hand the second the sound escapes. I don't want him to wake up but my thoughts are leading me to ridiculous places. Maybe this is part of that insanity.

The man forced me to make myself come in the shower. It wasn't what I wanted. But did he make you watch him when he jacked off beside you in the bed? The answer to that is yes.

I tried to pull my eyes away. I tried to not watch him. I didn't feel threatened in that moment. I wasn't worried he was going to hurt me. There was no silent command to keep my eyes on him but that didn't make it any less of a choice. There was no choice. I was in a trance.

I blink into the darkness but my eyes refuse to adjust to the lack of light. It's too dark. It's too quiet. It's too everything.

"If you don't go the fuck to sleep." I jerk at the sound of his voice, scaring me in the darkness. "Raya," he warns, the tone of his voice making me immediately lie flat on the bed.

We're still not touching. I wouldn't survive the night if we were. I close my eyes because they serve me no purpose in the darkness. I lie flat on my back, listening, but there's something soothing about the sound of his voice, about the sound of his breathing, and when I get the urge to drift off to sleep, much like how I've acted since I got here, I don't fight it.

Chapter 15

Liam

The last several days have been nothing but a series of whys and today is no different. Why did I stay lying beside her? After several hours of no sleep, why did I quietly climb off the bed in an effort not to wake her? Why, instead of leaving the room, did I remove the lock from her chain, bolting her to the floor? Why do I even care?

I don't have any answers to these fucking questions. Normally, a question I couldn't answer gets ignored. In the grand scheme of things, it doesn't fucking matter. I asked the question a lot. When I was being held captive in South America—why are they doing this to me? Why haven't they killed me yet? Why did they take such pleasure in hurting others? Why were their screams from the other room? Why did those screams stop?

I shake my head as I pad down the hallway. Instead of going right into my home gym, I continue left into the living room. The clock on the wall tells me that it's four o'clock in the morning. That doesn't surprise me. I can't remember the last time I had a good night's sleep but last night has to be the worst night I've had in as long as I can remember.

I never sleep well. Clearing my mind enough to be restful is an impossibility for me. It has been for years even in a house with only one door and no windows. I can't completely eradicate the feeling that I'm unsafe. I don't know why I thought lying in bed beside her would make it different.

I don't know how it's different for her. I don't know how she's been sleeping peacefully for the last three hours. I don't know how she didn't startle when I got off the bed. I don't know how she didn't jolt and sit upright on the mattress when the combination lock clicked against her chain. It's not like she was pretending, like I was last night.

I knew when I spoke and told her to go to sleep that she thought I was already asleep. She can't possibly feel safe with me. Although there's a certain thrill and wanting to convince myself that that's true, I know what it's like to figuratively sleep with one eye open. I know what it's like to jerk and startle and be so exhausted that you can't help but fall asleep.

But every sound, every clink, every voice, every scream wakes you up. It sets you on high alert. It forces adrenaline through your blood and even the crash of that isn't enough to allow for a peaceful night's rest. Was it my promise that gave her comfort? Was it my promise that let her sleep peacefully? Or is it the fact that she believes she's too important to worry herself with being afraid?

I grit my teeth as I open the refrigerator door. There's nothing that I want. There's nothing in the fridge that I'm hungry for. The only hunger I feel is for her. It claws inside of me, begging to be released. But feeding that monster, giving it what it wants, isn't an option. I don't hand out promises like they're nothing. *A man's word*, a foster dad told me once when I was five or six, *a man's word has to mean something*. His did. When that foster dad used the words *or else*, I learned very quickly about his word meaning something. I learned that he didn't waste words. If he said I'm going to beat your ass, he delivered.

I shake my head. My thoughts are all jumbled—what I need to do, what I should do, what I could do, what I can't do. All of it mixes and swirls together. All of it makes me want to arrow down the hallway, wake her up and demand that she tells me what it is about her that is making me this way.

Knowing I can't give the monster exactly what he's begging for, I pull breakfast ingredients out of the fridge. I know she hasn't been asleep long, but I also feel different from the man that crept out of the bed in order to allow her to sleep. The sun's not going to be up for another couple of hours, but there's purpose in what I'm doing. I need her off balance. I don't want her to know whether it's day or night.

That makes me frown at the breakfast. I just don't have the energy to cook a steak or make a sushi roll in an effort to try to convince her that it's a different time of day. Breakfast consists of toast, oatmeal, eggs, and bacon. It's not fancy. There's not a sprig of parsley in sight. Feeling spiteful, I make only one cup of coffee. Either she's gonna stare at me while I drink it, wanting some of her own, or she's going to be annoyed with the smell of it filling the air. Either way she won't be pleased.

This is one more way for me to control her. I need control over her but at the same time, it irks me relentlessly that she's so quick to obey. It's as if she's biding her time, as if she knows something I don't know. It's as if she

has information that I'm not privy to, and that's another thing that drives me crazy.

She's sitting up on the bed when I bring breakfast into the room, the light flowing in from behind me lighting up the bed. She blinks rapidly from the sudden onslaught of light. I don't know how long she's been sitting here on the bed in the dark. But it doesn't look like she's moved a muscle.

I hit the light switch with my elbow before crossing the room and placing the tray of food on the table in front of the small sofa.

"I have to go pee," she says timidly.

I angle my head toward the bathroom before pointing down at the untethered chain. "Go ahead and go."

She looks down and I can tell the instant she realizes that she's been semi-free. She woke up in the dark room alone. She didn't test her restraints. She didn't move a muscle. I'm not stupid enough to think, or even try to convince myself, that she wants to be here, but it says something that she didn't try to leave.

It doesn't stop the regret from swimming in her eyes. Regret that she didn't try. I smile at her when her lip begins to quiver. "Don't tell me you're tame already, Raya," I taunt.

She must recognize something in the look on my face. "You promised not to hurt me."

I shake my head. "I promised not to rape you," I clarify. It doesn't set her off. It doesn't anger her. It doesn't spark that argument I can see forming in her eyes. It's exactly what I'm looking for.

She's okay with being abducted. She's perfectly at ease, being told what to do all the time. She may be accustomed to obeying. She may have rules that she follows because her dad is a politician and always in the spotlight but there's fight in this woman and that's what I'm looking for. Raya Reed will never be her true self until she loses complete composure.

She continues to watch me silently, like always. I wonder if this is part of how she's trying to control me. I'm waiting for the explosion. I'm waiting for her to lose her shit and just rail on me. But each time she complies, each

time she obeys, I have mixed feelings. I like it because I want it and that is the end game. But at the same time I want the fight. I want her to stand up for herself.

Eventually, she climbs off the bed and heads into the bathroom. I hear the toilet flush then the water in the sink comes on. Then I hear the shower. I'm annoyed because she didn't ask permission to shower. It doesn't take me long before I'm standing in the doorway, watching her. I never promised her privacy, and she'd be a fool to expect that from me.

I see the second she realizes that I'm standing there, but she doesn't shy away. She doesn't try to cover herself or angle her body in a way that I can't see her. She's just bathing. She's not washing in a way meant to entice me, but that doesn't stop the arousal and the desire from rearing back to life.

I don't pull my sweats down this time. I don't stroke my cock watching her, but I'm left feeling like I'm missing out on something when her shower finishes and she reaches for the knob to turn the water off.

"Don't," I snap.

She turns around to face me, questions in her eyes that she's either too afraid or too confused to ask.

"You know what to do," I tell her. All I see is relief in her eyes. There's no fight. There's no argument. There's no hesitation as she runs her slender little hand down her belly and goes to work. She doesn't look up at the ceiling this time. She doesn't cry. Her lips don't tremble. She doesn't fight it. When she locks eyes with me as she comes, if anything, she looks relieved. It says she needed it, but more importantly, it looks as if she needed me to tell her to do it.

Raya

Shame keeps my eyes lowered as I hand him back the towel. It's not the first time he's commanded me to pleasure myself and I have no doubt that it won't be the last, considering the amount of desire in his eyes while it was happening. My shame stems more from the guilty realization that I enjoyed it. I needed it. I wanted him to tell me to do it. I don't think I would have touched myself had he not issued the command, but my body was begging for the release. My skin was on fire, itchy with need. Wanting it this time is unlike being forced to do it the first time because the pleasure lasts longer. It doesn't dissipate the second the orgasm is over like it did the first time.

My head is a jumble of thoughts as I walk past him into the bedroom. The chain around my neck clinks and jingles as it travels along behind me. At first, my eyes dart to the bed, I could really use more sleep. I have no doubt if I survive this situation, I'll sleep for a month straight. But then again, I know my parents would never allow it. We'd have to jump on the prime news spots that have been covering my abduction. There'd be exclusives and interviews and every part of my life leading up to my abduction until I returned home would be picked apart as much as I want out of here.

I'm not looking forward to that part. There's no true privacy in my life. There would be no headline that states the family is asking for privacy during this trying time. My emotions and my mental health would not even be considered. The news would be too big.

I swallow as my eyes dart to the bedroom door and for a split second, I imagine myself throwing it open and escaping. But I know that's not possible. The lock on the door requires a thumbprint—his thumbprint.

With a sigh that encompasses more than the guilt I feel for what I just did in the shower, I cross the room and take a seat on the small sofa. My mouth waters at the sight of the bacon there. It looks golden and extra crispy.

I glance up at him as he crosses the room, his erection flagging but not fully gone as he sits right beside me. There's a brief brush of his thigh along mine but he's quick to move over a few inches until we're not touching. I don't know if it's guilt or his own form of shame that keeps him from putting

his hands on me. Maybe all the things he spit at me when he first brought me here are right. He thinks I'm a petulant, petty child. Maybe he believes I'm not worthy of his touch. Maybe the thought of touching me in the first place disgusts him.

"Eat," he grunts as he reaches for a piece of toast. I don't do the same.

He chews quietly and I can feel his eyes on the side of my face, but I refuse to look in his direction. I've acknowledged his presence too many times already.

"Is there something wrong with the food?" he asks.

I have a choice to make. I can comply and eat what's put in front of me, because Lord knows I'm starving, but I decide to go with my first instinct instead. "Do you know how much grease there is in bacon? Do you know how many carbs are in toast and oatmeal?" I keep my voice level, the snideness I want to use bubbling under the surface.

"This isn't a fucking five-star hotel, Raya."

I scoff at the ridiculousness of his words. "I can't eat a plate full of carbs and saturated fat. I'll get as big as a house."

He scoffs as if I'm the ridiculous one. As if he didn't rip me away from my life and force me to play with myself in his shower.

"You could stand to gain a little weight. Now eat."

My head jerks back, his words like a slap to the face. But I'm more surprised than angered. It's the opposite of something my mother would say. My mother, who's a firm believer that everybody has at least five extra pounds to lose, would say if the camera adds ten pounds, you need to lose fifteen.

I try for a different tactic. "I'm going to go crazy without exercise." He hums and it sounds like an agreement as if he couldn't imagine going through daily life without some form of exercise. His agreement isn't an offer to provide that for me though. He doesn't make a suggestion about doing jumping jacks or push-ups or wall squats.

In the room he's caged me inside of, he just continues to eat, using long fingers to pick up another piece of bacon. I have to look away,

remembering what those hands look like when he's touching himself. I'm losing my mind. I have to be. That's the only reason I can come up with for letting those things infiltrate my head.

"Eat," he commands again. I look at him this time.

"If I wanted to waste my calories, I'd do it on something enjoyable, like banana Laffy Taffy, not toast, oatmeal, and greasy bacon." Keeping the ire out of my tone this time is impossible.

The turn of his head is slow, his eyes serious and menacing, but he doesn't issue another command. The demand to eat is etched in every feature on his face. Knowing I've pushed the boundaries enough today, I reach down and grab a piece of toast, somewhat grateful that it seems to be wholegrain.

"I like eggs," I confess after chewing and swallowing a small bite.

"But not those eggs?" he asks, pointing down at a clump of scrambled yellow mess.

"Not really," I say, instead of complaining further. If the toast is already cold and I can see the top layer of oatmeal already drying out, I'd never be able to stomach those eggs. I don't know how he'd respond if I puked on his floor.

The toast is dry in my throat, but he picks up the single cup of coffee off the tray when I go to reach for it. "The water is yours," he says and I try my best not to glare at him when he lifts the coffee to his lips. With more attitude than I intended, I pick up the cup of water and drink more than half of it. "You need protein," he says after a long minute. "So either eat the bacon or eat the eggs."

Gingerly, I lift a strip of bacon from the plate and take a hearty bite. It's delicious. Thick and crispy. It's nothing like the paper-thin slices of turkey bacon the chef adds to my breakfast plate every morning. I don't groan in pleasure as I swallow but I want to. What I can't manage to do is scrunch my nose and pretend that it's horrible. I ignore the faint smile on his lips as I toss the second half into my mouth. He scoops bite after bite of eggs into his mouth, leaving the remainder of bacon for me.

He doesn't say a word. He simply waits patiently until I'm done eating before he stands and carries the tray out of the room. The sound of the lock engaging fills the room and I know I'd never be able to escape that way. I war with myself on what to do next. I don't know how long he'll be gone. I could be in here alone for two minutes or it could be two hours. But I can't not take a chance at escape. He didn't re-chain me to the floor and I don't know if this is a test or not.

The second I gather enough courage, I bolt up from the sofa and race across the room. I'm not greeted with sunlight or darkness when I pull the curtains back. How is that even possible? I gasp, my hands meeting nothing but sheetrock and paint. I dart to the next window, ripping the curtains back once again. Walls. It's nothing but walls.

I race around the room, checking behind all four sets of curtains, but there are no windows. There's nothing there. It's just wall. My heart is racing and tears burn my eyes. I want to sob. There's no escape. There's no getting away from him. I crumple to the floor and pull my knees up to my chin and cry. It's the only thing I have power over right now. I don't have control over my thoughts, my emotions, or my body.

I don't bother looking up when the bedroom door opens again. It's only been a matter of days and already I'm defeated.

"What's wrong?" he asks. But the tone of his voice says that he is well aware of what I've discovered. It wouldn't be that hard to figure out. I've got my back against a curtain where a window should be. I look up at him, tears still streaming down my cheeks. But there's no sympathy in his eyes. He doesn't feel sorry for me. Hell, he doesn't even seem pleased that I'm upset. There are no emotions on the man's face.

"The windows are fake," I tell him, as if this isn't his house, as if he didn't know. "Why are there no windows in this room?"

He stares at me for a long moment, as if he's trying to figure out an explanation. But he simply shrugs. "There are no windows in this entire house." I stare at him. "It's just safer."

"Safer?" I ask weakly. "Who do you need protection from?" My mind races with the idea that there are people out there willing to go up against a man like him. Are there worse people in the world than men who have abducted women and forced them to come?

"Everyone," he answers. From the way his throat swallows, from the way he watches me, it makes me wonder if he's talking about me as well.

Liam

Part of me wants to give her a little freedom. That's the disillusioned part of my mind. That's the part of me that thinks a switch will flip in her head, making her want to be here, rather than being my captive. It's a crazy thought. As long as she's here, she'll always be my prisoner.

Sane people don't wake up over a week after being captured, and just decide that this is where they want to be. If I believed in talk therapy rather than killing people to solve my problems, I would have made an appointment right after sleeping in the bed with her for the first time. That's when the real insanity started.

Even after a week, I don't feel right. I'm not sleeping any better at night because I know it's only a matter of time before all of this comes crashing down around me. I'm gonna have to leave here, eventually. Despite my need to keep her trapped in this house, it's not something I could do myself.

My skin is itchy with the need to get out, to hurt people, to take my anger and frustration of this entire situation out on someone else, because I would never hurt her. As much as I want to prove a point, as much as I want to show her that discarding people is dangerous, I don't think I could ever bring myself to do it.

As time slowly drags by, I realize it never would have happened in the first place. I'm surprised I've let it get this far. I don't know if it's an ingrained part of me or what, but I've never been the type of man that could hurt a woman. Maybe it was what I witnessed as a young child in foster care. Maybe it was the sad eyes of the foster mothers after their husbands yelled at them or hit them and called them worthless. Maybe it was the threats I heard whispered in the dark of night when she had the nerve to ask where he'd been. Maybe it was the screaming and the begging, the pleading to be let go.

When I was a prisoner in South America, maybe it was the pleas and cries for help or maybe it was the begging for death that made me not want to be that person. Maybe... maybe it's just her. That would be an easier explanation. That would help explain why I lie beside her every single night

and listen to her breathing as she sleeps. She has no problem getting rest despite the way she tortures me in the darkness with every breath she takes.

Each morning, I make breakfast for the two of us and then I watch her shower. I fight the urge to detach myself as the memories of the last five days force themselves to the front of my mind. Five days ago, I gave her a test. I followed her into the bathroom, commanded her to pleasure herself. I just watched, not once touching the straining erection jutting from my hips.

The next day, the second she climbed under the stream of water, my hand found my cock, stroking it, teasing it, touching it the way I wish she would. I was floored when she did the same. My mouth was literally hanging open, when unprompted she ran those slender fingers over her body to the apex of her thighs. I stroked faster. Her fingers worked harder. I slowed down. She looked annoyed but she slowed down too.

That's what it's been like the last four days. If I have to tell her to touch herself, I don't reward her with the sight of watching me do it. She's learned that if she initiates it, I'm going to follow through right along with her. I roll over in the bed with a groan, trying to shove those thoughts aside but I'm long past seeing reason or coming up with a way for all of this to end that's beneficial to both of us.

My balls ache with need for her. It's all I can focus on—that sting of pain in my nuts that demands its own form of relief. I know better than to try to fight it. It only leads to misery.

I climb out of the bed and slowly make my way to her side. She only stirs a little when I flip on the bedside lamp. "Raya," I snap. Realizing a little too late that I didn't say her name loud enough to wake her, I repeat it louder this time. She jolts in her sleep but doesn't open her eyes. I pull the corner of the blanket down, exposing her shoulder. With more attitude than she's ever given me, she jerks it back up and grumbles something about needing a day off.

But then she freezes as if she had the ability for a split second to forget where she was. She sits up, pulling the blanket up higher on her chin, and stares at me. She looks wiped out and frightened, realizing that she made a mistake. The lines on her cheek should make me want to run my thumb along it to smooth the creases away but I'm too far gone. I'm too caught up in the

needs of my own body.

I don't want to touch her softly like I do sometimes at night when she's fast asleep. I don't want to trail my finger down her arm or brush hair out of her face. I want to consume her. I want to crash my mouth against hers, slide my hand between her skin and the blanket and see just how hot she is. I want to touch those aches in her own body. Need building inside of me is the only thing that makes thoughts of physical reasoning for her ability to control me dissipate.

When I lie in bed listening to her sleep, I'm almost able to convince myself that it has to be a brain tumor. That has to be the only explanation I have for this connection I feel to her. I'm a man who actively avoids any connections with real people. It's why I've been avoiding Hollis the last five times he's called this week. I don't want to talk with him. I don't want to see him. I don't want to meet him and Nash for another boring-ass day on the beach. Neither of them knows how long I have to travel to get there to make it look like I live even remotely close to South Padre. Neither of them has any idea that I'm hundreds of miles away from the beach.

I don't tell her what I want as I walk toward the bathroom. She's gotten really good at anticipating my needs. She no longer has a collar or chain around her neck and I have fought the urge to put it back there just so I can hear that soft *thank you* she told me two days ago when I removed it.

She pads slowly into the bathroom, as I put myself up against the bathroom counter. Her hair is a tangled mess, her eyes sleepy. Her yawn makes it even more evident that she was nowhere near ready to be woken up. There's irritation flowing through her body with every single step she takes, but I can't worry about that right now.

She'll have plenty of time to sleep once I'm rid of the throbbing in my body. I can't think of her while my cock is hard and my head can focus on nothing else than the endorphin rush I'm going to get watching her shower. She turns the shower on like she normally does, but instead of reaching for that sweet spot between her thighs or the bodywash, she glares at me.

This isn't the first time she's done this. I've caught her once or twice with that snarky look on her face—the one that says that she just wants to spew hateful things in my direction. This time she doesn't back down. She

doesn't stop looking in my direction with anger in her eyes.

"You know what to do," I tell her, bargaining with myself that if I don't command her into action, it doesn't count. Because God knows if I have to command it, then I have to follow through with this unspoken rule between us. If I have to tell her to do it, then I can't do it to myself.

"Why do you want me to shower all the time?" she asks, sounding like a petulant child who was being told to eat their vegetables, instead of a naked woman standing underneath a steaming stream of water with perky breasts and a shadow of Heaven between her thighs.

"I like what happens in the shower," I say.

"I could play with myself in the damn bed," she grumbles but she doesn't give in. She doesn't reach for herself. She just stands there glaring at me.

Knowing she's in full control of this entire fucking situation, it kills me. I keep my mouth shut. The only reason I woke her up was so I could come in if she's going to play this game. "Raya."

I win. Her eyes drop to my erection and I don't have to look down to know that the tip is glistening with precum. I can feel the temperature difference as the cool air in the room washes over it. She doesn't take heed of my warning. Instead, she cocks her hips to the side and crosses her arms over her chest. I clench my fists open and closed, biting the instinct in me that tells me to make her do it. Not only is she hiding her perfect tits, but she's also being completely defiant.

My cock begs me to give in. It aches. It leaks. It fucking hurts and begs me to relieve the pressure. Her eyes narrow as I clench my jaw and it slams into me like a ten-thousand-pound truck.

She just figured it all out. She knows I'm not going to touch her. She knows I need more than she does. She knows that it pleases me to watch her. She's realized these moments in the shower are about my own need, my own desperation, and not that I'm trying to control her.

"Finish your shower," I snap before spinning and leaving the room. My hand is trembling by the time I press my thumb to the biometric keypad on the bedroom door. If she's gotten too used to the status quo, then I'm just going to have to mix things up.

Raya

He didn't exactly have a plan when I stood here and refused to do what he wanted me to do. He could command me, but the look in his eyes and the erection he had from the second I woke up, told me there was a reason he wanted me in the shower. This little game we've been playing, the one where he refuses to touch himself, he refuses to give me that part of him, if he has to ask me to do it, was in full force.

I wanted the command, but I also wanted him to break. I wanted him to tell me to touch myself, and then for him to touch himself too. I don't know when I got over the guilt. I was failing at doing any of this, but refusing to give him what he wanted wasn't supposed to end with him storming out of the room and telling me to finish my shower.

I'll finish alright, I think as I reach down and spend less than a minute getting myself off. If there's any such thing as a weak orgasm, it's the one I experience right now with him out of the room. I turn off the water, dry myself quickly with a towel and head back into the bedroom. I hope he doesn't see the flush on my cheeks and if he does, he attributes it to being upset at being woken up at whatever ungodly hour it is.

I have no real concept of time. The only thing I can base it on is whether he brings in eggs and bacon, sandwiches and chips, or something a little heartier, like pasta or sushi in the evenings. I'm not so sure he's not bringing me breakfast for dinner or lunch for breakfast just to fuck with my head.

I pat my hair, unsure of why I'm even concerned about what it looks like. I stopped looking in the mirror days ago. I didn't want to be a witness to the transformation I've made. It says if I've been reduced to basic human needs—eat, sleep, come, with a little television watching thrown in.

I crave the orgasm as much as I crave the coffee he doesn't let me drink, but I won't beg for it either. I don't have it in me to take it that far. From the way he stormed out of here, it seems he doesn't either. He still hasn't touched me, and I still haven't begged for it, despite the itchiness on my skin every time he's near.

I'm not one accustomed to touch. Of course, there are pats on the hand and a quick hug and a kiss to either cheek. There are more occasions than I can count where a man leans forward and kisses the back of my hand like Jackson did the night I was abducted. That's not the type of touch I crave from him. I don't want niceties and things that are expected in society. But I also don't know if I want soft and gentle or if I want the grip of his fingers, hard enough that it leaves bruises behind. I chalk that up to things I'm inexperienced with.

I didn't know I was lacking physical touch until I didn't have it, until he brought me here and deprived me of it. I could sit on the couch and wait for food. That's been the routine—shower, sit on the couch, and he brings me something to eat. He hasn't brought in food before the shower since that first time I refused to eat cold scrambled eggs, but eating is the last thing on my mind.

So, I climb back in the bed and pull the blankets up to my ears. Maybe with his anger, he'll be gone long enough that I can fall back asleep. Instead of the hour it normally takes me when he turns the lights out, because even in the darkness I can feel him watching me, I'm just drifting to sleep when the bedroom door opens. But like a spoiled child, I don't budge.

I don't jolt up and look at him like I normally do. I don't watch him cross the room like I know he expects. I don't try to anticipate his next move or wonder what's going to happen. He didn't give me what I wanted earlier and I refuse to give what he wants now.

"Raya," he snaps. Chills cover my arm but I still ignore him when he calls out again. I move down. There are only so many buttons I can push with this man before it becomes a danger to myself. I'm not willing, able, or ready to test those boundaries. But a little bit more attitude doesn't hurt.

I turn over, ready to give him a piece of my mind, but then I freeze when I see what's in his hand. The collar and the chain were bad, and I was so grateful when it was removed. But I never imagined this. There was no part in my head that could have conjured this scenario.

"You've got to be kidding," I say softly, trying to swallow the lump that has instantly formed in my throat. He's gripping a black dildo in his right hand as if it's an extension of himself. I open my mouth to argue in defiance, but mostly because of the way my body responds to even the idea of it. I should be terrified. I should be scared. I should run across the room and refuse. I don't feel any of that staring at the thing. A hint of disappointment settles low in my stomach because I've seen the man standing in front of me naked more than I've seen him clothed. It's easy to compare his size and the size of the toy in his hand because they're nearly side by side. It looks shorter, narrower, and I'm left wondering why he didn't buy a closer replica to his own anatomy.

"Uncover yourself, Raya," he commands but I can't obey. Maybe I'm in shock. Maybe I don't want him to see how I'm truly responding to it. He doesn't give me another second to argue. He simply rips the cover and the sheet from the bed and leaves them in a pile on the floor. "Spread your legs," is his next command.

I may actually die from heart failure with how hard the muscle is pounding in my chest right now. I hear the vibration of it in my ears. I feel it in that hollow spot at the base of my throat. I go to shake my head, to refuse his command, but then he steps closer to the bed. Unbidden, my legs fold but he doesn't pounce on me. His steps stutter. As he reaches the end of the bed, his eyes lock on the apex of my thighs. I have to look away, another wash of shame covering my body. I touch myself in the shower. That's the status quo. Sometimes, he strokes himself lying beside me in the bed, but he never tells me to touch myself then. The slickness of my desire is hidden in the shower. It washes away as quickly as it forms but there's no denying it now.

"Please don't make me do this," I say, mostly because I feel like I have to. I need to fight this. Just reaching out for the toy and accepting that this is how it has to be is a whole other argument that I'm not willing and not capable of thinking about right now.

"You know the rules," he says and maybe the reminder was needed.

Maybe I needed the threat that if I don't do it, he'll do it for me. Maybe it's fear that causes a new wave of goosebumps to cover my entire body. Maybe I'm scared and that's what makes my nipples harden to points.

His eyes graze over my body and it's as if I'm an open book. If my legs weren't spread for him, I still wouldn't be able to deny it. He tosses the toy on the bed and it bounces, the tip of it brushing the back of my knee as if

handing it to me would be getting too close. As if the simple brush of my fingers on his would be too much, as if it would be too hard for him to back away from.

"Do it," he says, the two words low and menacing.

"I'll need lube," I tell him but then he looks from my face to between my legs. His gaze locks there for a long moment as heat creeps up into my cheeks. I hate him in this moment. I've hated him many times since he took me but this may be the worst.

He knows it's a lie. He knows that my body is ready for that toy and I despise him for it. I despise the fact that I can't keep secrets, that my body responds in ways that I don't want it to. I don't want to want this. I don't want any of this.

My hand trembles as I reach down and pick the thing up, my eyes meeting his. Once he's done looking at me there, there's a hopefulness, at least that's what I read in his eyes. His cock's still pointing at me, still leaking, still flushed red and angry, still wrapped in a web of veins that both scare me and entice me. It's almost enough to make me lose my composure. Add that to the list of things I hate him for.

"If you're expecting me to get off," I say in a matter-of-fact tone. "That's probably not going to happen since I just made myself come in the shower while you were gone."

Liam

I clench my jaw at her confession. I should be angry. It pissed me off that she touched herself while I wasn't around. But it actually says a thousand things at the same time. I hate that I didn't get to see it. But at the same time, it means that she needed that release. It tells me that what she does in the shower isn't only because it's what I'm commanding of her.

"Fuck the cock, Raya." She looks at the thing in her hands, turning it over before taking a firm grip around the shaft right against the silicone balls. And it feels as if she's touching me, as if her hand is wrapped around my own length.

She doesn't immediately move it between her legs and it makes me wonder if this is the moment she's finally going to tell me to go fuck myself, but she doesn't open her mouth. She doesn't argue. She slowly moves it between her thighs. The tip of the fake cock barely kissing that glistening, sensitive flesh of hers like she did in the shower that very first time. She breaks eye contact with me, looking up at the ceiling.

"It's cold," she complains, but she doesn't pull it away from her skin.

I lick at my lips. "That fiery hot cunt of yours will warm it up in no time."

Her pretty blue eyes snap back at me and all I can do is reach for my cock. The game was over when I gave the command, standing here at the foot of the bed a few seconds ago. I have no intentions of standing here, watching her fuck herself and not touching my own cock. I'd never have the strength for that. Watching her stuff that toy inside of her and not touching myself? Not a chance in hell. There's no way, there's no fucking way, I would be able to handle that, but then I see victory in her eyes.

I lost, but it isn't until she pulls the cock further from her pussy that I understand.

This is a new game.

When I release my cock, she inches the toy closer to her body.

Just to test it one final time, I reach for myself and she pulls it further away. It irritates the hell out of me. I'm supposed to be the one in control, not her.

With a snarl, I drop my hands to my sides, ignoring the drop of precum that drips from the tip of my cock and lands on the top of my fucking foot.

A slow, victorious grin spreads across her face as she moves the toy up her leg, right back to where it belongs.

Her eyes flutter as she dips the end no more than half an inch then she pulls it back out, only to dip it in a little bit further. She works at it this way, slowly in and slowly out. I'm slowly losing my mind. Then she shifts on the bed, re-angles her body, and starts all over again.

My mouth is hanging open, my eyes locked to the center of her. But then she stops, her eyes dropping from the ceiling to meet mine. "It doesn't feel right," she complains. Sweet fucking Christ, I'll come without even having to be touched if she asks me to do it for her. But that's insane. She'd never ask because she'd never want me to do it. I'm sure the thought of me touching her would make her physically sick.

"I can't," she says as she pulls it free of her body and flings it down the bed. "I'm not going to hurt myself for you."

The only thing I can do is stare down at the thing, the black silicone making it easy to see her arousal clinging to the tip of it. I pick it up from the mattress, fighting the urge to smell or taste it.

An idea strikes me and I walk across the room and slap it onto the corner of the table. The suction cup on the bottom makes it stand right up into the air.

I look back at her and find her eyes watching me before they dart to the toy and then dart back to my face then dart back to the toy. She shakes her head, a look in her eyes I can't read. I think it's surprise. I think she's shocked at what I'm expecting. I don't say a word. I stand there and wait.

Her eyes stay on mine for the longest time before drifting back to the table, to the toy standing there. And this is how we continue for what seems

like five minutes. But eventually she climbs off of the bed. I'm entranced by the bounce of her tits, by the sway of her hips, by the way her eyes are locked on the toy much the same way she locks her eyes on me when I'm stroking myself while she's in the shower.

She licks her own lips as she gets closer to it, but she makes a point to step around me, to make sure her skin doesn't brush mine. I'm so fucking grateful for that, given she hasn't worn clothes since the second night she was here. She's naked all the time, and I know that tortures me but I just can't seem to help it. Maybe that's my own punishment. Maybe being here is hers and seeing every inch of her flesh all day, every day, is mine.

Her heart-shaped ass jiggles as she passes me, and I clench my hand in an effort not to reach out and grab it. She's confident in her skin, no longer trying to hide herself from me. Sometimes we watch television in bed and she lets the blankets pool around her thighs rather than holding it up to her chin to cover her tits.

Once she gets within reach of the toy, she begins to position herself over it with her back to me.

"No," I say. "Turn around and face me." She does but that same annoyed look is on her face that she gave me earlier in the shower for having been woken up when she was still tired.

"I will fall over," she says. "I need my hands on the table to steady myself."

I inch closer to her and once again she steps to the side, making sure her toes aren't in the way. I slide the table across the room, butting the corner up against the bedpost. I don't waste a second climbing on the bed, situating myself until I have the best view in the house.

She stands there, disbelief and shock marring her pretty features, but once again her eyes go from me to the toy, to me to the toy. I can sense the argument or refusal coming in the way she walks to the corner of the bed. But instead of refusing, she says, "I've never..."

And I swear to God if she says she's a virgin, that promise I made last week will fly out the fucking window. I grip my shaft because I have to. Because thinking about her blood on my cock from penetrating her hymen,

nearly sends me over the fucking edge. My breathing increases.

"I've never done it this way before," she says, and I can't help but smile.

"Never ridden a cock?" I ask, because this is the kind of conversation I like.

I don't want the small talk. I don't want the questions she sometimes asks if she nods off during the middle of a show and gets confused when she wakes back up, needing to know what happened.

I want her to torture me with her words as much as she tortures me with the sight of her naked flesh. I try to ignore the disappointment I feel at discovering she's not a virgin. I've never had sex with a virgin. It's not something I've sought out, but I shove away the disappointment of knowing I won't be the first one to fuck inside of her.

Sick fuck, I'm a sick fuck, I think. She shakes her head and honestly, I'm so lost in my own thoughts, I can't remember what questions she's answering.

"I've only been with one guy," she confesses.

"And what?" I managed to ask. "He didn't like you on top?"

She frowns. "He never worried about me. He was more the bend me over the desk and get off than worry about me. It was always a rush job from my professor."

My eyes narrow. She has confessed so much right now. She's only been with one guy. She lost her virginity to a college professor. He didn't take care of her, didn't make her come. I couldn't imagine putting my hands on this woman and it only being about me. Her pleasure is my pleasure.

I hate the man and I don't even fucking know him. She looks away then and the embarrassment is gone. I hate that she might be thinking back to that time. I hate the pain I see in her eyes with the memories.

"He hurt you, didn't he?" I ask. "He broke your heart."

She shrugs as if it doesn't matter but I can tell that it does.

"Get to work," I say, pointing to the cock standing in the air instead of

consoling her. Warm and fuzzy isn't my thing. Tracking that guy down and slitting his fucking throat on the other hand? That's kind of more my style.

Raya

How can I want what he's demanding of me and want to refuse it at the same time?

I lick my lips as I stare down at the silicone penis but then I have to lift my eyes back up to him. I regret telling him not to touch himself because at least if he was, he'd be a little distracted with his own pleasure instead of analyzing every movement of my body.

"Get it ready," he urges, and I don't have to guess what he means. I close my eyes as I touch myself, noticing the change in his pattern of breathing. I slit my eyes open to see what he's doing. His hands are tangled in the sheets. His grip so tight, his knuckles are white. And I know he's hurting, not touching himself. I know it's what he wants. It's what he wanted in the shower and nothing has changed.

Slickness coats my fingers as I tease and toy. I avoid my clit because even as deranged as this is, I can't deny how much I want it. What would his hands feel like on my skin? I keep going back to that thought over and over, day after day. And I want to fight it. I want to refuse to think about it. I don't want my head imagining such things. It makes me just as sick and twisted as he is.

But the blame is no longer there, the excuses that would normally run through my head as I mentally pointed the fingers at my parents. I could have been more rebellious. I could have fought against their rules. I could have been unconcerned about the chance of news outlets getting a picture of me going wild, but I didn't. I think it's time to stop blaming everyone else for everything I feel like I've missed out on in life.

He doesn't let me refuse. Or maybe he does with the threats in his voice. The warnings he gives me with his eyes because that's all it takes to get me into motion. I touch myself longer than I need to, wondering if this is the time that I should stand up for myself, but I don't open my mouth to complain. I think refusing to do it would be worse with the way that my body is demanding I bend to his will.

I want it. There's no denying it, I realize, as I pull my fingers free and look down at the black toy standing there. It's as if the thing is reaching up to me. It's proud and unflagging. I can only imagine how good it's gonna feel. I spread my legs as I reach for the bedpost and I fight the urge once again to tell him that it's okay if he touches himself while I do that.

It would be a confession I'm not ready to make despite his ability to read those desires on my face without me uttering a word. His own arousal leaks from the tip of his penis and I take a little pride in that. I take pride in the fact that I'm able to turn him on enough to make him weak.

My tongue sneaks out, licking at my lips again, and that pleases him as well as he watches my mouth. The power I feel in this situation right now is divine, but I know it will be short lived. I know that if I waste any more time, I'm gonna force his hand. He'll either command me with words or he'll command me with his hands. I don't know which one would be better or worse. I don't know which one I desire the most. And maybe it's a combination of the two.

Maybe he could tell me to do it and when I refuse, he'll make me. God, what would his hands feel like on my shoulders as he pushed me down on that toy. A tingle races up my spine. My eyelids go half-mast and that control I was so happy with now feels like a loss of control. My need for him is a weakness.

And I have to wonder if it's him or the situation. If it were another man, would this be different? If I weren't a captive in his house? If I were at Jackson's parents' place, playing out this same scenario, would I still feel the way I do right now?

My nose scrunches up as I picture it, and the answer is a simple no, I wouldn't. I wouldn't want Jackson's hands on me. I could hardly stand the brush of his lips on the back of my hand the night that I was taken. I can still feel the sense of relief that he took a phone call and walked away even after what happened next.

Does that mean that I want to be here, that I'm okay with what's happening? Would the outcome be the same had I talked to this man in the surf shop instead of walking away? He doesn't seem like the type of man who would be okay with what my parents would consider an indiscretion. He

doesn't seem like he would fall in line with the demands of sneaking around with a woman like me.

I don't think it would be enough. I don't think that what I could give him would ever be enough. I could give him everything and I imagine he'd still ask for more.

My thighs tremble from the strain of just hovering above the toy. A low moan escapes my lips as it brushes my sensitive flesh but then the thought hits me and I stop. It takes a lot of effort not to laugh when a growl slips out of his mouth.

"What's the fucking problem this time?" he snaps, and it's clear that he's barely hanging onto his control.

I can't help but wonder what it would mean if he actually lost it. I can't help but wonder if he would release me or if he would hurt me. I can't help but think about the two very different reactions my head has with both of those scenarios.

"I don't even know your name," I tell him.

His upper lip twitches in irritation, his hands gripping the sheets even tighter. "You don't need to know my name."

"I beg to differ." I stand, feeling the instant relief in my muscles, and take a step away. His eyes comically dart from me, back to the toy. "If I'm going to fuck this cock," I say, swallowing because the dirty words don't feel right in my mouth. "Then I'm going to need your name." I stop short of crossing my arms over my chest because the action may be just a little too much for him to handle.

"Liam Stone," he says without hesitation, but then he growls again when I continue to stand there.

I need a second. I need a little time to run his name through my mind. I repeat it over and over in my head before his next growl sets me into motion. I bite my bottom lip in anticipation of how it's going to feel as I resituate myself above the toy.

I don't feel sexy at all as I have to look down and hold the thing in my fingers to line it up right. But then I squat a little lower, one hand gripping the bedpost.

The first couple of inches forces that moan I was trying to hold back out of my mouth. The next inch makes my mouth fall open, and I watch him, pleased at the way that he shifts and angles his head so he can see a little better. He's entranced much the same way I feel when I'm watching him in the shower.

"Do you want me to picture that it's you?" I whisper. His cock jerks against his lower abdomen. "Are you imagining it's your cock I'm sliding... Oh God," I moan when I take the thing fully inside of me.

It makes me feel full and a little achy but not in a way that makes me want to stand and refuse. It burns in a way that makes my body beg for more and so I give it exactly what it needs as I stand and then lower myself back down. I do this over and over, slow and steady.

"Jesus," he grunts but I'm no longer watching him. Paying attention to him when my body feels this good just isn't possible. He doesn't complain as I tilt my head forward, my jaw still hanging open in awe at the way it makes me feel. I watch it, that toy that less than ten minutes ago felt like a weapon, as it brings me the most pleasure I've ever felt before in my life.

I don't speed up when my body urges me to. I want to take the scenic route with this orgasm because I know it's going to leave me drained. The urgency for relief slams into me and I have to release the bedpost with one hand and stroke myself between my legs. My head angles back, my eyes unseeing, my breath hitching.

"Fuck, that's it, Raya. Don't stop."

I couldn't if I tried. I would probably claw and scratch and scream if he demanded that of me. There's no way to stop this. No way to impede what's coming, and as the first wave of orgasm hits me, I risk a glance in his direction. The power of my release doubling when I watch his cock jerk, cum jetting from the tip. The man didn't even have to touch himself to come. He didn't have to stroke his length or tug on his balls the way I know that he likes. Watching me was all that it took, and that says a lot about what I needed to know.

Liam

We stare at each other for a long moment as if neither one of us can believe what just happened.

I don't recall a moment in my life, even as a teenager, that I was able to come without touching my cock. Maybe it's because I never resisted the urge before. It's possible I've always had the ability, but I highly doubt it. She's the reason for this. The way she moaned, the way she looked surprised that riding that toy felt so good.

I can't pull my eyes away from her as she lifts herself off that fake cock. My own dick hasn't flagged at all. I don't know that it will anytime soon. The drop I always experience after coming hasn't happened yet.

"Can we watch more of that baking show?" she asks as if she's not only two minutes past her eyes rolling in the back of her head as she came.

"After we shower," I answer as I climb off the bed. That Black cock is glistening, covered in her arousal, and I know that if I don't step around her and head to the bathroom, I'm going to do something really fucking stupid with it.

I figure I can get a shower first. I can be quick and efficient and then she can take all the time she needs. Her footsteps follow close behind me as I reach into the shower to turn the water on. I freeze after stepping inside before I can tilt my head back underneath the spray.

She's carrying the dildo into the bathroom. And of course I'm still hard as I watch her wash it in the sink. Bubbles cover her hands and the cock as she strokes up and down it. She's not doing it to impress me. She's not doing it to turn me on.

But it doesn't matter. God, I want her hands on me. I want her mouth on me. I want to swallow her moans. I want to taste and lick and nip and bite every inch of her body—the backs of her knees, the tops of her thighs, her shoulders. I want to suck on her fingers.

"Goddammit," I grumble, finally tilting my head back into the water.

I'm reaching for the shampoo when she smacks the dildo onto the countertop. The suction cup takes hold, and it wiggles back and forth as if taunting her when she releases it. But she doesn't hesitate to turn to face the shower. She doesn't pause her steps as she walks closer. And of course my cock is still hard. I may die with an erection at this point.

She's careful not to touch me as she slides past me and turns on the shower head opposite of the one I'm standing under. We've never done this before. We've never shared the shower. I've never threatened her with it, despite wanting to every single time she's in here alone.

She's not trying to turn me on but it doesn't take much these days. A sleepy smile, a yawn, the way her lips wrap around a fresh strawberry as she watches television. She's torturing me and I don't even think she knows it.

There's no medical reason for my cock to still be pointing at her. I came so hard watching her that it should have flagged already. It's unsatisfied despite the pleasure it felt earlier.

"I'm sorry," I tell her, apologizing for the first time in a very long time. I have to. I grip my cock, stroking it as I glare at her. I'm not mad or angry. I'm not upset. If anything, I'm confused because I don't understand why she makes me feel the way that I feel.

I mean, yeah, she's beautiful. Her body is fucking phenomenal. But she's not the first beautiful woman I've seen with a phenomenal body. It's not the way she looks. Her good looks don't hurt but that's not what's making me feel this way. It's her, just her.

"I know," she says softly. "It looks painful."

Does she care that I may be in pain? It becomes obviously clear that she doesn't. As she starts to shower, she pays no attention to me, no attention to my hand despite me assuming earlier that's exactly what she wanted. It irritates me because I would never be strong enough to turn around and not watch if the roles were reversed. If she were pleasing herself, my eyes would be locked on her hand or on her jiggling tits or on the way her mouth hangs open before she comes.

"Turn around," I command, and the second she does, I erupt. I splash her skin with jizz, glaring into her eyes, challenging her to argue, daring her to open her mouth and say something about it. I don't apologize this time before climbing out and grabbing a towel.

I storm from the bathroom, but being in the bedroom just isn't enough. I need more distance. I have to leave the room completely, of course making sure it's locked before I go. I'm diligent about making sure that the door closes behind me, that I don't step away until I hear the mechanism whir inside, ensuring that it's locked.

The clock on the wall reads two a.m. and I'm honestly surprised that it's been two hours since I came out here to get that toy. It seems like it was over too fast. And although she gave me everything I was expecting, it somehow has ended up not being enough.

That toy has been on my brain all day since it was delivered around noon. Just knowing that it was in the house has taunted me beyond measure. I thought I'd be able to hold out longer than half a day to show it to her. But now I'm glad that I didn't. It was spectacular. Better than I ever could have imagined. And I'm a greedy fuck who wants to watch it over and over and over again.

My stomach growls as I enter the kitchen but even my hunger doesn't shove away the guilt I feel for speaking to her the way I just did. It's not like I can make her crave me the way I crave her. It's not like I can force her to want me the way I force her to come. I know I won't apologize as I grab snacks and head back to the bedroom. I already did that once today. And that's once more than I ever presumed I would in my lifetime.

I cradle various bags of snacks to my chest as I open the bedroom door, wondering if this is the moment she loses that control she's so good at holding on to. But when I swing the door open wide, nothing comes flying at my head. She's sitting on the bed, watching me as I enter. She has the covers pulled up around her hips, perfect fucking tits on display, and she looks more confused than angry. It's as if she wants to ask me what just happened, but I know she won't. She's never gotten comfortable enough to question my actions. Maybe she's still afraid of me.

The coffee table is already back in its original spot on the far side of the room, in front of the couch. I don't know how I feel about the room being put back in order as if nothing happened. I don't know if I overreacted in the shower. I don't know if she's confused at why I acted that way. I don't know if it was a power play on her part. All I know is that this sense of guilt that I feel is entirely unwelcomed.

I don't say a word before turning around and walking back out of the room. I don't bother closing the door. She couldn't escape if she tried and I think that she's realized that as well. But just in case, I know I can trust the biometric lock that's on the front door. That's the only way out of this place. I drop the snacks back on the counter, not considering the thought that making her something heartier to eat is just one more form of an apology that I refuse to let escape my lips.

I stay on high alert for a few minutes as I rummage around in the pantry. There may come a time where she tries to find a weapon to hurt me with but keeping her locked in the room forever isn't likely either. I'm confident enough in my skills that I would be able to strong-arm her and get any weapon of her choosing away from her before it caused any real damage. I know that I need to be less concerned about the physical damage that she may cause and focus more on how she's completely turned my life upside down. But I don't have a hundred years to analyze all of that information.

Raya

I stare at the open bedroom door. I know better than to get my hopes up. An open door doesn't mean I'm free. I don't immediately move from my spot on the bed. When he doesn't come back after a couple of minutes, I climb off and make my way in that direction.

I angle my head just outside of the doorframe, listening. Sounds of irritation can be heard in the banging of dishes and kitchen cabinets. I follow the sound, unsure of what I'm going to find.

Since I've been here, other than his phone ringing on occasion, we've been completely alone. I don't anticipate that ending anytime soon. He's already irritated, so I don't bother wrapping the sheet from the bed around myself before leaving the room. My bare feet carry me into the kitchen.

He slams another cabinet door, grumbling to himself as I enter. My head is held high, but the show of confidence is only skin deep. My ability to maintain composure is another skill I've mastered in my short lifetime. Freaking out will get me nowhere. Darting to the front door is hardly a blip on my radar. It has the same type of lock as the bedroom door and my fingerprint would never open it.

I come to the shocking reality as I watch his back muscles twist and bunch, that there's a real possibility that I don't run to test it out because maybe I don't want to escape. The thought frightens me. It angers me because being held captive isn't something that I want either.

I swallow before opening my mouth to speak, but the words never come out. He's grumbling, clearly irritated, and although he's the one who left the bedroom door open, an invitation for me to leave, I doubt he'll be happy that I've joined him. He looks up at the ceiling as if there are answers there to questions he's not asking out loud. I take in the kitchen. It's small but efficient, clean, devoid of clutter.

"If you're making an omelet, I want egg whites only," I say.

He turns slowly to face me, but there's no surprise in his eyes. I have no doubt the man knew I was standing behind him the second I entered the room. His eyes skate down my body and I've learned it's something he can't control.

I fight back a smile because he makes it very clear he likes what he sees. I've stopped hiding my body from him. There's honestly no point in it. If I'm not on full nude display, he'd command it from me. If I refused, he'd force it out of me, and I'm picking my battles.

I'm tender between my legs as I shift on my feet, waiting for his response. He never moves his eyes like he's gonna argue, like he's going to choose this moment to once again assert his power, control and dominance over me. His annoyance with me is clear in his eyes. Well, that makes two of us. I'm annoyed as well.

He seemed annoyed when I told him about my experiences with my college professor and how he didn't provide the things I needed. He wasn't happy at the idea of another man leaving me wanting. But then he did the exact same thing in the bathroom.

I climbed into the shower, needing more from him but not in a sexual way. What I did, the performance I gave him in the bedroom, left me raw and needy. I didn't want him to touch me. I didn't want him to embrace me and tell me I did a good job, but I was exposed. All he wanted was more of that.

It's stupid of me to think of this as more than what it actually is. He doesn't care for me. His goal has always been to use me and that's something I need to accept. I need to stop visualizing him as anything more, as anything more than the monster that he is.

I orgasmed so hard it blurred my vision. He came without touching himself, and as much as I thought that was a victory, that I had done something right, it wasn't enough for him. I wasn't enough for my professor and I'm not enough for my captor. And what does that say about me?

He opens his mouth to speak, but he doesn't tell me that I'll get what he sees fit. "Do you want it spicy or mild?" he asks.

I blink at him, surprised. "Is there a middle ground?" I ask. "A little spicy but not too hot?"

He nods before turning back to the stove. And as much as I want to explore, I take a seat at the table and wait. I try for a relaxed look, so he

doesn't turn around and think that I'm waiting in an expectant manner, but slouching in the chair hurts my back.

I fiddle with my fingers on the tabletop, picking at the manicured tips of my fingernails as he cooks. When he places the delicious looking omelet in front of me, I fight the urge to dig in, waiting until his is done and he takes the seat opposite of me.

"This is weird," I say after swallowing my first bite. He looks from the plate in front of me to my mouth.

"Did I put too much cayenne in there?"

I shake my head, a small laugh erupting from my throat.

"Not the omelet. The omelet is perfect, thank you. It's weird sitting at this table, the both of us eating, as if this is a completely normal situation." He hums in agreement but doesn't say anything else. We spend the remainder of the meal in silence. No words come from my lips but my head is a mess of questions I know I'll probably never ask.

I can't recall a single time in my life when I have spent so much time in the presence of another without speaking. Words always seemed necessary, but the silence between us doesn't seem awkward. I don't feel obligated to smile and engage in small talk just to fill the void of silence. He definitely doesn't seem like he wants to speak.

He finishes eating before me but waits until I'm done before he stands. Without thinking, I stand as well, holding my hand out for his plate. He looks surprised, speechless, as he hands it over. I carry them both to the sink, awkwardly turning on the water. Washing dishes isn't familiar to me, but I do my best, adding soap to the sponge and scrubbing the food away, before rinsing them and placing them on the draining board.

I feel an odd sense of accomplishment as I rinse my hands before turning off the water. I take a step back with a smile on my face, knowing he's still in the room because I can feel his presence as he watches me work. But when I look over at him, he's not smiling. That same air of annoyance I felt when I first walked into the kitchen swarms around me once again.

"What?" I ask, looking from his scrunched-up face, back to the dishes.

"They aren't clean," he says.

I want to ask him if he's OCD, but I know that won't go over well. My instinct is to apologize even though I'm not the least bit sorry. I hate being corrected. It means I've made a mistake. Instead of letting an *I'm sorry* slip out of my mouth, I take another step back and cross my arms over my chest.

I know what agitates him more than anything and I choose this moment to use it as a weapon. "I figure I did pretty well, considering I've never washed dishes before."

He stares at me as if I am an alien transplant from a different planet.

"What?" I shrug. "The house staff always took care of that for me."

His eyes narrow even further and I know that I hit the right button. "I've never swept or mopped either. I've never used a vacuum cleaner."

He shakes his head in annoyance as he steps up to the sink and turns the water back on. Instead of hanging around, listening to him grumble and call me a spoiled brat under his breath, I leave the room. There are only three doors on the narrow hallway, one is the bedroom, one is the bathroom, but it's the last door on the right that I choose.

Liam

"She's only doing it to annoy you," I mutter, as I scrub the plate again. Who only washes the front side of a plate? All sides need to be washed and it doesn't make me an asshole for wanting my dishes clean. "Never swept or mopped or vacuumed," I mumble. "Prissy little bitch."

As annoyed as I am, I'm also a little impressed at the way she handled herself. She didn't apologize or offer to do it right. And I honestly think that it was different behavior than she would have displayed the first day she was here. She's not as quick to please. She's taken more pauses as she works through the way she should respond to me.

It's only a matter of time before she explodes. It's only a matter of time before she shows me who she really is. But it's also only a matter of time before they come to take her away from me. It's that sense of urgency that has me quickly drying my hands and leaving the room in search of her.

I find her in my small home gym. Her back to the door as she looks down at the small open door on the far side of the room.

"Is that for storage?" she asks.

I have to laugh. "It's a hidden room."

"It looks more like a closet, for a hobbit," she says, angling her face in my direction as I step in beside her, making sure we don't touch.

"Not everyone lives in fifteen thousand square foot homes, Raya."

"Clearly," she says and that annoyance that I tried to fight down in the kitchen threatens to come back.

When I look at her, she's got a small smile playing on her lips, and it lights her pretty blue eyes up. I realize she's joking or at least attempting to make a joke. "Doesn't seem like much of a hidden room if you leave the door open," she says.

"The room only needs to be hidden if I need to hide. It's a waste of time to have to open it in case I need to get in there quickly." I have to look away. I don't know why I'm explaining this to her. It's bad enough that I abducted her. Giving her the ability to witness all my insecurities is showing weakness. I push it closed before turning back to look at her, wanting to see if she's just as impressed as I was when I first purchased the home, with how it seamlessly fits into the wall, making it impossible to tell that it's even there.

"Seems like a really thin panel," she observes.

"It is. I don't think it would prevent someone from being heard." I have to laugh. "The goal is to be quiet. If I'm in there, I won't make a noise."

Seeming bored with the conversation, she turns and faces the gym equipment. Her lips turn down in a frown.

"What?" I ask, hating that she has thoughts as clear as day on her pretty face but she doesn't open her mouth to speak them.

"I told you I needed exercise and you have all of this equipment in your home." She throws her arm out, indicating multiple pieces of exercise equipment before the point of her finger lands on the treadmill. "I could be using that every day."

"You could," I say, knowing she's going to wonder if I say it in offering or if I'm just being an asshole. She doesn't take the bait. She simply walks across the room, the tip of her index finger trailing over the equipment as if they hold more value than they actually do.

It shouldn't be sensual. I know she's not trying to turn me on with the way the tip of that one finger slowly caresses the arms of the treadmill before moving on to the weight bench. But that doesn't mean it's not affecting me in that way. I have to wonder if it's a way for her to get back at me, to taunt me, because I know that she would never touch me that way.

It makes me want. It makes me need. It makes me want to take the things that I need. Agitation once again bubbles to the surface, making the palms of my hands sweaty in the restraint it takes not to reach out to her, to grab her by the hand, and force the warmth of her palm against my chest. Knowing I can't do that, I huff and turn to leave the room.

"Where are you going?" she asks as if she has any right to question anything I do.

"To take a nap," I grunt.

"You're not worried I'll try to escape?"

I don't answer her. I don't remind her that there is no escape. That there isn't a chance of her getting out of here unless I allow it.

"You're not worried I'll try and slit your throat in your sleep now that I have access to the kitchen?" Her voice trails after me as I make my way toward the bedroom.

"If only she were brave enough," I mutter. Maybe that's what's best for both of us.

I don't close the door behind me as I enter the bedroom. I pop the light off and climb into the bed, wishing I would have bought her a different bodywash, shampoo, and conditioner, instead of her continuing to use mine. My bed smells like me and as I close my eyes, I find myself wishing that it smelled like her instead.

It doesn't take long before I feel her presence in the room and my heart races with the thought that maybe this is it. Maybe she did go to the kitchen and grab the knife from the draining board I used to cut the vegetables for our omelets.

Would I fight back? Would I turn that blade against her for having the audacity to try to use it against me? A month ago, I would have said yes, but today, I'm not so sure.

The bedroom door clicks closed, effectively locking her back into the room with me. I smile into the darkness. She'd never try to kill me, being visually impaired. The room is pitch black but I count the number of steps her shuffling feet make as she closes the distance from the door to the bed.

"Shit!" she gasps. I smile more at the cuss word spilling from her mouth than the realization that she ran into the footboard in the darkness. She hardly ever cusses. And like the couple of times those filthy words have slipped from her mouth, her eyes widen in surprise. The very first time it happened, she slapped her hand over her mouth, like I was going to chastise her, punish her, for using such language.

The bed dips beside me as she climbs up. Her breathing is stilted,

coming out in small gasps. I angle my head more in her direction. Tiny whimpers are coming from her lips and I realize that she's crying. It's a different sound from the noises she makes when she's upset.

I flip on the bedside lamp and turn to look at her, finding her sitting but curled up in a ball. Tears stream down her face. I pull back the blankets to find out just what the fuck is going on. I notice the blood first before looking up at her face. "Your period?" I ask stupidly.

She swallows, fear in her eyes. She shakes her head, pointing down at her foot. Her big toenail has been damn near knocked off and it must have happened when she ran into the footboard. It's not a major injury. If it happened to me, I'd be more pissed than anything. But I also have to consider that she doesn't have the same high pain threshold that I do. She probably doesn't experience physical pain very often, and it's different for people who haven't fought to survive their entire lives.

"I'm so sorry," she says and I hate that there's true fear in her eyes.

"You're sorry for hurting yourself?" I ask, my annoyance growing by leaps and bounds. Who the fuck feels the need to apologize for getting hurt?

"The blood," she whispers. "The sheets are ruined."

I reach for her foot but she jerks back. Even in pain, she doesn't want me to touch her.

Raya

"Get out of the fucking bed, Raya," he snaps angrily as he crawls out on his side.

I wince as I move at his command. My toe is killing me and his anger doesn't help. I limp like a baby, like I've severed a limb rather than just knocking my toenail off. I haven't been given many opportunities in my life to get injured. I'm always supervised. I'm always protected. There's always someone there to open the door, to help me out of a vehicle.

This is my fault. I should have left the bedroom door open. I honestly have no idea why I closed it. It locks me inside again with him. I don't have the freedom or the ability to just walk over to the bedroom door and open it. He made it clear in his home gym that the exercise equipment is there but not available to me.

"Sit on the fucking counter." He points before opening the cabinet above where he keeps his towels.

I watch, dashing away the tears on my cheeks as he pulls the first aid kit out. He places it on the counter near my hip. It doesn't take him long to open it and then he's standing in front of me. I have nowhere to go.

He's pissed. His eyes on fire. No explanation on his tongue, and when he reaches for my foot, I expect that anger to be transferred. There's no irritation in his touch. His skin is warm and it makes me gasp. He immediately releases my foot and I find that I'm disappointed.

He read my reaction wrong. He saw it as me not wanting him to touch me rather than being surprised that his hands aren't icy cold as I imagine his heart is.

His eyes search mine for a long moment before he takes a step back and holds his hands up. "Get it cleaned up," he snaps, before leaving the bathroom.

My tears are renewed and I know that I'm being a baby. I know it shouldn't hurt my feelings that I'm expected to tend to my own wound care.

I'm not his responsibility in any capacity. I'm simply the girl he took from the beach because I snubbed him at first sight. Maybe this is the further part of his retaliation. Maybe he knows an ounce of closeness is what I crave and he refuses to give it to me.

I swallow down a whimper. The throbbing in my foot is intensifying but I know I can't sit here all night, bleeding on his floor. So I start to rummage through the first aid kit. It's high end and fully stocked. I sort through numerous sizes of bandages before pulling one out I think I can use. There's antiseptic spray and antibiotic cream but that's not what surprises me. There's an entire surgical kit with scalpels, and curved needles, and those weird scissors you only ever see on medical shows on television.

Why would he have a kit like this? A normal first aid kit has tape and bandages and maybe an aspirin or two. I look from the first aid kit to the door leading into the bedroom. Liam is ripping the sheets off the bed, his hands gruff and angry. I'd be surprised if there weren't tears in the fabric when he's done.

It scares me. It makes me wonder when I reenter the bedroom, if he's going to be unsatisfied with just being destructive to the bed. I take my time tending to my wound. Both because it hurts and I'm not a fan of causing myself pain and also because I'm terrified of how things are going to be when I go back into the bedroom.

He doesn't look over his shoulder. He doesn't glance back at me as he pulls fresh sheets from the armoire and remakes the bed. He's grumbling to himself, the same way he was in the kitchen, the same way he did when he left me standing in the middle of the exercise room. He's not speaking loud enough for me to hear him but it's clear it's not words of praise or anything like that.

I close up the first aid kit, biting my lip to stifle the grunt of pain as I jump down from the cabinet. I return the kit to where he had it and clean the droplets of blood off his bathroom floor before washing my hands. I have no idea why I didn't grab the scalpel from the first aid kit. I should be figuring out a way to use it on him.

I shake my head, bile burning my throat as I imagine what it would take to leave all of this behind. Murder. I'd have to kill him, and if I do that in

an area of the room not close to the door, I will either have to drag his corpse across the floor or remove his finger to open the lock on the door. I shake my head, rejecting the thought immediately. There's no way I could kill him. But the scary part is realizing that I wouldn't want to.

He's to the point of putting the comforter back on the bed, but when I step up to help he gives me a look that tells me it wouldn't be appreciated. I can't offer to pay for the sheets I've ruined. I have no money. Hell, I have no freedom.

"I'll order some fucking night-lights," he says, his voice no calmer than it was in the bathroom. "Since you can't manage to walk across the room without hurting yourself." His words are angry, bordering on violent but there's nothing but concern in his eyes when he looks down at my bandaged foot. There's regret there as if he's the one who hurt me.

I hide a small smile by rolling my lips between my teeth. As his eyes skate up my body, they're not filled with desire or need or want or arousal. He's checking to make sure that everything else on me is okay. It's the first time I think that he's cared, or maybe it's just the first time I'm catching him do it.

He doesn't walk around to his side of the bed and tell me to go the fuck to sleep like he's done numerous times. He holds back the covers on my side of the bed and it nearly takes my breath away. If this were a different time, or place, if this was a completely different situation, this is what I imagined being a normal loving couple would look like.

I look up to his eyes. "You're not getting soft on me, are you, Liam?"

His own eyes narrow but somehow glare at me at the same time. He doesn't look pleased with my words, but he doesn't say anything about it. He doesn't make a threat or slap the blankets down. He doesn't storm from the room, which is what he normally does when he gets to the point of irritation he can't control.

"Don't get things twisted up, Raya," he says as I climb into the bed. He drops the blankets down on top of me, leans in close, one bunched fist on either side of my hips. He's not touching me but he might as well be. He's close enough that I feel the warmth of his breath against my lips when he says, "I'm still a fucking monster."

Liam

"Feel better?" I ask, my chest growing tight as she smiles up at me and nods. "Finish your shower and I'll work on lunch," I say as I turn the water off on my showerhead. I don't take my eyes off her as I step out of the shower and grab my towel.

It's not that I feel like I still need to watch her, like I have to keep an eye on her. I no longer feel the need to wonder if she's going to try to escape or if she's going to hurt me. Maybe it's stupid, but things have shifted. Her eyes no longer dart to the front door when she's out of the bedroom. I no longer get that feeling from her that she's going to try to leave. Some days I let myself imagine that she's happy here with me, that this is exactly where she wants to be. I let myself dream that this is where she would choose to be if the situation was different.

I know I'm delusional. I know she's probably still biding her time, waiting for just the right moment to get away from me. But she's also not miserable. The smile she gives me now is no longer placating and fake. Her laughter is new and has quickly become my most favorite thing.

Time doesn't matter. It doesn't matter if it's daytime or nighttime. The outside world has completely fallen away for me. It's only me and her spending time together. And that ache I have for her has only grown stronger.

We still don't touch. She still doesn't reach for me in the middle of the night. She keeps her distance and out of respect I do the same. If she comes close, I back away. I don't know when that dynamic shifted. I can't pinpoint the exact moment where I relinquished control and maybe it wasn't a single measurable point in time. Maybe it was slow and gradual.

I don't have to make threats. It doesn't stop me if she's not moving fast enough or if she gets that petulant look in her eyes that tells me she's going to argue. Sometimes the words still slip out but instead of being angry and defiant, she just grins and does what I tell her to do, as if part of her needed me to issue the command.

I hate the rule I made in the beginning. It haunts me now. It's a constant

block between the two of us. I was angry at her for the longest time because of how fake she was. Because she wouldn't allow herself to be who she truly could be. But now I'm the fake one. I'm the one not acting how I know I should be acting.

I shouldn't be obsessed with her. I shouldn't continue to lie asleep at night, listening to her breathe. I shouldn't be wishing for more. I shouldn't wake up on the nights that I manage to get a little sleep with a smile on my face at the sounds of her snoring. There are a lot of shouldn'ts in my life right now but thinking I never should have taken her, isn't one of them.

I'm content right now but I'm not happy. I hate that there are no real conversations. I hate the silence constantly between us. I hate having things to say but being unsure of how they will be received. I hate that I think of her before I think of myself. I've never been this way before.

It's not all bad. The conversations we do have are simple. They're not heavy and weighed down the way conversations I've had in the past were.

She no longer acts shy about her body. She no longer lifts her head high in defiance. Her fake it 'til you make it moments are few and far between. I don't know if it's habit or if it's what she needs when she climbs in the shower in the mornings and her hand runs between her thighs before she even touches the bodywash. Her orgasms don't seem routine.

It's the times she pulls the dildo from the dresser and sets it up on the table herself that appeal to me the most. It's still its own form of torture and her taunting was right that first time. I do imagine it's me that she's sliding down. I do imagine that I'm the one inside of her. To keep myself from taking what I want, I've convinced myself that it's only a matter of time and that she's also wishing it was me.

But neither one of us has caved. I took her but I can't take that, and she's not to the point of asking for things to change just yet. I'm biding my time with the hopes that eventually she will. That she will slide that hot, juicy cunt off of that black dildo and crawl up the bed and slide down on top of me. My only worry is that they'll find her before I can.

There are times just the pounding of her feet on the treadmill echoing through the house gets me hotter than I've ever been in my life. But then again, everything about her turns me on. My appeal for her is endless. She can do the exact same thing every single day, and I'm still in awe of how amazingly sexy she is.

I can't count how many times I've waited on the bed for her, with that dildo suction cupped to the table, waiting for her. I groan as I run my hand over my head, making my way into the kitchen. That's what happened this morning. I waited for her to finish her run. She didn't hesitate for a second when she walked inside with her skin glistening from sweat. She watched me with a devious smile on her face and she straddled the toy and got to work. Once again, I came without touching myself, like I always do.

I discovered it leaves me wanting more, but not always in a sexual way. Sometimes I can't fight back those urges. Sometimes I stroke myself off in the shower, painting her with my cum. But I also wish she'd open up and tell me about her life. I'd like to know what her childhood was like. I wonder if it's different from the way I've pictured it in my own mind. I don't ask because I don't want to reciprocate.

I've never felt shame about my past, my history, and the childhood I suffered from until her. Before it was a badge of honor, the things that I had survived. I have no doubt telling her about the real me would make her sad. It would make her pity me. I need a lot of things from Raya Reed, but compassion isn't one of them.

Lunch is going to be simple today. Turkey sandwiches, her favorite kind of chips. I toast the bread of her sandwich because she mentioned liking crispy bread at one point. "Goddammit," I grumble, dropping the hot bread to the plate, the tips of my fingers a little sore from pulling it out of the toaster oven too soon.

My phone rings on the counter. Once again, it's Hollis calling. I don't know why I pick up. I've ignored every single phone call since that time I met him and Nash on the beach. I open my mouth to tell him to fuck off, to quit acting like a sorority sister who needs advice, but then Raya walks in fully nude, her skin still wet in spots she didn't reach with her towel while drying off. My mouth waters to lick those droplets from her skin.

She asked for clothes a while back and as much as the thought of her covering her body annoyed me, I laid out a t-shirt and a pair of sweats one day while she was in the shower. That's where they've sat since. I don't think

she wanted the clothes. It was clear she was just trying to determine whether I'd provide them or not.

"I can't fucking talk right now," I growl into the phone, my eyes never leaving Raya. She looks at me, her head shaking, and she mouths, *it's fine*. I don't know why I stay on the phone with him, but a lot of it has to do with the fact that she distracts me anytime we're in the same room. Hell, she distracts me when she's in the other room. Raya Reed is nothing but a distraction and I find myself enjoying not focusing on anything but her.

"What's got you so fucking busy that you've been avoiding my calls?" Hollis snaps as if he has any right to confront me. As if he's some jealous boyfriend wanting to know my whereabouts and what I'm doing.

"You sound like a needy bitch," I grumble as I move to the fridge to grab the mayo. "I'm building a deck. I don't have time for your shit," I lie.

"I can help build a deck," Hollis offers. Hollis is still working under the assumption that we live close by. That my house is just a short car ride from the beach we met on. I know that's where Hollis lives. Neither he nor Nash are as secretive about their lives. But they do what they do for fun, for the thrill of it. They haven't suffered things like I have. They don't have that insistent need to be alone because alone is safe.

"I don't need some gimp-ass bitch slowing me down," I say.

"I'm not a gimp anymore," Hollis says. "The cast is already off."

I take a step back when Raya reaches for the mayo in my hand. We're always keeping that distance between the two of us. I watch as she makes our sandwiches, grinning at how awkward her actions and movements are. She may not have been put in the position to make her own meals before, but she's never been unwilling to help.

"You took your own fucking cast off?"

"No, the doctor took it off," Hollis explains. "I was completely healed."

"You must have superpowers then. You still had three weeks last time I saw you like ten days ago."

"Ten days?" Hollis says. "You fucking idiot. It's been three and a half

weeks since we were at the beach. Have you been high this entire time or something?"

Floored that it's actually been that long all I can manage is a nod. High... that's a good way to explain it. I know I've ordered groceries several times, more often than I normally would, but I just chalk that up to Raya being here and eating more food. Three and a half weeks?

"Listen, asshole, I'm busy," I say, getting ready to hang up the phone.

"And I'm fucking calling because, for some reason, Angel can't find you."

"Angel isn't looking for me," I argue. The man doesn't need me or him or Nash.

"Check your email, you dumbass." That motherfucker has the nerve to hang up on me.

"A friend of yours?" Raya asks as a piece of turkey dangles between her fingers. I don't answer her as she finishes the sandwich. She turns to face me, questions in her eyes at the silence.

"You didn't yell for help," I realize out loud.

Her brow furrows. "And risk someone as deranged as you, knowing I'm here?" She gives me a look that says she thinks I'm an idiot before lifting the butter knife to her mouth to lick the mustard off of it. She tosses it in the sink. The metal making a clanking sound simply because she knows it annoys the shit out of me.

I don't say a word as she holds up a plate in front of me. On it is possibly the ugliest fucking sandwich I've ever seen in my life. But I also realize the importance of it. She made me food without being prompted and this may be the first thing she's ever given me besides too many orgasms to count. And all of those are offered without touching.

She put her hands on this sandwich. I can't convince myself that it was made with love, but it has to mean something, right? I ignore the dirty dishes in the sink as she grabs her own plate and walks toward the bedroom.

I press play on the remote after we settle on the bed. The sound is low, unintrusive as we begin to eat, but what Hollis told me nags at me. "You've

been here nearly a month," I say, wondering if she's lost track of time as easily as I have.

"Twenty-seven days," she says, taking a bite of her sandwich and not pulling her eyes from the television.

My world stops. She knows exactly how long she's been here? "How do you know that?" I ask.

She looks over at me as if it's a silly question. "Today is the thirtieth. You took me on the third. But I'm not counting that day because it was close to midnight." I just blink at her. "The date is on your phone screen," she explains. "I saw it yesterday when you placed the grocery order." As if it's no big deal, she gives me a small little smile before reaching over and stealing the pickle off my plate.

Raya

I chew on the corner of my bottom lip as I enter the kitchen. Liam is at the sink washing dishes from dinner.

He's in his normal uniform of low hanging sweats and a plain black tshirt. He must have gotten tired of looking at the clothes folded on the bathroom sink because they're the same ones he offered to me weeks ago.

I don't test him often but when I do, he surprises me. If I mention a certain food I like it's always in the delivery the next time he orders. I always get to pick what we watch on television, but I think that has more to do with the fact that he honestly doesn't care what's playing out in front us because his eyes are usually always on me.

I like the attention. I like being the center of his world, his only focus. It's the first time I've had anything like that, and I'm hungry for it. I crave it, like I crave the sight of his orgasms.

I woke up feeling different this morning, restless. It's not the first time, but it's the first time I haven't been able to shove that feeling away.

It's September third and I know that that date means absolutely nothing to him. And there have been a lot of years I knew better than to let it mean anything to me, but today is not one of those times.

He notices me standing in the kitchen as he turns. The smile on his face at the sight of me is my newest obsession. He's normally such a closed-off man, very frank and matter of fact. But it's these moments, these half seconds of time when he responds before thinking or analyzing how he should act that make me the happiest. The only time he normally lets his emotion show is when his hands are working his cock.

Don't get me wrong. I'm just as obsessed with those times, but the little smiles are few and far between. We don't find the same things funny. Often I'll laugh at something on the television, or a silly thought in my head, and he just stares at me, as if he can't believe I'm immature enough to laugh at anything.

I know he likes me being here, but I don't think the man has any real joy in his life. I wouldn't say that he's bitter, just caged off and accepting of the way things are. Maybe I would be too if I were the subject of violence like he had to have been with the scars that mark his body.

"What's up?" he asks as he dries his hands on a dish towel.

My eyes instantly drop to my feet. I have to be crazy to open my mouth and ask of him what I want. He's going to say no, so there's really no point in me wasting my energy but I just can't get it out of my head. I won't be able to find peace with it until he rejects the idea.

"Raya," he says, the warning clear in his voice. He doesn't really like me getting stuck in my head and for a man who doesn't really like to speak at all, he's usually insistent that I speak my mind. I don't tell him the real thoughts in my head. I'm still holding that part of me close to my chest.

I could be thinking about how less stressed I am, even here, being held captive than I would be if I were home. I memorize my schedule a month in advance. Dates have always been easy for me. I know how many events of my father's I've missed. And the first couple made me nervous, but somehow I let go of that. At some point, I either stopped worrying or maybe just stopped caring about what my absence might mean for others.

"Raya," he prompts again. "Spit it out."

I look up at him, having to swallow a lump that's formed in my throat. Tears burn the back of my eyes for no other reason than in preparation of his rejection. "If you put the collar back around my throat and attach it to the chain..." I swallow again. "Can I go outside?"

He blinks at me as if my words were spoken in a foreign language and he's having a hard time understanding.

"I know the answer is going to be no," I rush out. "But it's just that it's my birthday and I wouldn't be asking if—"

"Are you going to try to escape?" he interrupts.

I roll my eyes, the question completely ridiculous because where would I go? Back to my parents? How would I explain the fact that I've been missing for a month?

"You don't have to wear the chain or the collar because you'd never outrun me, Raya."

And there it is, the threat in his voice.

"I don't know," I say, trying to lighten the mood. "I've been running a lot on that treadmill. I am as fast as the wind now."

He narrows his eyes at first, but when I smile at him he realizes I'm joking.

"Okay."

"Okay?" I ask, shifting on my feet. I never expected him to agree.

"I don't have shoes for you to wear."

"I don't care," I rush out, my heart racing at the thought of being outside for the first time in a solid month. My heart rate kicks up double when he walks across the room and opens the front door. I feel locked in place as if maybe this is a test of his own. I have to wonder what the tradeoff is going to be. What he's going to expect in return. And as someone outside looking in, they would realize how crazy I've actually become. The thought of an ultimatum thrills me rather than scares me.

I take a few tentative steps in his direction as he steps out onto the porch. The entire thing is screened in, covered by an extension of the roof. I only think about running for a split second because I know he will chase me. But then I reconsider. If he chases me, he'll have to touch me to catch me, and the thought of that thrills me.

He gives me less space than usual. It doesn't go unnoticed that he keeps himself between me and the screen door leading out into the yard. I see nothing but sand.

"It's hot out here," I complain. He doesn't say a word as my eyes skate over the landscape. It's beautiful, I realize. There's nothing to obstruct the land or the setting sun. How have I forgotten how beautiful a sunset can be? Did I stop noticing those things before I was taken?

"Are we still in Texas?" I ask.

"Barely," he responds, but he doesn't elaborate.

The silence around us is interrupted only by the sound of bugs and crickets.

"It's strange not to hear any road noise," I say more to myself than to him.

"It's very secluded out here." His words sound like a threat, a warning, but I don't feel that rush of fear that I probably should at realizing that even getting outside doesn't mean I can escape. "No one around for miles," he says in an absent way. It doesn't sound like he's warning me this time.

I'm wondering how hot the desert sand would feel under my toes as I take a step back. His eyes track me as if he fully expects me to shove past him and run away. I like his eyes on me. I like the dark circles under them when he wakes up because it means he spent a lot of the night watching me.

It was weird when the room was fully dark but now shadows are cast through the room from the night-lights he installed after the night I hurt my toe.

"Liam," I whisper as I take a couple steps closer to him. Normally he would move. Every other time we got within arm's reach he would shift out of the way. It became a habit for me to do it as well. I give him distance. He gives me distance. He doesn't move and even the Texas heat doesn't prevent the chill that it sends down my body. I gasp when he reaches up, cupping my cheek.

There have been brushes. It's hard to be in such close proximity with someone for a solid month for there to be absolutely no inadvertent touches, but this is different. My pulse pounds, my eyes fluttering closed, and I do exactly what feels right in this moment. I press the palm of my hand to his stomach before looking back up at him.

He looks just as dazed as I feel. Just as wrapped up in this moment. I'm scared. I'm scared he'll back away. I'm scared that he won't. He leans in closer. Nothing exists in this moment but him as his lips brush mine. He doesn't deepen the kiss. He looks sad and heartbroken when I open my eyes.

But then I hear the noise. It's a low buzzing sound and from the look on Liam's face I can tell that it's not normal. It's not a generator on the side of the house, or a common occurrence around here.

"I'll never regret taking you," he whispers. "I'll never regret making you mine even though a month is all we'll get. Whatever happens, know that it was worth it."

I swallow, my emotions getting the better of me. "What's that noise?" I ask.

He gives his head a slight little shake, but I don't know what question he's answering. "A drone. They found you." He gives me a small smile. It's weak and sad. "You get to go home now."

Liam

I cup her cheek for a long moment before stepping back. I need to memorize her face. If I were given the opportunity to choose the very last thing that I ever see in my life, it would be her.

"No regrets," I tell her before taking a step back and turning away.

I open the screen door, taking the steps to the ground slowly before lowering to my knees on the hard ground. I lift my arms, interlocking my fingers behind my head just as the first SUV is rolling up the driveway.

I can't risk her life with stray bullets. I know there's no way to fight my way out of this and I'd never endanger her in that way. As if they're prepared to take over a small country, four huge guys pile out of the SUV, guns drawn, all pointed in my direction. I close my eyes, expecting a hail of bullets. I can't imagine what the command would have been given by Thomas Reed, what instructions these guys have been given if they find me.

Surviving the situation is highly unlikely, and I knew that from the moment she told me who she was. Thomas Reed isn't president yet, but that doesn't mean I won't be sacrificed if I'm a threat to the United States.

I find myself hoping for death, praying that one of these motherfuckers gets a little trigger happy because I can't imagine the alternative. I can't imagine spending the rest of my life without her. They don't shoot, but they aren't gentle as they flatten me to the ground. A knee pinned between my shoulder blades as they yank my hands behind my back and put on a pair of cuffs tight enough to cut off the circulation in my hands.

"What the fuck is your problem?" I growl when one of them yanks me up and jerks me toward the SUV.

"Liam Stone, you're under arrest for the abduction of Raya Reed."

I glare at him. He resembles more of a soldier than a cop. "What's your fucking badge number?" I growl. I should probably comply. I'm caught dead to rights. There's no arguing that, but I just don't have it in me. I fucking hate cops, every goddamn last one of them. Twisted fucks that they are.

"Oh they're coming," the guy says just as several more SUVs pull up behind them. Within a matter of seconds, I'm shoved into the back of an SUV, as if I still remain a threat. A big burly redheaded motherfucker climbs into the front passenger seat. He doesn't speak to me. He doesn't make threats. He doesn't start grilling me for answers. He sits silently, watching as more than a dozen men armed to the teeth raid my property.

They spread out, some going inside, some going around either side of the house, guns raised as if they're anticipating some other form of attack. The guy who handcuffed me walks back after speaking briefly with another man and climbs into the driver's seat. He also doesn't say a word but I can't pay any attention to him. I lock my eyes on the front porch, waiting to see her for the very last time.

A radio chatters and I look over at the redheaded man just in time to see him turn it off. I have to smile as if there's anything I can do about the information I may hear come across the damn thing. He looks familiar.

Movement on the porch draws my attention back in that direction but it's one of the SWAT-looking officers, not Raya. I watch for fifteen minutes as men carry bags of my shit out of the house. I don't know if it's a scare tactic or what but one of them stops and pulls a bedsheet, *the* bedsheet, out. I know now probably isn't the most appropriate time to think about what happened on that bedsheet today, but I can't help it.

Today was a day of firsts. A day of Raya touching herself after I woke up with an erection that just wouldn't flag, and I couldn't wait another minute to touch myself. In the darkness before the sun even rose, she watched me as she brought herself to orgasm. I know what's on that sheet.

The entire yard is full of activity—men coming and going out of the front of the house, more men looking around the property, no doubt for disrupted dirt like I would ever hurt her and then bury her in my own backyard. But still no Raya. Are they consoling her inside? I grind my teeth in anger at the thought of them grilling her. I'd do everything in my power to kill every single one of these motherfuckers if I get wind that they even spoke to her in a tone of disrespect.

Maybe they called her dad to come get her. It would be one hell of a photo op for her to greet her soon-to-be president father on the front porch of

the house she's been held captive in for the last month. Then it hits me.

"I know you guys," I snap.

The guy in the front seat huffs. "You don't know shit about us."

"You're those douchebags from St. Louis," I say. "Black street or something."

"Blackbridge," the redhead corrects in a gruff accented voice. "Now shut the fuck up,"

The guy in the driver's seat steps out to speak to another man and although I can't hear them, it's clear that neither one of them are happy. I watch their very annoyed, tight-lipped conversation and only get bits and pieces of it. Words that sound like scandal, more proof, false imprisonment, and I have no idea what any of it means.

I can't allow myself to get hopeful. The crash from that would be as detrimental as knowing I'll never see Raya again.

"Bad Press. I'm sorry. We'll get more," are the next sets of words that filter into the SUV. The redheaded guy grows antsy, annoyed as if he can hear the entire fucking conversation. He is not happy with where it's going. The driver of the SUV throws his hands up in the air before turning and walking back to the vehicle.

"What the fuck is going on?" the redhead asks when the other guy opens the door at my side.

The guy pulls me out and I almost fall to the ground before I can get my feet under me.

"Wren doesn't make fucking mistakes," the redhead growls.

The guy who pulled me out just glares at me as if he can read my mind. I'm too stunned to taunt him. Too stunned to be argumentative right now. There's no fucking way that I'm being released. But he spins me, roughly shoving me up against the side of the SUV. Despite the heat of the vehicle burning my skin, I don't say a word.

All of the men start to leave, pissed off and angry, peeling out in my front yard.

"See you soon," the man says, before shoving me in the direction of my front porch.

Raya never exited the house which tells me that she took off. The sun is fully down now, the front porch light casting the only glow of light. The night's so dark, it doesn't make it far before fading into nothing.

I go back inside, an itch to my skin with thoughts of Raya being out at night in the fucking desert all alone. Even if she made it into El Paso, she wouldn't be safe. The city is just as dangerous as the desert with countless stories of abductions, and traffickers, and people being turned into drug mules. Border Patrol wouldn't suspect a pretty blonde thing like her. She'd be the perfect addition to their drug smuggling.

I don't say a word as I run into my house. I know I have to wait. I know that those motherfuckers won't be far. I know they're waiting for me to slip up just like I know they bugged my house. I use an app on my phone to scan, pulling three listening devices. I drop each of them individually into the garbage disposal in the sink, not feeling any better about this entire situation as I power on the disposal and grind them to pieces.

I'm thorough though. I look over the house. Again, more to keep myself busy than thinking I missed anything the first time. I have to wait until they get sleepy and complacent before I can go out and look for her, and it fucking kills me to do that.

Hours go by and all I can do is pace. I spend some of the time pulling my go-bag out of the bedroom closet and making sure the expiration dates haven't passed on the food inside. A noise filters in and I tilt my head to the side as I leave the bedroom. The noise isn't coming from the front porch like I expected, thinking the guys somehow managed to get DNA results already back from the sheets and they're here to cuff me for the final time.

The noise comes from the exercise room and as I make my way in that direction I realize the door to the hidden room is no longer standing open. I swear to fuck, if one of those guys is hiding in my house, I'll slit his goddamn throat and not even think twice about it.

I didn't count the number of men that entered and I didn't count the number of men that left so it would be easy for them. *They'll never find his body*, I think to myself as I pull open the door. I barely duck out of the way

fast enough to keep the knife from slashing my face.

Raya

My hand shakes as the sound of footsteps draws near. Nothing prepares me for the gasp that rushes out of my mouth when the door is tugged open. I lash out, the scalpel from Liam's first aid kit swiping through the air.

"Raya?" he asks, obviously astonished to see me crouched on the floor in the hidden room. He looks from me to the scalpel that's still in my trembling hand. "Were you going to stab a federal agent?"

I can no longer hold back the sobs. Tears roll down my face in relief. I don't know why I hid. That's not true. I hid because I didn't want to leave. I hid because I didn't want him to get into trouble. It wouldn't be fair to punish him for the things he's done because I don't regret them.

Maybe I'm crazy. Anyone who heard the full details of everything that's happened, and then witnessed my reaction to knowing that people were coming to take me away, would call me insane. I feel a little crazy as I watch his eyes. The relief in them makes me sob harder.

"You're really here," he says, as though he can't believe his eyes. He pulls me from the hole, the scalpel clinking on the floor.

I don't shy away from him. I don't think I would ever pull away from him ever again. He holds me to his chest, his breathing as erratic as mine is.

"I can't believe they didn't look in there," he says.

"I can't either," I say on a sob, burying my face into his neck. His touch feels better than I ever could have imagined. He pulls me back, but it's not to push me away. Both of his big strong hands cup the sides of my face, his eyes darting between mine before assessing the rest of my body. "I'm not hurt," I tell him.

He swallows, the edges of his eyes turning red as if he's fighting back tears himself. I hate that he feels like he can't do that in front of me. He presses his lips to mine, and it's nothing like the soft brush of lips, like out on the porch.

Somehow, despite the connection that we share, and the experiences

we've had over the last month, the kiss isn't sexual. It's grateful. It's full of surprise. It tastes like hope. But what can I possibly hope for? There's no chance at riding off into the sunset with this man. I can't just step out into the daylight and act like nothing happened.

There will be too many people with questions and I don't have the answers they're looking for. I'm not saying I don't ever want to go home, I just didn't want to be sent home like that. I didn't want to be dragged away or see him in handcuffs, see him suffer some sort of punishment.

The beginning of whatever this is, that has built between us over the last month, was rocky. I was fearful. I was afraid. I was terrified of the unknown, but that's not surprising. I've never been given the space or the opportunity to think or make choices on my own, and despite him taking so many choices from me, he was the first one to ever allow me any sort of power.

I moan at the first brush of his tongue against mine, clinging to him and pressing my body closer. It's better than I ever could have imagined. With the taste of him, the warmth of his skin against mine, my fear over everything that could happen, fades away. I'm burned for this man. I want everything he has to offer.

I whine, the petulant sound erupting out of my throat when he pulls back.

His eyes stay on my mouth as he speaks. "You have no fucking idea how bad I want this, Raya, but it can't happen."

I deflate, my shoulders slumping forward. He wanted me to be found.

"Don't look at me like that," he demands, his voice once again full of the authority that has become so familiar in the last month. "I want anything and everything you're willing to give to me, but we can't do this right now. We have to get out of here."

"I know how ridiculous that is. I know that whoever those men were that came into this house aren't going to give up that easily just because they didn't find me. Crimes aren't solved that way."

"Why didn't you let them know you were here?" he asks, as if he can't believe it.

"I wasn't ready to leave," I confess.

He kisses me again, the second one more tender and appreciative than the one before it. He steps back again and I have to wonder if this is just another one of his games. If he's going to make me beg for it, and I will. My pride flew out the window a long time ago. He's turned me into a woman that's willing to ask for what she wants.

He presses a finger to my lips before I can speak. "Not here," he says.

His hands slide from my cheeks over to my shoulders until his fingers are tangled in mine. Without a word, he tugs me toward the door, pulling me along into the bedroom. I stand in the center of the room, watching as he pulls an empty bag from the closet and begins stuffing clothes in it.

"I have a go-bag already," he explains. "We don't have time for me to pack yours as adequately but we can make do with what I have in mind." He zips the bag up, his eyes darting to my feet. "Motherfucker," he grunts.

"What's wrong?"

"I don't have any clothes or shoes for you. And your feet are so fucking small, it's only gonna rub blisters on your feet if you try to wear a pair of mine." He stands there for a long moment as if he's formulating a plan in his mind. "I'll just have to carry you. It's a long distance but you weigh hardly anything." He shoulders both bags and reaches out for my hand. Again, I take it without hesitation.

He doesn't tug me toward the front door, rather he heads right out of the bedroom, right back into the home gym. He crouches low into the hidden room and before long, the back panel is removed, revealing a dark hole.

"This tunnel was one of the reasons I bought the house," he explains as he stands to his full height and notices me gaping in horror at the dark hole.

I shake my head and take a step back. "There's no way in hell, Liam."

He doesn't smile like he normally does when a cuss word escapes my mouth. "This is the only way," he explains. "I pulled three listening devices out of the house.. The feds aren't done with me. They aren't satisfied with what they found and they took the bedsheets from this morning, Raya."

This news makes me freeze. Those bedsheets are going to tell them

everything they need to know. They'll know that I was a willing participant. And that part of me, that tiny little part that I shoved down, comes roaring back to life. For a split second, I worry about my father finding out about my own depravity. I could picture the look in my mother's eyes, the judgment I'd hear in her words. Going home isn't an option now.

It makes me wonder if this search for me would stop once they heard the news. If they would just wash their hands completely of the entire situation. They have to know I didn't leave willingly, but what kind of sick person enjoys the things that I did. That voice in my head that has been telling me that I'm disgusting is louder now than ever. But despite all of it, even if given a second chance to do it all over again, I think the outcome would be the same. I think that I would still reach for his hand as he guided me into the hole.

"Are there bugs down here?" I ask, feeling silly. The words don't reflect the gravity of the situation. Liam must feel the same way because he laughs.

"I'm sure there are all sorts of things down here."

I want to smack his chest and tell him that this isn't funny, but I don't know if we're there yet. I don't know that he would ever be the type of guy to be okay with me doing that to him.

"It's going to be fine," he whispers in my ear. "Just get all the way through. The hole and the tunnel open up at the end."

I shift to the side, my skin cold despite the warmth in the air.

"I'm afraid of enclosed spaces," I confess.

"I will never let anything happen to you," he says, giving my back a small push to urge me forward. "Once we get to the end of this part of the tunnel, I'll pick you up and carry you."

It's enough to get me moving. I startle when the hole lights up. I turn around and glare at him and the flashlight he's holding in his hand.

"Couldn't you have led with that?" I snap, irritated for how silly it was for me to be scared in the dark.

He's the monster. He told me once if there's anything to be afraid of,

it's him. But as my eyes search his, fear is the very last thing that I feel, at least directed at him.

I fear getting caught. I fear getting confronted by other people wondering where I've been for a month. I fear that my explanation wouldn't be enough.

Father has too much power for things to just be okay. I pause at the end of the narrow hole, hearing Liam close the door to the hidden room before replacing the back panel. I know we'll never get to come back here and that saddens me more than it probably should.

The second he clears the hole he picks me up just like he promised. I don't hesitate to wrap my arms around his neck and press my nose into his skin. When he squeezes me, I hold him even tighter.

Liam

Federal agents or even those Blackbridge guys could be running up on our asses at any moment, but when she tucks her nose into my throat, I find myself slowing. I want this moment to last forever. I want to always feel the warmth of her body pressed against mine. I want her against me, touching me.

I'm not a man who lets himself hope very often. I'm a man of action. I don't often allow myself to wish for things I know I can't have. And Raya is no different.

She may have chosen to stay, but that doesn't mean she's choosing me. And even if she chooses me in this moment, it doesn't mean she'll stick around. Freedom is a hard-fought thing for many people, and she's no different.

As I walk, I try to prepare myself for the inevitable fallout. She won't want to stay with me forever. She's eventually going to come to her senses and realize what a monster I actually am. Comfort in a secluded home isn't the same as having to run forever, and that's what we'll have to do.

If by chance she does choose me, if she wants to stay with me, we'll always be on the run. We'll always have to look over our shoulders. I always run the chance of us being found. They'd return her home, and I'd be sent to prison. I'm fully in the mindset of let's just see how long this can last because giving her up a second before I have to isn't an option.

I feel the warm press of her lips against my skin. I swallow against the rush of emotions I'm incapable of handling right now. I look down at her, giving her a soft smile without actually telling her exactly how much I enjoy it. She doesn't return the smile like she often does.

The motion activated lights along the tunnel make it easy to see the heat and desire filling her eyes. But before I can tell her now isn't the time, her lips are on mine. I had the strength to pull back earlier, but the man with control can no longer be found.

Her kisses are hot and deep, full of a longing that makes me wonder

just how long she's wanted it to happen. I've wanted my lips on hers since the moment I watched her down on the beach. Nothing is like the fantasies. The images in my head were incapable of describing the warmth of her body against mine. The way her fingers curl into the back of my neck is as if she's desperate to get closer.

I pull back and take a breath, looking down at her kiss-swollen lips.

"You stayed," I whisper. "All you had to do was stay standing on that front porch and you'd be halfway home by now."

She shakes her head as if the idea is ridiculous. "I'm exactly where I want to be."

I kiss her again, holding nothing back. When she shifts her weight in my arms, I don't hesitate to turn her body against mine so we're lined up in all the right places. The warmth between her legs isn't hindered by the sweats she's wearing. The t-shirt on her torso does nothing to conceal her pebbled nipples.

Her hand snakes down the front of me and I groan with need when her fingers brush along my erection. She has proven she can make me come just by watching her and that same tingle threatens to embarrass me within seconds. I grip her hand under mine, stealing her movements as I look into her eyes.

"You chose me," I say, and her smile is slow but sure.

"I chose you and I choose this."

Her permission is all I need to softly place her on the ground and start pulling at her clothing. There are better times and there are definitely better places than an escape tunnel in the middle of the desert. But the urge to take what she's willing to give can't be ignored.

Her fingers work open the fly of my zipper as I take the tip of her breast into my mouth. Her skin is cool and firm. The perfect combination of all the things I love about a woman. Her sounds are otherworldly. A combination of whimpers and moans that arrow straight to my dick.

"This is crazy," she pants, as I push down her sweats.

All I can manage is a hum of agreement against her skin. Laying her

out on the dirty ground isn't an option, so I do the only thing this situation allows and that's lowering myself into a sitting position. She stands in front of me as I hold my hands up to her but her hesitation is nearly nonexistent.

I wish I had more time, a bed, days, scratch that, years to enjoy this moment. But the heat between us is fervent. The need tugging at me. My mouth hangs open in awe as she settles on top of me without even looking. Her time with the suction cup toy has made her an expert. It nearly comes to an end the second I watch her mouth hang open and her eyes get a hazy glow to them.

Her pleasure is obvious. There's just something about a woman enjoying sex that makes a man incapable of controlling his own body. I lift my hands to her hips, holding her still for a long moment in an effort to gain better control.

She rolls her hips, adjusting to the fullness. Her mouth slightly agape, I use the opportunity to press my lips to hers, licking into her mouth, like I want to do all over her delicious body.

She's absolute perfection. The end game of all conquests. Nothing else will ever compare.

"I'm not on birth control," she whispers.

The feel of her tight pussy clamping down even harder with her words makes a moan of my own escape my lips. "Are you purposely trying to make me come too fast?" I ask, my grip growing tighter on her hips. Her soft chuckle is almost as perfect as the noises she makes when she comes.

"The thought of getting me pregnant makes you want to come?"

"Jesus," I grunt. "Stop talking about it."

A sly look crosses her face and she wiggles her hips again. And all I can do is lick my thumb and press it to her clit, with a small prayer that she's able to come just as fast as I know I'm going to. My thighs clench in an effort not to fuck up into her when she starts to move. I have imagined my cock inside of her, every time I've seen her ride that fucking toy. The actual experience is a million times better than I ever could have dreamed of.

"So thick," she whispers. "So full."

I grind my back molars together, my jaw clenching. "Are you purposely trying to torture me?" I ask.

She doesn't grin this time, her pleasure too all encompassing. She rolls her hips at the same speed I circle her clit. Her mouth hangs open, her head tilts back, and I know she's more lost in her own pleasure than trying to distance herself from the situation.

I know her orgasm is seconds from happening when that deep red flush spreads from her throat to the top of her breasts. I can hold out no longer.

"Touch your clit," I command, as I grip both of her hips and hold her aloft. She doesn't miss a beat as her hand reaches between her legs. The brush of her fingers on the base of my cock, encourage me to go harder, faster, deeper.

When her eyes find mine as if she can't believe how good it feels, I lock them there, keeping her captured in my gaze. Her body only clenches once in warning of what's to come before her orgasm truly begins. The clench of her body is nothing like the grip of my own hand, which has always been a sore substitute for the real thing.

"Gonna come," I pant in warning, but she doesn't move. She doesn't attempt to climb off me. She doesn't attempt to get away so I don't fill her up. It magnifies my orgasm tenfold. I'm breathless when she settles, still fully impaled on my cock. The comedown is exhilarating and exhausting at the same time. I hold her there for long moments before either of us speak.

"That was better than I ever could have imagined," she whispers, her face once again tucked into my neck. I can only nod my agreement because words seem impossible right now. I know neither of us are in any hurry to get moving again but we're on borrowed time.

"Where will we go?" she asks when she eventually climbs off of me.

"Mission, Texas. I have a scheduled meeting there tomorrow," I explain. "My sort-of boss wants to see me and he may have some ideas on what we can do to survive all of this shit."

We both dress a lot slower than we did getting undressed, and it seems like she has no regrets about what just happened because she doesn't hesitate to press her face right back into my neck when I pick her up again.

Raya

When I wake to the sun warming my face, I want to disillusion myself into believing my reality isn't what it actually is. I don't want to be anywhere else but with him.

That's not what I would change. There aren't many positive outcomes to this entire situation. I'm not in a position to just ride off into the sunset with Liam. If that were possible, I'd do it in a heartbeat.

There would be no second-guessing, no wondering if I'm making the right choice. I feel them within the depths of me that with him is exactly where I was always meant to be. It seemed possible before the raid on the house, but now even though I'm trying to remain hopeful, I'm not accustomed to getting lost in dreams and fantasies.

My mouth feels like sandpaper as I roll my head on the headrest and glance at him. We've been driving for hours and hours, only stopping to put gas in the car or to switch out vehicles. Liam has stashes all over the state of Texas. Each one stocked with food and water and another vehicle. I've seen things like this on television shows where people are extreme preppers. I've always thought those people are a little crazy but now I understand why they do it.

I stay in the vehicle when we stop for gas which keeps us under the radar of everyone looking for me. It has given us the ability to move across the state undetected. Liam is hyper focused on the highway, his eyes darting everywhere. This isn't a lazy, fun-filled road trip. His grip is tight on the steering wheel.

"If you drove a little faster, we'd get there sooner," I say, hating that I sound like a whiny child. But I'm tired and in desperate need of a cozy bed.

"If I get stopped by a cop, this is all over," he explains.

I open my mouth to apologize but he doesn't seem to need it nor expect it. His grip tightens even further on the steering wheel and I find myself staring at the blond hairs on his forearms that glisten in the sunlight. I wanted freedom from his house for a very long time. I don't know when that

transitioned into just wanting fresh air, like I requested yesterday.

But even in this car that can't seem to eliminate all the heat on the outside, I can't imagine being anywhere else. I don't long for the campaign trail, or the luxuries the life with my parents provided.

"How much longer?" I ask, unsure of how long I'd been asleep.

"Not long," he responds.

He insisted on driving to Mission, Texas where his boss is because he believes the man can help us. I suggested Mexico because it was a short distance from where his house was in El Paso. He instantly rejected the idea, saying it was impossible to cross the border without getting caught.

He explained that attempting to cross the river was too dangerous. He doesn't seem willing to risk my health and safety and for that I'm grateful.

"I'm hungry," I grumble, not for the first time.

"Do you want another protein bar?" he asks.

I make a gagging noise, bringing a smile to his face.

"I want a greasy cheeseburger and french fries."

He makes a noise low in his throat as if that would be the perfect thing right now. He doesn't placate me and tell me maybe we can get one soon. I'm well aware of the situation that we're in. I know the chances of being identified and how impossible it is right now, to just roll through the drivethru of a fast-food place. However it doesn't stop me from wishing things were completely different.

"This is it," Liam says, as he parks the car. He leans forward, getting a better view of the building we're parked in front of, as if it's the first time he's ever seen it himself.

"Your boss owns this place?" I ask, as I look at the skull and flower logo painted on the door. *Finis Mali*, I read in my head. I'm not skilled enough in Latin to have any idea what it means. The end of something. It looks more like a motorcycle club hangout but there are no surly bearded bikers out front.

"I've never been here before," he confesses.

"Are you sure it's safe?" I ask. As I look around and out the windows, I can't tell if the area is mostly abandoned or in the beginning stages of a rejuvenation project.

"I'm sure the building is safe," he says, making me wonder if he doesn't feel the same way about the man inside.

Instead of climbing out of the car, he shifts in his seat so he can face me, a look of seriousness drawing his brows together. "I want you to stay in the car." He gives me that same familiar look that translates into *don't argue with me* when I open my mouth to speak. "I'm going to leave it running. If you feel at all uneasy, I want you to drive away. I'll call the satellite phone if shit goes down."

He doesn't give me a second to argue before climbing out of the car. I sit and wait for a few minutes. The idea of driving away without him is almost as bad as the urgency in my bladder.

I argue with myself. I know doing what he says is probably what's best for me, but at the same time, I'm tired of being told what to do. I've lived my entire life working on someone else's schedule and I'll be damned if I'm going to pee myself while waiting for him to come back out.

I turn off the car, gripping the keys between my fingers in case I have to use them as a weapon, before walking up to the front door. I give the skull and flower emblem one last look before stepping inside. A man and a woman, both looking agitated, stand across the room from Liam.

"We're closed," the man snaps, as I step forward.

"Jesus Christ," the woman says.

I know she recognizes me instantly, and I look to Liam to gauge just how big of a mistake I just made.

"What the fuck is going on?" the man across the room growls. "Why is the missing senator's daughter in my fucking office right now?"

I stand a little taller at the irritation in his voice, trying to look unbothered at his tone. Liam had said this man had the ability to help us, so I take a chance. I hitch my thumb at Liam. "He's the one who kidnapped me."

Liam

"This is the fuckup you mentioned," Angel snaps, pointing at Raya. "This is what you think I'm willing to help with?"

Lauren lowered the gun before Raya entered the building but that doesn't mean either of us are safe. The woman is looking at me as if I'm crazy and Angel is watching Raya in a way that makes my blood boil. If I didn't think that Lauren would drop me in a second for going after her man, I'd snap that pointing finger clean off his fucking body.

I step in front of Raya, not only to protect her from a possible stray bullet but to also get her out of Angel's line of sight. The stubborn woman doesn't stay behind me, however.

Angel doesn't look impressed but Lauren looks amused. "You need to get out of here," Angel says. The man is seething, pissed, no doubt wondering why he answered my email in the first place. This may be a mistake, me assuming he would lend a helping hand.

"I'm not interested in the type of trouble this shit brings," he says as if there's any mistaking his stance on the situation.

I look down at Raya when her soft warm hand brushes my forearm, leaning down closer to her mouth so she can speak to me.

"I need the bathroom," she whispers.

"It's right back here," Lauren says, having heard Raya's words.

Raya seems reluctant to follow the other woman out of the room, but from the look on his face, I know there's a real chance Angel could kill me in the next couple of minutes. It's not something I want her to witness. Leaving completely would prevent that from happening, but for the first time in my life, I have someone else to worry about.

I'm not the type of man to ask for help or even need help from someone else. It has taken choking down a lot of pride for me to step into this office with the hope that someone is willing to help. Walking away without even asking for it isn't possible.

"It's fine," I tell Raya, pressing my palm to her back to urge her forward. She nods, so sure I'll make the right decisions for her. I pray I don't fail her.

I've seen a lot of things in her eyes—hatred, fear, anger—but I know disappointment wouldn't be something I could handle.

Angel looks over his shoulder, his eyes following Lauren and Raya out of the room. When he turns back to face me, I know that we're safe to speak freely, but he doesn't immediately talk.

I don't know if it's the determination he sees in my eyes or what but the man reads me like a book, his head shaking at what he finds in my eyes. "This can't happen," he says. "This will destroy her."

I nod in agreement because I know he's absolutely right. This is going to destroy both of us.

"I need help to mitigate the situation," I confess.

He huffs a humorless laugh as he runs both hands over the top of his head in frustration. "Her family will never let this happen. Has she just been hiding out with you?"

My first instinct is to lie to the man and tell him yes that she's been with me because she just doesn't want to come home. But for him to help me, he has to understand everything. I shake my head.

"I took her. I'm sure you've seen the surveillance video from the hotel."

"She doesn't seem very forced to me," Angel says and I fight a smile that his words threaten to bring to my lips.

"It's been an intense month," I say. "We're not the same people we both were a month ago when it all began."

He blinks at me as if he doesn't understand my explanation. "You've had her for an entire month?" I nod. "And she hasn't been found? Every federal agent and several third-party organizations have been looking for her. Either you're one lucky motherfucker, or you live even further off grid than I do."

"We managed to stay off the radar until yesterday," I explain, before going into full detail about what happened with the feds' raid yesterday evening.

"It's only a matter of time before they catch up with you again," he says and I know it as truth. "I don't know what your exact feelings are for this girl. I don't know how she feels about you, but it doesn't matter how things are now. It only matters how it started and that was with felony kidnapping. Because of that and the airtime this case has gotten, there's no happily ever after for the two of you. Running now means running forever."

I knew this was the case, but hearing it from someone else makes it hit just a little bit harder.

Angel continues as if the things he's already said isn't enough. "Her father is fixing to become the leader of the free world. He's not going to allow his only child to stay with a man who abducted her. The public won't understand even if he does and because of that, she will become her father's prisoner. She will be deemed mentally unfit to make her own decisions and you will end up in prison then or dead."

It's my turn to scrape my hands over the top of my head. My heart pounds in my chest because I know everything he's saying is true.

"It doesn't matter if she's with you willingly," Angel says. "They would never let that information see the light of day. She will always be the victim. You will always be the perpetrator. The truth would affect her father too much, so she has to be the victim. Being the victim of an abduction will help his career once she's returned to safety. And that means all the blame will be placed on you."

"I know all of this," I growl, my frustration increasing. "I came for help and suggestions. I don't need all the mistakes I've made pointed out to me in bullet points."

"You need to let her go and run. And once you find the end of the earth, keep running. That's the only way. If you want to protect her and keep her safe, it's impossible to do that with the two of you together. There's no fucking happily ever after for you, Liam."

I drop my ass into a chair in the waiting area. This isn't exactly the kind of help I was hoping to get but everything he's saying is the truth. She can't deny being with me, not with her DNA on the sheets they pulled from my house.

I look up at him, pleading and desperation in my eyes. "You can't think of any other way for us to survive this?"

He immediately shakes his head. "You have to let her go."

Raya

A sense of unease clings to the layer of sweat already coating my skin as she follows closely behind me.

"It's just right there," she says, pointing to a door at the end of the narrow hallway.

The need to escape her has me shuffling quickly and locking myself inside. The restroom is small and intimate. It doesn't have an industrial or businesslike feel to it at all. I use the toilet before standing at the sink to wash my hands. I've avoided looking in the mirror as much as possible during my time with Liam and I think that's what helps me notice the difference in my appearance.

A month ago, the reflection looking back at me would have her hair pulled into a tight, severe bun instead of the unruly wisps all over my head. My eyes would be clouded with despair and hopelessness. She would be unhappy biding her time until she could get a moment alone. That woman is nowhere to be found in the reflection. She's been gone for a while now.

Although we're in a better place mentally now, I know the real fight has just begun. The fight to get away from him has transitioned into a battle of staying together at all costs. With renewed determination, I pull open the restroom door and startle to find the woman waiting for me in the hallway. Is she afraid I'll run and somehow cause her trouble? What is she willing to do to me to prevent that from happening?

"Excuse me," I say when she steps in my way as I try to walk past her.

"I was just about to make a cup of coffee," she says. "Would you like one?" Her voice is soft and unintrusive. But it's that side of me I've been trying to free myself of the last month that agrees to her offer.

I've always been taught to be agreeable but cautious, and I think that skill serves me well right now. As much as I want to get back to Liam, this woman has given me no reason to doubt that a cup of coffee is all she's offering.

The small kitchen that we enter is just as homey and inviting as the bathroom. I take a seat at the table when she waves her hand in that direction but I keep a cautious eye on her as she steps up to the coffee machine on the counter. She doesn't look back at me or speak as she prepares our drinks.

Although the silence is expected I feel the need to fill the void. "Congratulations on the baby," I say, having noticed her very round belly when I first entered the building.

She gives me a weak smile over her shoulder before continuing with the coffee. I have to wonder if the sex I had with Liam will lead to the same thing. He didn't seem opposed to the idea of getting me pregnant. If anything, it excited him. A baby right now would be completely impractical, but it doesn't keep me from hoping.

"Cream or sugar?" she asks as she pours the coffee into two separate mugs.

"A little of both please."

Once she's done, she places a steaming cup in front of me on the table. I instantly wrap both palms around it, wondering how Liam would react if he walked back here and saw me with a cup of coffee. He tortured me for weeks with his own cup. When he offered me my own cup two weeks ago, I found I no longer had the need for it.

"It's been a long time since I've had a cup of coffee," I confess to her. "I hope it doesn't make me jittery."

She scoffs as she lifts the cup to her mouth. "You don't have to worry about that," she says with a frown. "It's decaf." She points to her belly as if that explains everything. I can only assume that caffeine consumption is something that should be limited during pregnancy because I have no real-world experience with it.

The campaign trail is hard work. It's exhausting. Most women who find themselves pregnant while working for my father end up in an office. *It looks bad to work a pregnant woman so hard*, my mother said once. *Constituents don't like it*.

"What happened?" the woman asks me. I give her a look that makes her chuckle. "I used to be an FBI agent," she says. "I've seen a lot of abductions. Hell, I've been abducted more than once."

I shake my head as if rejecting her words, because it doesn't make sense. I can't imagine putting myself in a situation to be taken a second time.

"I've watched the news reports. I've seen the images of a shadowy man carrying you away from the beach. How does one go from being abducted to being okay with it?"

My cup of coffee becomes very interesting as I lower my eyes to the creamy liquid inside the cup. "You wouldn't understand," I say.

"Try me," she counters. "You wouldn't believe some of the things I've seen."

"I can't," I whisper.

"Because you don't feel safe?"

"I don't want him to get in trouble."

"And I know you didn't go willingly," she says but there's no judgment in her tone. "If you're in danger, I'll help you.

"I'm not in danger," I assure her. "At least not in the way you would think."

"You care for him."

"It didn't start out that way."

"It never does, Raya."

I look up at her, only now realizing I don't even know her name and she's expecting me to confide in her. So, I ask her.

"Lauren Voss," she says.

"And you were an FBI agent?"

She nods. "My specialty was sex trafficking cases. I worked undercover and have seen many horrifying things. I know that it's not uncommon for women to behave a certain way to stay safe."

I swallow down a rush of emotions. I've seen newscasts and read stories online about the horrific things that happen to sexually trafficked

women.

"You no longer have to pretend to care for him or like what has happened. You're safe. And that man out there won't ever be able to hurt you again. He can't hurt you any longer."

"He's not hurting me," I rush out. "He's never hurt me."

"There's a difference between hurting you a little and hurting you a lot," she says. "The man drugged you and carried your unconscious body off the beach. He doesn't care for you."

"You don't understand," I argue.

"I understand more than you could possibly imagine," she says.

It dawns on me that Lauren has already made up her mind about this entire situation and there's no chance that I'll be able to change it. She's a prime example of how anyone from the outside looking in would see this situation, and it's like a slap to the face. Any expectation of making people understand is gone. It doesn't change anything though. Just because what Liam and I have isn't what others would want, doesn't make me need it any less.

"It may not be normal but I don't care. I appreciate your concern," I say as I stand from the small table. "The fact that you're willing to help someone so quickly, without explanation, is commendable. But I don't need your help."

I quickly make my way out of the small kitchenette and back down the hallway. Angel and Liam are standing close together in a heated argument. They both stop speaking the second I step into the room. I'm upset, nearing the point of tears, as I walk across the room.

I know Lauren is right behind me because I listen to her footsteps trailing at my back on the way into the room. But I can't look at her. Reassuring her that I'm fine and that Liam will no longer hurt me because that's not who Liam is, rather than her providing the security that I need doesn't cross my mind. The only thing I can think about is getting back to him.

If these people aren't willing to help us, there's no point in sticking

around. He clasps my hand the second I hold it out to him. The squeezing of his fingers against mine are all that I need in assurance. He's angry to the point of trembling but he doesn't say a word as we walk out of the building into our new world of uncertainty.

Liam

"Thanks," I tell the desk clerk, not feeling an ounce of gratitude. I don't bother looking around the parking lot as I walk back to the car. People in seedy motels don't pay attention to anyone else because they don't want people paying attention to them.

After the front desk clerk took cash, I figured I wouldn't have any problems getting a room here tonight. When he didn't bother hiding the fact that he was stealing the money when he pocketed it right in front of me, I knew for a fact I wasn't going to have any trouble.

Raya is silent, lost in her own little world, as I drive the car closer to the room we've been given. I don't know what Lauren said to her, but she came back into the front office, looking somehow terrified and extremely annoyed at the same time.

I'm itchy, my skin feeling exactly the same way, as I park the car, as it did the night I took her. It's not an unfamiliar feeling, and that's what bothers me the most. My pounding heart and sweaty palms are the physical manifestations of the worry going through my mind. I know what I have to do. I just don't know if it's going to be the right choice.

My life has worked out for the better through a series of events. Working hard and not giving a shit who I step on has helped. But I'm not the only one in this situation right now. I have more than myself to worry about and not just from a safety standpoint.

I have no idea how she's going to react or respond. I don't know if she's going to do what I tell her to do or if tonight will be the moment she finally digs her feet in and refuses to listen. Honestly, it could go either way. I don't know if I want her to fight me or if I want her to fight for us. If I could come up with a scenario that gave us even a hint of a chance, I'd jump on it. But after the conversation with Angel I know it's impossible.

I think I knew it was impossible the moment I got her in my SUV and couldn't follow through with the plan of dumping her off just to scare her. Determination to see it through settles deep in my gut, making me nauseous

and a little manic.

I grab our duffel bags from the back without a word. It takes Raya a minute to open the car door, but I don't complain about her slowness. The fight is coming and I know I need to conserve all my energy for it.

I feel her eyes on my back as I unlock the motel room door. I know she can tell I'm not myself, but she doesn't ask me what's wrong. I imagine she presumes I'm upset at Angel and Lauren's unwillingness to help us. I don't say anything to her to clear that up, as I drop our duffel bags onto one of the queen-sized beds.

I want to take her into my arms. I want to promise this woman the world. I want to lay her out on one of the beds and get lost in her body, but that doesn't seem fair. It isn't until this moment that I allow a hint of regret to settle in my bones for what happened in the tunnel.

Maybe things would be easier for both of us if we hadn't crossed that final line. For me, it's something to hold on to when she's gone. For her, I imagine it's just one more regret she'll have to live with for the rest of her life. Had she not crawled into my lap and sank down onto me, maybe she could have eventually convinced herself that everything she did was against her own will. Hell, maybe even after doing it, she'll get to that point.

My heart clenches, the pain of her forgetting me damn near a tangible thing. I want to wrap my hand around it, squeeze the life out of it, allow myself to believe that I'll be just as unforgettable to her as she is to me.

I turn around to face her, needing to pull the trigger on this conversation sooner rather than later. Raya is looking around the room that pretty little nose of hers scrunched in disgust as she takes it all in. She looks less than impressed, and even though I'm also a little disgusted by the quality of the accommodations, I know I can use it as ammunition.

That prissy attitude of hers, that expectation she'll probably always have, is the perfect trigger.

"Are you fucking kidding me?" I growl. Her eyes snap to mine, filled with confusion. "Is this place not good enough for you, Your Highness? This is a luxury compared to what we're facing in the near future."

"Liam, I—"

"I don't want to fucking hear it," I snap. "Four-star hotels and catered meals are a thing of the fucking past."

Her eyes narrow as she glares at me and despite the fact that her anger makes me hard, I can't focus on that right now nor ever again.

"I don't mind the room," she says, pointing to the far wall. "But there are bugs here." I wish I could say that I've seen enough places while working that a couple of roaches don't bother me, but the thought of them touching me while I'm sleeping makes my skin crawl.

I imagine she would make this assumption about me with how clean I keep my house and my person but mentioning it won't help my goal at this point.

"There may be bugs but that goddamn bed is a fucking luxury. There will be nights we don't have anywhere to sleep but the car. And if the car breaks down, we have nothing. I don't have hidden spots all over the world, Raya. Our resources will eventually run out and I don't have the means to make more with your needy ass tagging along with me."

This isn't exactly true. I don't have infinite resources, but I have enough money in various bank accounts all over the US and offshore that would last us both a lifetime. If money is all that it took for us to be safe and happy, us being together would be a non-issue. It's the running from her father and every federal agency in the world chasing after us that's the problem.

As hard as it is, I ignore the tears that spring to her eyes. This is killing me, but not pushing her away will kill us both. I would die a thousand deaths in hell before I let the consequences of my mistakes hurt her in any way.

"This isn't gonna work," I say, turning around so I don't have to face her reaction. Relief in her eyes would hurt me more than anything. "I can't spend the rest of my life looking over my shoulder just to keep you around. There isn't a piece of ass on earth worth that headache."

Silence fills the room, making me turn around to face her again. It isn't anger or agitation that's keeping her quiet. She's devastated. It makes my heart sing. It lets me know that what we share isn't one-sided, but it doesn't change anything. I don't get to keep her.

"Wipe that look off your face," I snap, having to swallow down the

pain the words bring me. "You don't really care about me."

"Liam, I—"

"And I don't give a shit about you. It was fun while it lasted, but the fun is over. I'm not interested in playing this game any longer. Keeping you hostage in my house, manipulating you into thinking that I wanted you, was enjoyable, I'm not gonna lie. But you're no longer worth the trouble keeping up that charade would bring."

Endless tears run down her cheeks, but she doesn't bother to wipe them away. "I see what you're doing," she sobs. "You're pushing me away because you think it's what's best. It isn't going to work, Liam."

"You're mistaken," I argue. "Do you honestly believe that getting you to fall in love with me wasn't always part of the plan?"

She shakes her head and I don't know if her denial is in the fact I'm saying I'm toying with her or that she doesn't feel that way about me. The latter would be best for both of us, but I know better.

"The door's right there, Raya," I say, pointing over her shoulder toward the parking lot. "You'd have the freedom to leave. I won't try to stop you. This isn't a trick."

She doesn't bother pulling her eyes from me and looking in that direction. Her chest is heaving up and down, and I want nothing more than to go to her and tell her I'm the biggest liar in the world. That I can't imagine my life without her. That I don't imagine living long after she's gone. But I can't turn back now.

"No one's stopping you from running back to Mommy and Daddy and going back to your five-star princess life. Nothing's keeping you from going back to that man you were going to be a whore for on the beach." Bile burns my throat at the thought of her hooking up with Jackson Smith. It makes me want to murder the man. "Run back to the life you had because I know the life I can give you won't keep you happy. You're too fucking stuck up for this life."

"I don't mind the bed or the bugs," she argues. "I don't mind being on the run or sleeping in the car or walking a thousand miles to outrun the feds." I shake my head despite her saying exactly what I need to hear. Her idea of how things will be versus how they really will be are on two opposite sides of each other.

"There's nothing romantic or comforting about how our life will actually be. The whole idea of 'love is all you need' is complete bullshit when you never get a moment's rest. You have two options, Raya," I say, having to clear my throat from the clog of emotions there. "You can go home and throw me under the bus, claim to be the victim despite me knowing that you're a whore for the game we've been playing for the last month. Or you can go home and tell Mommy and Daddy exactly how much you crave me. How it took less than two weeks for you to fuck yourself on a dildo, to please me."

She takes a step back, shaking her head. "I can't do either of those things," she says. "One would land you in jail and the other would ruin my father's reputation."

I shrug as if whichever option she chooses matters. Even if I stay free, living without her is its own kind of prison. I throw my hands up in agitation. "If you can't make the choice, then I'll make the choice for you." She swipes at more tears as they roll down her cheeks. "I'm not going to spend my life running. You're not worth it. It was a lot of fun while it lasted, but I'm bored."

"You don't mean that," she gasps.

"You care for me as much as I care?" I ask, shaking my head. "I don't fucking care about you. Do you really think you're the first woman I've ever taken and toyed with?"

Her sobs double and like the bastard I am, I use that as ammunition as well. I point at her. "See, you're broken. I despise broken toys."

She stumbles as she takes a step back and it takes everything in me not to reach for her in protection. When she reaches the door, all I want to do is stop her and beg her to stay, but I can't do that. I issue the final nail in the coffin.

"When you tell your daddy how much of a monster I am, don't leave out how hard I made you come, Raya. Let him know that the innocent little daughter he raised is all used up now." The slam of the door as she leaves triples the crack in my heart.

Raya

I duck my head as I walk away, sobs racking my body. There are no raindrops falling from the sky to blame. I used the excuse numerous times as a teenager before I was able to get my emotions under control. How I feel right now is real and raw, less like the robot I had become before meeting Liam.

My chest aches with heartbreak, my heart broken from the words he said to me. I couldn't take it any longer. I had to walk away. I needed just a few minutes before going back and telling him that he's a coward for purposely trying to shove me away.

The tactic doesn't surprise me. Liam isn't exactly the type of man who's going to admit that he's scared. He won't tell me that involving me in his life is too dangerous for me, because he should know by now that I'm willing to take the risk. I'm willing to run to the ends of the earth for the man and I'll explain all of that to him.

But the words he said, the truth in all of them, were like slashes to my skin. I don't think he believes them, but if there's even a chance that he feels the way he just said he does, then he may be right. There may be no hope for us.

"Excuse me," I say mechanically when I bump into someone on the sidewalk.

"Miss, are you okay?" the woman asks but I don't acknowledge her.

I keep walking. I keep my head down. So people don't see how upset I am. This devastation isn't meant to be witnessed. My world falling apart, my heart utterly broken, should be done in private.

The sun gets lower in the sky as I continue to walk but I keep a pattern of left and right, left and right at the end of each block, so I'm able to zigzag my way back to Liam.

"Ma'am," another female voice calls out, but I ignore her too. "Ma'am."

I hurry my steps, turning right at the next block.

"Raya Reed."

My feet stutter to a stop at the sound of my name, fear making my heart pound. My first instinct is to run but after taking a quick glance over my shoulder to assess the situation, I know I can't. A uniformed police officer approaches slowly, her hands facing me palms open, in a way you would expect someone approaching a dangerous animal would act.

"Miss Reed," she asks, her voice questioning as if she can't believe I'm standing right in front of her.

I know I can't get away from her. With all of the running I've done on Liam's treadmill, I might be able to lose her but I'd never be able to outrun her reports back to dispatch. It will only be a matter of time before every cop in the small towns descends on this area.

Liam's voice rings in my ear of the options he gave me. *Tell them I took you or tell them the truth*. I still haven't decided which way I'm going to go as she ushers me to her car.

"I'm sorry about this," she says as she opens the back door. "The computer takes up more than half of the front seat. You're not under arrest."

I feel very much detained, not free to walk away, as she closes me in the back. Her radio comes to life after reporting that she just found me wandering the streets of Mission, Texas, incoherent and completely distraught. I imagine she'd be just as upset if the man she loved said the things to her that Liam said to me, but I don't open my mouth to tell her so.

My tears are renewed as she drives past the motel I left not long ago. Liam's car is already gone. Even if I managed to find my way back to him, he couldn't be bothered to stick around. Maybe the things I tried to assure myself weren't true, he actually meant.

The cop car rolls to a stop outside of a small regional hospital and you'd think that there was an assassination attempt on my father's life with how many people rush out to greet us. I'm not given the option to walk inside, as a burly orderly lifts me under my arms and places me on a gurney. Numerous members of the hospital staff descend on me, taking my temperature, my blood pressure, asking a slew of questions and not waiting

for any form of response.

I wince at a pinch in my arm, wondering if they're just taking liberties, as a nurse fills a vial of my blood, or if I'm as incoherent as I heard the policewoman mention on her radio on the drive in. Nothing seems real and I think that has more to do with the fact that I don't want this to be real. I don't need the hospital. I need Liam, but Liam isn't an option. He made that blatantly clear saying the things he did, and then leaving.

He proved that I don't matter to him. That I was a game. That I was a toy he broke for fun.

I'm not transported into a trauma bay. I'm instantly put into a quiet room. I don't speak to them, but I do acknowledge that I am in fact Raya Reed when they ask.

The next several hours are a mad rush of tests and questions that I can't answer. Questions that I won't answer, like where have you been? Who took you? Did they hurt you? I ignore all of them until a doctor steps into the room. She shuffles everyone out and I know what's coming before she even speaks.

"We have one more test, Raya. I need to perform an exam on you."

"No," I say.

"There's a chance that—"

"No," I snap. "I wasn't raped."

She gives me a small smile as if she doesn't believe me, but instead of forcing the issue, she hands me a clipboard and a pen. "I'll need you to sign this, stating that you refuse to give consent for the exam."

I quickly do what she says because I know what she'll find. Liam may hate me. He may not see me the way I see him but hurting him isn't the reason for my refusal. I don't want the exam because I know what they will find. They'll determine that I hadn't had sex, nor was I assaulted.

I base a lot of what I know on real-life experiences and I know those types of exams reveal consensual sex and rape. I know I'm protecting myself more than I'm protecting him with my refusal.

It doesn't take long before several men in dark suits arrive to escort me away from the hospital after the doctor leaves with my signed consent form. They don't look happy or pleased to see me. They don't offer any condolences and I get the feeling that it's more because they're just a couple of men doing the job they're paid to do rather than actually caring where their paycheck comes from.

I'm of no more importance to them than I am to Liam. That knowledge sits like a weight on my chest as I ride away in the backseat of a darkly tinted SUV. I couldn't sleep if I wanted to, but that doesn't stop me from closing my eyes in an effort not to speak to them. They don't try to engage me in conversation or questions.

The police detective that arrived at the hospital shortly after I did thinks I'm in shock, assures me that I'll be willing to talk to him, eventually. I heard chatter from the nursing staff. Words like *in shock*, and *won't speak without her father present*, thrown around. I let them make their assumptions. People have been doing it about me my entire life. Why try to change things now? They have no idea that I'm no longer the woman I was a month ago, and I don't know that it's in my best interest to disclose that information.

Somehow, but not surprisingly, the media has already been tipped off. We pass several news vans rushing in the direction of the hospital as we leave town.

The drive is long, taking what seems like forever to get back to my parents' home. No one but house staff greets me when I step inside the house. My parents aren't there, but I don't know why I would expect them to be. I haven't turned my reality into a fantasy during the time I was gone.

Maybe I would have if things would have been bad. Maybe I would have longed for this house, for Roxanne who's always quick with a warm smile but never really engages in meaningful conversation with me. She's too busy. The expectation my parents have for her is high, just like they have for me.

Oddly Roxanne pats my hand when she approaches. "I'm glad you're home, miss," she says. "Is there anything I can get you?"

"Where are my mom and dad?" I ask.

"They're on their way back. They had a meeting in Dallas."

I nod before walking away.

"I put clean sheets on your bed and fresh towels in the bathroom," she says as I ascend the stairs toward my room.

When I walk into my bedroom for the first time in a month, I notice the only thing that has changed is me.

Liam

Despite being certain I made the right decision, it doesn't stop that sinking feeling that I'm making a mistake. Before her, life was just a series of days of going through the motions. I thought I was happy. Had anyone asked me if I was before Raya, I would have told them that I was content. My life after Raya will be nothing but hell.

I'm only a handful of hours east of Mission and I already regret what I did. I can't regret putting an end to things because it protects her. It's how I did it that's eating me alive. I despise myself for the hateful, vile things I said to her in my effort to get her to leave. I knew walking away on my own was impossible, but I didn't have to destroy her.

I didn't waste a second getting out of that hotel room. I knew it was only a matter of time before someone recognized her, or before she pounded on the door of another hotel room to get help. I know what angry, vicious women are capable of, and as miserable as life will be without Raya, being locked up in prison without her would be worse.

I stop for gas just outside of Houston, taking the chance of being seen because I'm in desperate need of something cold to drink. The Texas heat doesn't allow for the enjoyment of a protein shake. Maybe I'm taking unnecessary risks because I no longer care.

New Orleans was the first city that came to mind when I pictured this dull existence, and I don't know how I'll be living now that all of the light Raya brought into my world is gone. It's easy to get lost on Bourbon Street and that's what I plan to do.

I fuel up at the gas station before heading inside and grabbing a bottle of water from the cooler. It brings to mind the memory of when I approached Raya in South Padre, but I can't linger.

I throw out all thoughts of going back to find her when I lift my eyes to the television playing near the cash register. Her reappearance has halted all normal broadcasting. I stand to the side, allowing several customers to go ahead of me as I watch cell phone footage of her being shuffled into the back of a dark SUV.

I take comfort in knowing that she's safe. That she didn't walk away from me only to be snatched up by some other devious son of a bitch. There are no tears in her eyes in the video that captured her leaving the hospital. If anything, she looks a little stunned, and it's very possible they medicated her while she was there.

There are no flashes of my name or picture in connection with her disappearance, but I know that's also only a matter of time. They would have done a rape kit on her. They won't find my DNA in any type of database, but they wouldn't need it to know my name. I have no doubt that Raya will give that to them.

That's why Liam Stone can no longer exist. It's a relief, actually. That man died with every step she took away from the hotel room. He wouldn't have survived, anyway.

I listen as the news anchor speculates about where she is, the trauma she may have endured, but they aren't stating any real facts. Neither El Paso nor the house I kept her in for over a month are mentioned. That also is only a matter of time.

New Orleans may be my first stop but that's definitely not where I can land. Staying in the United States isn't an option. But putting more than the width of Texas between us makes me want to claw at my own skin.

Part of me thinks that she will tell her family the truth about what happened and that scares me more than her demonizing me. Angel said she would become her father's prisoner, and I have no doubt about that. She wouldn't be the first person in a political family to be silenced. Hell, the Kennedys performed a lobotomy on one of their own in order to keep her under control.

Raya may be the number one story on the news reel right now, but I imagine that's only temporary. Before long, she'll go into seclusion. The story of her abduction and the resulting trauma would cause almost anyone to understand why she no longer wants to be in the spotlight.

Knowing that I may never see her face again, not even on television, adds to the misery I feel. Unable to watch any longer without being

suspicious, I pay for my bottle of water and leave the gas station.

I pray she doesn't end up a shell of herself, but at the same time, I also hope that her time spent with me changes her. I hope that she voices her opinions and fights back against anyone trying to turn her back into the "yes woman" she was when we first met.

I know she's gonna tell them who I am. It's only a matter of time. I can't even be mad at her. I even understand. I know what it's like. People do a lot of things to protect themselves.

I've done countless, horrific things at the expense of someone else because it benefited me. Raya should be no different.

I can only hope that one day, when she thinks of me and the time we shared, that she does it with a smile on her face, instead of the tears that were in her eyes when she walked out of that motel room.

Raya

I'm not asleep when my bedroom door opens, but unlike before, I don't immediately look in that direction. I want to be here even less I realize, when a clearing throat tells me I can no longer hide out in my room. I push the covers away from my face, taking my time before sitting up and looking toward the door.

My mother looks less than impressed with having to wait. She looks tired but I'm sure that has more to do with my father's extensive schedule than actually worrying that her only child has been missing for a month. Her face doesn't light up, seeing me for the first time in many weeks. She doesn't run across the room and wrap her arms around me in a bear hug. She doesn't tell me that she missed me or that she's glad that I'm home safe.

I don't know why I let myself even imagine she would feel that way. Maybe it's being cared for so thoroughly for the last month that allowed those ridiculous thoughts to infiltrate my head. But her just standing there staring at me expectantly is all I'm offered.

I knew my parents' reaction to me has always been sort of cold and businesslike, but it's blatantly obvious in this moment. Roxanne showed more enthusiasm from our arrival than my own mother is. I'd laugh if it didn't almost make me cry.

"Your father is waiting for you in his office," she says.

When she lingers in the doorway, a moment longer than usual, I think that maybe I was wrong to judge her. That maybe she does have all of those emotions for me, but they're just as familiar as the emotions I usually have. I let myself fantasize that she finally breaks that stoic composure of hers and acts out of character. But she simply nods at me before leaving the room and closing my bedroom door.

Things would have been different if they were home when I arrived last night. Our reunion would have been staged for sound bites. There would have been fake tears and joyous hugs. They would have blamed incompetent house staff for the leaked video footage when it really would have come from

Christine, my father's media specialist.

I got online last night long enough to get a feel of the atmosphere. It's about a fifty-fifty split between those with a million questions, demanding answers, and those who have expressed their joyous gratitude that I've been returned home safe and sound.

Once again, I'm slow to climb off the bed, unconcerned if my father is waiting, uncaring of how irritated he will be when I finally make my way downstairs to his office.

Although I showered last night, I feel the need to shower again. Being back in this house makes my skin crawl. My shower here is nothing like the shower back at Liam's house. The old, fully remodeled Victorian takes a while before the water is warm enough to get in.

I douche for a second time, because although the hospital staff allowed me to refuse a sexual assault exam, I don't see my father being as willing to accept my demand for privacy.

I try to get out as many tears as I possibly can before turning off the shower and drying off. I don't care that my parents will see me with red eyes and a puffy face. I imagine it's to be expected after the trauma I'm sure they assume I've encountered.

I cringe when I dress despite only pulling on underclothes, a t-shirt and lounge pants. They won't be pleased with my choice of attire either, despite being in my own home.

I don't make eye contact with my two bodyguards that are stationed outside of my room. I heard them out there chattering last night so their presence isn't a surprise. What is concerning is that we've never needed this level of security inside of the house. It's not unusual for my dad to have guards around when taking meetings but my bodyguards usually disappear the second I arrive home.

My flip-flops slap on the floor as I descend the stairs. I knock on my father's office door, the action more muscle memory than any formal show of respect. As if being punished for my delay, I stand there for a solid minute before the door opens and I'm allowed entry.

I don't know why I expected this meeting to just include me, my

mother, and my father. Why would we need a private moment to discuss anything that's happened to me in the last month?

With tired eyes, I look around the room. My exhaustion is bone deep. I've done more in the last twenty-four hours physically than I've done nearly the entire month I was with Liam. The fatigue experienced from running on the treadmill doesn't even compare to the weariness I currently feel in my bones and my muscles. I guess that's just how heartbreak works though.

I look around the room again, making eye contact with Christine, my dad's PR specialist. The family lawyer and my father's personal assistants are in the room as well. This meeting looks like any other meeting he would have to discuss schedules, poll numbers, and strategic plans for the future.

I look to my father but I get nothing more than what my mom offered, standing in my doorway upstairs. There's no joy. If anything, disappointment clouds his eyes. My heart begins to race, my mind wonders that maybe they know what happened with Liam without me even speaking the words. That would make it easier, I guess, if my confessions weren't a surprise. I cross the room to take a seat in the chair across from my father's desk and it already feels like an interrogation without a word being spoken.

"Are you hurt?" my father asks, as I'm taking a seat.

I shake my head because I know he's not concerned with my emotional wellbeing. He frowns, and I'd say the response is misplaced. Physical ailments, he could codify. Physical issues could be an excuse, a reasoning to justify how I've ruined my prospects of marriage, which in turn ruins his plans for his own future. I imagine it would be difficult to marry off a daughter who possibly had been tortured, abused, and sexually assaulted for a month.

I don't open my mouth to assure him that I'm fine. It's not like he would care anyway. Thomas Reed's only concern is his career and how those around him are classified into two groups. Those that can help him and those that cannot. From the look on his face, I can easily see that I've been moved from one camp to the other.

"Who was Liam Stone to you?" my father asks.

His name on someone else's lips makes my heart race and my hands

grow clammy.

"Who?" I ask, coughing to clear my throat when the word comes out on the squeak.

Anger rages in his eyes but I know my father would never lose his cool in front of witnesses. Despite everyone in this room being loyal to him, he's not a man to take that kind of risk. He knows I'm lying, even if he didn't have the evidence from Liam's house. He knows I'm not telling the truth. It's not surprising. I've never been a very good liar.

"He never told me his name," I lie again. The instinct to save face and please my father is inherent.

"He's the one who held you captive for the last month," Christine, the media expert, says but I don't take my eyes off my father.

I can be strong in front of him because that's the expectation. Looking toward someone who may have sympathy in their eyes would break me. It would make me cling to the hope that there's a way out of this differently from how I know this will go.

"He didn't tell me his name," I repeat, knowing my silence won't be tolerated like it was at the hospital for much longer.

"He enslaved and tortured you, right?" Dad asks. "He held you against your will."

I clamp my mouth closed, despite my silence being a lie in and of itself. My dad looks less than impressed, and I imagine there'd be an irritation on my mother's face if I was willing to look in her direction as well. My father's jaw clenches, the muscle flexing in irritation, but I stand my ground. I've learned very recently that the silence doesn't have to be filled especially when you have nothing to say.

"You're clearly still exhausted," my father says. "You should go back to bed. Maybe when you wake up, you'll have more information."

I don't hesitate to stand up and walk away from the scrutiny of his gaze. Before I close the door, I hear, "mental break, Stockholm syndrome, petulant damn child."

My bodyguards follow me right back up to my room and it makes me

want to dig a little bit deeper into the whole situation. I'm surprised they still have jobs. I have no doubt my dad somehow spun it to make it look like they were heroes who were not outsmarted but possibly physically outmanned during my abduction.

Thomas Reed wouldn't make the mistake of hiring someone that would be easily duped.

As I close and lock my bedroom door behind me, I don't feel protected at all. For the second time in my life, I feel like a prisoner.

Liam

I have always lived my life in the shadows. I've spent my time on the edge of everyone else's existence. It's either that I don't care or it's the whiskey in my veins causing the change. The news stories of Raya's return haven't slowed down despite the lack of new information.

The police have to know It was me. They raided my house. They found her DNA, but somehow, for some reason, they've kept that information away from the press.

I've spent the last several days fighting the urge to turn myself in. Doing so would be stupid. It would go against everything I have fought for in life and that's my freedom. But there would be a trial and I'd get to see her in person during the court hearings. And that's almost enough to make me sacrifice everything.

I miss her soft breathing. I miss the sight of her sweat glistening skin after a run on the treadmill. I miss the moans she makes when she comes. I miss everything about her. There's not one recollection of her that comes to mind that I don't ache to experience all over again.

I turn and glare at the crack in the sidewalk, like it's its fault I stumbled and not the alcohol I can't seem to say no to these days. If this is how my life is going to be, I'd rather be dead. Misery isn't a strong enough word to describe how I feel without her.

The regret I felt, watching her leave that motel room, has nothing on the misery I feel right now. I was hasty in my decision to do what I did. Angel's words seemed like law, as if letting her go was my only option. I was too quick to give in to that side of me, to the part of me that has always only looked out for myself.

I knew it was going to be bad. I just had no clue it was going to be this bad. I didn't know her walking away would make it hard to breathe. I didn't know her leaving would make it damn near impossible to function.

New Orleans no longer holds the same appeal it used to. Before Raya, I would escape here. I would walk down Bourbon Street and try to blend in.

Pretending was the game, whether it be a college frat boy or just a drunken idiot, I knew how to play the part. Only as I stumble for the third time, I realize I'm no longer playing a part. I'm just one fool of many, only I'm not smiling and laughing and having a good time.

"Watch where the fuck you're going," I growl when some douchebag runs into me.

A slow smile spreads across my face when he turns to glare rather than ignore me like others have done in the past. My arm strikes out, my fist hitting him in the nose. Before I can listen to the reasoning side of my brain, that says getting into a fight will no doubt have a horde of cops on me in ten minutes, the guy stumbles, his hand immediately reaching up to stanch the blood flowing from his nose.

He's wide-eyed and surprised, floored that I had the audacity to hit him. I walk away as my phone starts to ring. I've been waiting for this phone call for over thirty-six hours

"About fucking time," I growl into the phone when the call connects. Silence fills the line and I have to pull the phone away to make sure that the call is still connected. "Do you have what I need or not?" I snap.

"You sure are in a foul mood for someone who needs a favor," Hollis says, making my irritation multiply.

"Hollis," I snap. "Did you find what I need or not?"

"You're going to owe me one."

"Of course," I quickly agree, knowing the return favor will never come to fruition because I'll be impossible to find once I'm done.

I hated reaching out to him in the first place. Asking for help is something that I never do. After the devastation of asking Angel for help, I was certain I would never do it again. But Hollis has more connections than I do. He has the ability to find information I can't.

I'm not a computer genius. It's why I reached out to Angel for work in the first place. I was never very efficient on the research side of things. After a little more prodding and Hollis acting like he's doing me the biggest favor in the world, I get the information that I need—a name, an address.

He doesn't ask me questions. He doesn't ask me why I need the information. It wouldn't matter if I gave it to him anyway. I plan on being a ghost after this. He'll know soon enough if he's paying attention, if he's the type of man to follow up.

I end the call without saying thank you. I have no gratitude for anything anymore. Besides, it was a business transaction, not one man doing a favor for another.

The urge to get in my car and head to Austin is hard to fight, but I'm drunk. Killing a family or ending up in jail before I can give Raya this last gift, isn't an option.

Somehow without altercation, I make it back to my hotel room. Raya has never been in this room but the sight of the bed still makes me miss her.

The gun on the bedside table would cure so many problems. Knowing I'll still have it with me after I'm done in Austin is the only thing that keeps me from using it right now.

Raya

I don't feel an ounce of guilt for the sob story I gave Roxanne that made it possible for me to leave the house alone. The three weeks since my return has felt longer than the twenty-two years before. I have no doubt the woman will lose her job for helping me, but I can't concern myself about it right now. My bodyguards have once again grown lax in watching me and I've been biding my time until now.

I've done my best to pretend that everything is normal. From the outside looking in, it would appear that I'm recovering well despite earlier thoughts. My father hasn't scheduled any interviews. He's afraid of what I'll tell the media.

I argued with Liam when he told me my options. I refuse to put myself in a position that would land him in prison but I also couldn't imagine telling the truth. I knew what that would do to my father and his campaign. Staying away from Liam for any period of time was never my intention.

I needed to clear my head. I needed a little space. I needed to gather the courage to confront him and call him out on his lies. The first week back home, I almost started to believe what he said, but it was my mother's voice in my ears saying those words not his. It doesn't matter if he was telling the truth or not.

I knew staying in that house, being involved in that vicious circle that's required for my father's political career, wasn't an option. Even in captivity, I found my first taste of freedom and I'm unwilling to give that up.

Liam had pointed out the bugs on the wall and the shitty bed and the crappy motel room as if it were a deterrent, as if that's all I needed to walk away. What he had no idea of knowing is that I would choose that any day over going back to my house with the spacious interiors and manicured lawns.

He made me a different person. There are times that I despise him for that but waking up every day in a house where there's no care or consideration for others, where no one is concerned about the wellbeing of anyone but my father, isn't an option.

In the weeks I was with Liam, I spent time wondering what my return home would be like. Those first couple of days, I was disillusioned. As time passed, I was better able to accept the truth of what my life was like. I'm no longer under the illusion that my parents care for me past what I can do for them, and after what I did today before leaving, returning home will never be an option.

I wouldn't risk my father's career by telling the full truth, by admitting who I had become. But that's exactly what I did. It could backfire. It could be a mistake. But the one thing I know for sure is that he's worth the risk.

It didn't stop my hands from shaking as I typed out the story. It didn't stop the tears from flowing down my cheeks, but I wasn't crying at all that I was losing. I felt relief at the possibility of living a different life even if it meant in the end I couldn't have him. The story I wrote was an insurance plan. I made sure it was very clear that I was of sound mind and body when I wrote it. I didn't want the facts being misconstrued or manipulated to fit my father's narrative.

I didn't feel the need to say goodbye to either of them before I left the house. I didn't need the opportunity to give them one last chance to be decent. Their track records prove that they're not capable.

I keep going back to the way he watched me when we made love. It's the only thing that's given me the strength to do all of this. I wasn't his toy or a plaything. In that moment, I was his entire world. I need him to know that he means the same to me.

I shove down the possibility that he could have been telling me the truth in that motel room. That he didn't want me. That he was just using me. That every interaction we shared from the time he took me on the beach until the day he pushed me away was because he felt something for me. If I find him and he wants me, I don't think I would ever be happier than in that moment. If he rejects me again, at least I'll know the truth.

What I know now that I struggled with in the past is that my value and self-worth isn't reliant on anyone else. I've created my own misery over the years by not standing up for myself. I'm no longer that woman. I can only hope that what he did was a tactic to get me to walk away because he wasn't

strong enough to leave me. In hurting me, he was protecting me.

I grab a diet soda out of the gas station cooler before heading to the front. I've gotten used to wearing clothes again, which I hate. The adjustment was quicker than it should have been. But I don't think I'll ever get used to the itchiness of the wig on my head. I fight the urge to adjust it as my eyes scan the magazines on the rack as I wait for my turn in line.

I nearly drop my drink when I see the newspaper headline, *Prestigious Texas University College Professor Found Dead in His Car from an Apparent Self-inflicted Gunshot Wound*. Crime happens all over the place and on a slow news day, someone's suicide has the possibility to make the front page. But it's the name Jason Crowley that makes me gasp—my former professor, the one I had an affair with.

Most people would be shocked or saddened with the news but I know better. I am surprised but the manner of death? Suicide? Never. Jason was not only too narcissistic and egotistical to hurt himself, but he was also stanch in his anti-gun beliefs. This has to be a sign, I realize, as I dip my hand into the plastic tub filled with Laffy Taffy.

I can't seem to wipe the smile off my face as I pay for my candy and my drink. This news is going to make the bus ride to Mission, Texas that much easier to deal with.

I don't hesitate the way I did the last time I was here but tugging on the office door is fruitless. It's locked. I rode the high the news of Jason's death gave me all the way from Austin, only to have it dashed away by a locked door. Cupping my hands around my eyes, I peer through the glass and immediately take a step back.

There's no way. In what world do people have sex in the front office of a professional building? I cup my hands a second time and sure enough, Angel and Lauren are going at it. Most people would probably give them privacy but I'm no longer like most people. I do pull my eyes away, the glare of the sun making it impossible to see inside, but I lift my hand and knock, hoping the noise comes across just as irritated as I feel.

I turn my back to the door, unsure if they know that I can no longer see

inside when the door eventually opens. There's no evidence of the embarrassment I expect Lauren to feel from what I just witnessed. Her smile is small and mischievous and her cheeks are flushed red. If I was a woman that still made assumptions, I would say she didn't come to greet me until after she had finished.

Angel is walking to the back, still zipping up his jeans as I enter.

"I figured you'd be tied up in an insane asylum by now," Lauren says as she relocks the front door.

I have no idea what kind of business can be run successfully with customers unable to come inside during business hours but it's none of my concern.

"The headlines are making you sound like a lunatic," Lauren continues when I don't speak.

"I have no doubt about that," I say, internally wondering if my dad was still somehow able to spin the story in his favor.

I went into graphic detail about what happened the month that I was with Liam. All the experiences I described while at his house were true. The only lies I told were about the night that he took me. I lied and said that we had been dating for a while. That Liam was my boyfriend. I wasn't dumb enough to give them his name because I'm hoping after everything settles down, we might have a chance at a normal life.

I explained that we like to play games, and that's why I was seen being carried away from the beach. Another lie I told was that I wasn't unconscious. I scoured the internet for footage of what happened that night and none existed that I could find where he drugged me. My lies are balanced on the hope that no such footage exists.

I explained that I was tired of being in the spotlight. I was exhausted at having to lead a life I never asked for. I went further to explain that I was under no legal obligation, regardless of who my father was, and who my father could be, to tell anyone goodbye.

As a parting shot to my parents, I also added that I was under no obligation to my father or his constituents to verify my safety or my whereabouts during the month that I was gone.

"Did anyone recognize you on your way in here?" Lauren asks, as she looks out the glass door to scan the streets.

"Why would anyone follow me?" I ask.

She turns around to face me, a mild look of annoyance on her face. "People are pissed at you, Raya."

I shrug, unconcerned about anyone's feelings at this point. "It's not my fault they don't like the fact that I made choices they don't agree with."

Lauren immediately shakes her head. "They're pissed about the energy, the money and the time spent looking for you. Colleges organized search parties. Every day, Americans spent hours and days with their eyes glued to the television, waiting for your safe return. People care about you."

I shake my head, rejecting her words. "People like to be involved in the drama," I say with a sigh. "It's more about them getting themselves in the spotlight than any true concern about anything else. People have gotten so used to putting every second of their lives on social media that they can't do something nice or grieve, feel happy or feel sad without telling the world about it. I'm over all of it. I want privacy. I want to make my own choices."

"You don't regret what you've done?" she asks but I can't sense judgment in her tone.

"Not one bit," I say without missing a beat. "My choices are my own. People being upset with them aren't my concern. I came here to ask for help," I say unable to hide the irritation in my voice. "If I wanted a lecture, I would have stayed in Austin."

Liam

I'm living my life in a series of before Raya. Before Raya, I could enjoy a shower alone. Before Raya, I could get a couple of hours of sleep every night. Before Raya, I could see a blonde walking down the street that didn't make me stop in my tracks.

It's not that I blame her for how I am now. It's that I almost hate myself for being weak enough to let a month change me so drastically. I press the heels of my hands into my eyes but it does nothing to ease the exhaustion I feel.

I told myself after Austin and my gift to her that I was done living. If I didn't end up eating the end of my gun, I had no intention of staying in Texas. This recent trip to Mexico notwithstanding, I haven't been able to leave my home state.

The only way I've been able to find the ability to function on whatever small level I've managed the last couple of weeks is to live and operate in complete seclusion. I consider it a moment of sanity as to why I answered the phone yesterday when Angel called.

That moment of sanity has a long shelf-life because here I am, sitting outside of this shitty hut, in a no name Mexican town. He had a job for me and I took it, which is stupid on so many levels or maybe it's genius. Maybe my level of distraction and my new hatred for life will collide here today. Maybe it's why I'm sitting in this shitty truck, watching the front of the house rather than climbing out and actually doing any type of reconnaissance.

No one has come or gone for the last half hour. But watching a place for thirty minutes never provides any real intel. Instead of waiting for real information or trying to work out the tree traffickers schedule, I climb out of the truck. I've only seen one shadow at a time inside, but that doesn't mean it's the same person moving around in the house.

But all my give-a-fucks are gone. I don't stick to the shadows as I approach the front porch. Caution and my will to live are nowhere to be found. I think I knew this was a suicide mission when I accepted the job from

Angel.

I kick open the front door the second I reach it. At least I have my gun out and raised. At least there's a chance I may take one of these sick fucks out with me before I go down myself.

A television flickering on the other side of the room accounts for the shadows I saw earlier. The house seems empty and for some reason even after being so determined to die here tonight, relief washes over me. I consider the half bottle of bourbon I drank in the truck, in the last half hour, my final mistake when I see a shadow move behind me.

I won't even have to worry about the headache I'll have tomorrow when I'm struck in the head because all of my problems end here tonight.

Ask and you shall receive. The words bounce around my head as pain filters into my body. I wanted to die and now that it's a real possibility, I hate that I let those thoughts infiltrate my mind. Dying means never seeing Raya again on this plane or the next.

I'm not a man to believe in heaven or hell but I know if it exists, she and I would end up in different places. Despite the devious things that I both convinced and forced her to do, Raya is inherently good.

Searing pain climbs down my spine, originating at the back of my neck. I know what the pain is from. I know that if I ignore it, it will eventually go away. That pain isn't from this time. That pain is from last time, the fiery sensation, a reminder of the possibilities.

It's possible I'll die this time around. It's possible I've made the biggest mistake of my life. I let go of the fear that this would happen to me again a very long time ago. I've been careful in everything that I do to ensure it would never happen again.

I can hope for survival but I know the chances of that are slim. Maybe the best thing for me to do is to hope for an easy death. Knowing there's very little chance for escape, I still attempt to break the bonds tying my wrists at my back. The chair is metal, making no sound when I attempt to shift my weight.

Whoever hit me on the back of the head knows what they're doing, and that's more worrisome than anything else.

"Do you really think you could get away with what you've done?" The mechanical voice gives me hope. It makes me believe that there's a chance if the people who have me are using it so it would be harder for me to identify them, they haven't decided to kill me yet. On the other hand, they could easily choose to torture me for years and years.

I know why I'm here. She's the reason I'm here. Despite Raya believing her parents don't love her, her father could never let me go unchecked. I messed with something that belonged to him.

I try to speak but there's a rope knotted in my mouth, the edges of it tearing into the sensitive corners.

"Hurting women," the distorted voice says. "Is something you'll never do again."

I angle my head, doing my best to follow the person in the room as they circle me. Seeing is impossible. The bag over my head is impenetrable by light. I feel suffocated, my own breath the only return air I'm able to manage. My heart rate kicks up, my body's natural instinct to fight against the lack of clean oxygen.

Focusing all my attention on the person walking around the room seems impossible, but I know hyperventilating at a moment like this wouldn't be well received. I have no doubt these people wouldn't care if I died, because that's their end goal for me anyway.

I flinch away from the touch when warm fingers brush down my cheeks. I fight futilely against my restraints when something brushes against the front of my jeans. My capture years ago didn't include that form of torture. I was never touched in a sexual way. The guys that had me preferred blood and screams rather than asserting that type of power over me.

They used the women in adjoining rooms for that. I'd always considered myself lucky not to have been violated in that way, but it seems my luck has run out. I shouldn't be surprised. The things I did to Raya. What I made her do were all sexual, from the touching to making her watch me, forcing her to ride that fake cock. All of it brought me right here.

You don't get to hurt someone in that way and expect it not to happen to you when revenge is being sought. My shoulders sag, realizing I deserve everything they plan to dish out and probably more. I tortured myself with my decisions these last couple of weeks.

Her pleasure was forced. I manipulated her every step of the way until she was so fucked up she thought it was what she wanted. I have no doubt she's come to her senses after being away from me, but I'll never be the same. In forcing her to do what I did, I changed myself. Going soft for a woman was never in my mind, but that didn't prevent it from happening.

I made her a stronger person, all the while weakening myself. For the first time in my life, I'm scared, terrified of what's to come. Before, I refused to let those feelings in. If I was going to die at the hands of my torturers, I was going to do it as a man. I'm unable to muster that courage now.

A husky laugh surrounds me, still mechanical, yet the edges of it seem familiar.

When a weight gets pressed against my lap, I fight with everything I have, but my hands are tied behind my back and my legs are tied to the chair. I'm helpless and it's the most dangerous emotion I could ever feel. It carries with it a loss of hope but it also removes the burden of trying to survive.

I blink into the bright room when the bag is pulled from my eyes. All I can do is stare, wondering when I finally snapped. Did I lose my mind before or after I was hit in the head? Have I always been delusional and insane?

The person I've wanted to see more than anyone in the world shifts her weight on my lap, a slow devious smile spreading across her face. I want to give in to her. This illusion my mind has conjured in order to deal with my situation.

"I know it will never be fifty-fifty between us," the ghost of her says.

"I know you'll always have more power than me," I grumble against the rope, trying to tell this illusion all the things I wish I'd said. All the things I wish I'd done. I confess my mistakes but each sound is as incoherent as the next.

She shushes me, pressing her finger to my lips. Tears leak from my eyes. Another thing I've been able to control until her.

"I'm as real as you are," she says, forcing my heart rate to triple. "Only this time, you're my captive."

Chapter 40

Raya

I want to bask in the moment he realizes that it's real. The second I took the black bag from his head, I could tell he thought his brain was trying to trick him. It gives me hope. It tells me that everything I've done leading up to this point was worth it.

He grumbles against the rope in his mouth and as tempted as I am to remove it, I can't.

I push away from him, standing, and take a moment to admire him this way. I never thought I'd be the one who wanted to be in control. Not when I relished the power he's had over me since day one. I know it'll never happen again. I know that when I release him, he's going to be the one who controls me with his words, with his looks, even with that air of power that just seems to circle around him.

I begin to pull my clothes off, first my t-shirt, then my jeans, leaving my bra and panties for last. His eyes follow the glide of every piece of fabric as it goes from my body to the floor at my feet.

"I know you didn't mean a word that you said in that motel room."

He shakes his head and I read it to mean that he didn't because getting rejected after all that I've done would carry the sting of a thousand suns. As strong as I tried to convince myself that I was, how I would just move on with my life if he rejected me, I know better. Living without half of yourself is impossible.

"Lauren and Angel told me they had a hand in convincing you to walk away from me. They explained how they thought I would have no protection from the media. My entire life has been a series of avoiding the press and also feeding them what I think they needed. It was all smoke and mirrors," I explain. "The protection I thought I needed from them my entire life is exactly what's going to protect me now."

His eyes are locked on mine rather than drifting down my naked body. I let myself imagine that I would have his full undivided attention even if he weren't tied to a chair and gagged.

"I gave them our story," I continue. "You should really hear some of the conspiracy theories. I know if anything happens to me, shit will hit the fan. I don't know if we're a hundred percent safe, but I do know that we're safer than we were. We don't have to run out or hide. We don't have to disappear."

He tracks me to the other side of the room as I walk up to the table and grab a knife. His eyes widen for a second as I step closer to him, fear fighting with acceptance. Acceptance wins as if he thinks he hurt me so badly that I have every right to do the same to him.

But I know better. The emotional trauma I suffered from being rejected by him doesn't have a physical counterpart. The pain I endured the last three weeks can't be revenged by hurting him.

I cut away at his clothing, smiling when he tries to flinch away from the blade. It seems convincing of the mind and fighting that natural instinct to survive are two separate things.

"I've missed you these last three weeks," I confess. "I've relived what we did in your house over and over."

Groans mix with a gasp as I trace the tip of his cock with the blade of the knife. I'm so needy my hands are shaking, so I drop the knife. Despite what he might think, I don't want to hurt this man.

"I wonder if the feds found our little black toy," I whisper in his ear as I straddle his lap. I'll remember the moan of pleasure he makes when I slide down him for the rest of my life.

He grumbles something incoherent against the gag in his mouth and I know his inability to touch me, to command me, is its own form of torture. I hate that he can't praise me, that he can't tell me that I'm pleasing him. But I also refuse to let go with this moment.

The thoughts of what he'll do to me for not allowing it, make me ride him harder. This isn't the most comfortable position in the world, but the thrill of him being inside of me for only the second time after dreaming about it for weeks, is more than enough.

I lean in closer, allowing my lips to brush his cheek. "I know what you did to Jason," I whisper in his ear. "I know it makes me a little crazy, how

much it turned me on that you'd protect me that way. I know it means you love me."

He lifts his head, exposing his throat so I can trail my lips there. His pulse pounds against my lips and I'm familiar enough with the sounds he's making to know just how close he is. The fact that he's going to come even tied up and gagged threatens to make me lose it as well.

If I had a genie in a bottle and three wishes, I'd use all of them for this right here. One for the look In his eyes. The second for the noises he makes, and the third for the devastating way he makes me feel.

My body gives in to his demands at the first kick of his cock inside of me. I don't fuck him through it. I settle on top of him, taking him as deep as I can go, as I shudder in orgasm. My skin tingles, knowing it was utter perfection, but at the same time, my body is demanding more.

My mental health can handle knowing how obsessed I am with this man because when I look into his eyes, I see the same level of obsession there. It's okay to be a little crazy so long as we're together.

He doesn't speak when I untie the gag from his mouth, like I expect. He watches me, his eyes darting from mine, running down the tip of my nose to my lips.

"Is it going to take you one month to apologize?" I ask.

He shakes his head no, angling his head up to press his lips to mine.

"I want more," I groan in distaste when he pulls away, wondering just how long I can maintain all the control.

"I'm never letting you out of my sight again," he whispers, and that's all I need to give full power back to him.

Chapter 41

Liam

Before, when Raya and I were secluded in my house, it was all about possession. It was selfish. I didn't want people coming and taking her because she was mine.

As we walk out of the room, I realize how much that has shifted. All I want to do is protect her from the men standing there. I recognize them immediately but that doesn't matter.

Part of my head can understand that we're here together because of them. That she went to Angel for help. But I want to growl at Angel, at Hollis, at Nash, at the other guy standing in the room who I have no idea who he is.

She doesn't inch away from me when I pull her tightly to my side. She makes this little sound of satisfaction as she leans her arm against my bicep.

"You fuckers have a lot of nerve," I growl. My anger must not have the hint of danger to it I expect, because there's nothing but smiles all around. These motherfuckers are happy with themselves.

The warmth of Raya's hand spreads across my chest as she presses her palm to it. It soothes me in a way I never thought possible. I went without her touch, went without the warmth of her body for so long, I hope that the novelty of it never wears off. I hope my heart flutters, my pulse increases, every time she touches me from now to eternity.

"Who the fuck is that?" I grunt, pointing to the stranger across the room.

"That's Fox," Angel says. "Don't worry about him."

I narrow my eyes. The man may be sort of my boss but I don't follow commands from anybody.

Hollis inches closer, looking back over his shoulder before speaking. "That guy's a real fucking psycho," he whispers. "Not like you, not like me, certified. I think it has something to do with his girlfriend being killed."

Understanding washes over me. If his girlfriend meant half of what Raya means to me, I have no doubt that would be enough to make him certifiably insane.

The man bares his teeth as if issuing a final warning before walking out of the house.

"Lauren didn't bother to come?" I ask, looking around the room and noticing she isn't in attendance.

"She's spitting fucking mad," Angel says, but instead of looking worried, his lips turn up in a smile as devious as the one Raya gave me when she pulled the bag from my head.

I don't know much about their relationship but I have no doubt in my mind that it doesn't include hearts and flowers and rainbows.

"Since you're all fucking here," Angel says, annoyance clear in his tone as he looks around the room. "I have a job and instead of assigning it to any individual, I'm letting you choose."

"I'll take it," Hollis says without hesitation.

Angel's head shakes. "This isn't a normal job," he says. "It's more dangerous than any I've encountered. There's a very good chance that whoever takes this job won't make it out alive."

"I'm busy for the foreseeable future," I say, pulling Raya even tighter against my body. A chuckle sounds around the room and I smile wider when she tucks her face into my chest in embarrassment.

"I'll take it," Hollis repeats. "Gotta die someday."

"The pay is five times higher than normal," Angel says, his eyes on Nash for some reason.

Hollis looks between the two men. "You want to go in halves?" Nash holds his hands up in mock surrender.

"I know what we do is dangerous," he says. "But guaranteed death, I'm out."

Fox reenters the house, a cold beer dangling between his fingers by the neck of the bottle.

"Just giving the guys an opportunity to take a job, five times the pay, probably ten times the danger," Angel says to the new man.

Hollis looks a little disappointed and possibly even jealous that Angel doesn't just automatically assign the job to him.

"We can go in halves," Hollis says, offering the same deal he offered to Nash.

"I work alone," Fox grunts. It's not a no, but it's also not a yes.

"I guess it's yours, Hollis," Angel says. "I'll email you the details."

"This is all fun and everything but I've got shit to do," I say before escorting Raya out of the house into my truck. I want her on my cock again but getting her to safety is the first order of business.

"I'm hungry," she whispers as we pull into the night.

She doesn't open her mouth to talk about what happened or what I said, how I treated her. I think she got it all out, said her piece, and is done with it.

We're traveling for nearly an hour before we make it across the border back into Texas. I've never felt serenity, the way I do when she's near. I'm the biggest fucking idiot for doing what I did but at the same time I feel like things worked out exactly how they were always supposed to.

It's a huge realization, considering I've never considered fate contributing to anything in my life.

"There," Raya says, her finger pointing across the street. "They have the best chicken nuggets."

I pull up to the drive-thru and place our order. My fingers sifting through Raya's hair as we wait for our turn at the window. The cashier and I make a trade, me handing over cash as he hands me the bag of food. Raya grumbles as I accept my change.

"What's wrong?" I ask as we start to pull away.

"They forgot the dipping sauce," she complains and I despise the look of disappointment on her face.

I hit the brakes on the truck, jerking us to a stop. She rolls her eyes

when she looks up at my face.

"You have that look," she says, amusement in her tone.

"And what look is that?" I ask fighting a smile.

"The look that says you're about to murder someone."

I shrug. It seems she can read my emotions very well.

"No," she snaps, pointing her finger at me like I'm a puppy getting caught peeing on the carpet. "You can't kill everyone because they're a minor annoyance to me."

I pull my foot from the brake and move it over to the gas pedal. She's wrong though. Anyone in this world who causes her even the smallest amount of distress runs the risk of having it be the last mistake they'll ever make.

THE END

The next job Hollis takes is more dangerous than he ever could've imagined.

His past collides with his presence.

Will he make the right choice for his future?

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