



TOXIC

When you fall in love with a villain, you also turn into one.

NEW YORK TIMES & USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

NICOLE BLANCHARD

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OceanofPDF.com

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DEDICATION

To all the good girls with a dark side

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CONTENTS

[One](#)
[Two](#)
[Three](#)
[Four](#)
[Five](#)
[Six](#)
[Seven](#)
[Eight](#)
[Nine](#)
[Ten](#)
[Eleven](#)
[Twelve](#)
[Thirteen](#)
[Fourteen](#)
[Fifteen](#)
[Sixteen](#)
[Seventeen](#)
[Eighteen](#)
[Nineteen](#)
[Twenty](#)
[Twenty One](#)
[Twenty Two](#)
[Twenty Three](#)
[Twenty Four](#)
[Twenty Five](#)
[Twenty Six](#)
[Twenty Seven](#)

[Twenty Eight](#)

[Twenty Nine](#)

[Thirty](#)

[Thirty One](#)

[Thirty Two](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Dear Reader](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Also by Nicole Blanchard](#)

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ONE

There are mornings when I wake not knowing or caring what day of the week it is. Sometimes, I go whole stretches of time without ever checking the date. I prefer it that way.

There's less chance of my having the hope of a better life if all the nothingness blurs together.

Above me, my husband labors over my body with practiced movements my own recognizes and responds to, if only out of habit. His head carefully tilts to the side so he doesn't have to look me in the eye. As he's told me countless times, "Fucking doesn't have to be personal to be effective." Somehow, he's taught my body to believe him. Played it and tuned it as finely as a musician tunes an instrument. He molds and shapes me to his liking, and I let him until I'm nothing more than a thing he programs for his pleasure—his real-life porn queen/sex robot. It's a wonder something so mistreated can still respond to the cause of its neglect.

The soft scrape of his buzzed haircut rubs the side of my face raw. It's an irritation I don't dare turn away from. The smell of sex, musk and lubricant, fills my nose, so I switch to moaning from my mouth. He likes it when I make noise, even if it's more for his benefit than any real reaction to anything he's doing between my legs.

Fingers bruise the skin on my wrists as easily as they can crush the delicate flesh of a peach. Fingers that once were cause for delight but now cause nothing but devastation. Vic's movements quicken at my strangled cry until he drives into me at an unrelenting pace. I lift my hips in time with his, if only to stoke to life a spark guaranteed to burn away the nothingness my existence has become. Anything to forget.

Each thrust of his cock mixes pleasure and pain until I don't know how to differentiate one from the other. Until they blend into the fathomless darkness I've come to know and love. I reach for it, yearning for it to wrap me in its bleak comfort.

His grunts draw me in the other direction, back toward reality. The pleasure ekes away with each of his sharp exhalations in my ear, the keen edge of oblivion dulled to an irritating reminder. An itch to go unscratched. I want to growl and claw at him, but I twist my fists into the bedspread instead and pinch my eyes closed until moisture leaks from the corners and down my cheeks to wet my pillowcase. Beside us on the nightstand, an alarm drones, and I mentally countdown the long minutes until he finishes and I can reach over and turn it off.

With his arms a relentless cage around me, he stiffens above me and groans. The promise of oblivion fades, taking the blissful sense of nothingness with it. The beeping punctures the promised haze of relief and reality claws its way back. The sweat sticking our torsos together reminds me of how dirty I feel, but I know it's best if I don't move, best just to wait until he gets off me.

When he does, I'll roll to my side of the bed, make appreciative noises when he asks if it was all right for me, and then I'll shower and get ready for yet another day. I repeat the lists of tasks in my mind until he leverages his weight on one hand before tossing it to the side with another grunt. I loose a relieved breath and cover myself with a sheet. I've long since lost the ability to sense shame where he's concerned, but there's a part of me—deep down—that always needs to run and hide.

He slumps on his back with a satisfied groan and paws at his stomach with one meaty hand. "You need a shower," he says. "You look like shit."

Another of his not-so-subtle digs. I swallow my angry retort and tell him I will. His attention drifts to the smell of coffee brewing downstairs. As he swings himself off his side of the bed, my breathing and heart rate return to normal, and already I'm counting down the seconds until I can move on with my day, even if I'll just have to start all over again tomorrow morning.

He ambles to the desk chair, retrieves his robe, and throws it around his shoulders. Without another word or a backward glance or even a show of concern for the fact that I didn't finish, he walks out of the bedroom and disappears down the hallway. After a few seconds, I hear the sounds of cabinets opening followed by the click of his coffee cup on the counter and then the sound of liquid splashing.

I shove the discomfort to the back of my mind—like I do everything else—and go to take a shower. Hot water doesn't wash away much besides the sweat clinging to my skin. I never understood people who thought

showers could make them clean. I feel just as dirty getting out of them as I do going in. There are some things water and soap just can't wash away.

I dress in a simple uniform of gray scrubs, blow-dry my long, dark hair until it's pin-straight, and then pin it back in a severe bun at the nape of my neck. I only put concealer on the lavender smudges beneath my eyes and run mascara over my lashes—more out of habit than any real concern for my physical appearance. Less is better. The last thing I need is to draw any attention to myself. Vic's, or anyone else's. I've become very skilled at blending into the background.

With a steadying breath, I turn my back on the mirror and join him in the kitchen. He sits at the table with the paper spread out in front of him, the cup of coffee at his elbow, steam curling from the top. It's a typical morning. Picturesque almost. The goddamn American dream. All that's missing is the two point five kids and the golden retriever.

I fill a thermos with coffee and snag a banana for something to fill my deadened stomach. "Have a good day at work," I tell his bowed head as I pass by him to the door.

He stops me with one hand on my arm and angles his cheek up to me. I oblige him with a kiss, and he says, "I'll see you for dinner." The underlying threat of what will happen if I'm late hangs heavy between us. Dinner is to be served promptly at six from an approved menu. The lack of autonomy doesn't matter. I've long since lost the ability to enjoy the food I eat, and it's but one of the aspects of my life he controls.

Dismissing me, he turns back to his paper, and I push through the side door that leads to our covered garage. It's February in Upper Michigan, and the cold seeps through my jacket with icy, penetrating fingers. In my haste to leave the house and my husband, I forgot to grab my gloves. Turning back is unthinkable, so I unlock the car with numb fingers and resolve to deal with it.

The drive to work is an arduous process. Roads are slick from the previous night's snow—I'm too early for the sweepers, but don't have time to wait for them to clear the way. The layer of ice underneath the fresh dusting crunches as I pull up to the gate to flash my identification.

The officer on duty, Ernie, pokes his head out of the ancient window, his cheeks blazing red. Despite his bushy white eyebrows, I can't miss his appraisal.

Without a word, I hand over my badge. Any friendly good morning I'd planned wilts as Ernie's eyes linger on the V of my uniform bared by my unzipped jacket. When he finally turns away, I wait as he scans it into the computer. I want to snap at him and tell him to keep his eyes to himself, but I don't. He'll spend the rest of the day out here in the cold, I tell myself. His suffering is a comfort. I didn't always use to be so cold-hearted, and as I wait, the irritation I'd repressed from losing the pleasant numbness this morning comes back a thousand-fold. Only this time it's directed at Ernie. My complacency in his blatant ogling reminds me of what Vic has turned me into, and I want to take my rage out on Ernie by grabbing his neck and slamming his face into the window frame.

The spurt of anger shocks me, and I jump as Ernie leans forward with my badge. "Whoa there, steady," he says as if I'm some spooked horse he can calm down. "Must be jittery because of the big day."

I make sure to take my ID between two fingers so I don't have to touch him again. My concentration is so absolute it takes a few long seconds of silence for me to realize he's waiting for my response.

"Why's that?" I ask, knowing there are eyes on me, even now, that will report back to my husband, who, as warden of Blackthorne, isn't to be crossed. Despite my feelings, I must play the dutiful wife and make pleasant conversation because any employee I encounter has the potential to relay my actions back to Vic.

Ernie pulls a face. "New arrivals," he says slowly. "Didn't you hear? One of 'em's supposed to be a real piece of work."

Eyelids shuttering closed for a second at the memory of last night's conversation with my husband, I do recall him mentioning that I should be extra careful today. Apparently, one of the new inmates is high-risk. He must be if he warranted such a warning.

"Must be the president himself," I remember to say.

Ernie snorts. "I'm sure he thinks he is. You be careful now. Wouldn't want one of them criminals roughing up that beautiful face of yours."

Laughter bubbles in my chest and nearly breaks free. For a moment, it threatens to overtake me, but I choke it back and wave to a bewildered Ernie as I pull my car into the parking lot.

The quick dash from my car to the entrance takes an eternity. In the interim, I lose all sensation south of my kneecaps, and the tips of my fingers and nose tingle with numbing heat. As I step into the dank front office, I

daydream about sandy beaches, coconut drinks, and crowds big enough to lose myself in.

It doesn't matter how much I think about it, though. A tiny part of my mind knows that these prison walls are my reality. I push through the main employee entrance, toe off my sensible shoes, and hand them and my lunch bag to the officer manning the metal detector. He nods good morning but doesn't engage me in useless conversation. His eyes barely even register my presence.

Once I have my shoes back on, I retrieve my keys to medical from the control room. The officer on duty pauses before handing them over.

I've learned it's best to wait little power plays like this out, so I stare at the paunchy middle-aged man until he speaks. "You've got a patient this morning."

"Oh?" I say without inflection, though it does pique my curiosity that I haven't been at work ten minutes and already someone's waiting for treatment. "Who is it?"

The officer pulls back, and I know I should have just kept moving. It isn't as if I won't find out who the patient is in a few minutes. I glance to the doors, hinting that I would like for him to let me through, and he relents without answering my question. The inner hallway is as silent as a tomb for once. The hush is so uncharacteristic that I keep looking behind myself, expecting someone to jump out from one of the doorways.

The walk to medical is a long one, and I'm on such tenterhooks that I don't even look up as I unlock the door. My eyes are on my feet as I put my lunch in the fridge in the small office they have for the nurses on call. I swing around to pick up the charts from the overnight patients and nearly gasp when I realize I'm not the only person in the room.

I open my mouth to call out or to question his presence, but something stops me. Without a word, the man sitting on the examining table in front of me manages to do what it took my husband two years to learn: how to shut me up with just one glance.

The hair on the back of my neck prickles as my body recognizes a predator in its midst. The layer of muscle underneath my skin contracts, preparing for flight even as I take a step closer to the prisoner in front of me. The other officers and nurses are in the infirmary, which is close, but at the same time an eternity away. There is nothing stopping this man from hurting me. It only takes one glance at him to know it's entirely within his

capabilities should it serve his means. Taut muscles, which are too large for the standard issue prison uniform, stretch against the confines of the top. Ropes of ink snake around his right forearm and his left bicep.

My throat bobs reflexively as my eyes flash up to his. He doesn't taunt me, but his smile speaks more loudly than words.

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TWO

I've been a nurse at Blackthorne Correctional Institute for five years, so dealing with inmates, from the docile to the deadly, isn't new. None of the tricks of the trade I've learned work to calm my panic when he directs the full force of his attention to me.

"Did they tell you to wait here for your receiving exam?" I ask, and I'm grateful when my voice doesn't betray my sudden nerves.

He lifts a shoulder, the material of his blood-smeared jumpsuit rustling in the otherwise quiet exam room.

Even though warning bells are going off in my head, I take careful steps forward until I reach the end of the examining table where he's perched. Most of the men who come here for care know better than to mess with the staff, but there's always the chance that today will be the day one of them changes their mind. So, when I reach for the clipboard hanging from a clip on the end of the bed that has his information on it, I do so with one eye on him. Something tells me it would be a bad idea to turn my back on him.

After a few careful steps back to allow for some much-needed space, I hazard a glance at his chart. There's no name on it, just his inmate number, which turns my insides to ice and washes away any doubts I may have had about how dangerous he is.

It's probably the blood.

A lot of prisoners get into fights with other inmates or officers during transport, but someone must have patched him up sometime between. There's a bandage on his nose and tape on the apple of his cheek. The blood on his mouth must be from a tooth that got knocked out, maybe? Or a cut in his lip. Either way, there's nothing that needs my immediate attention, but it reminds me to be cautious.

"It says here you didn't do the medical history questionnaire with the officers before they brought you here."

He nods.

“Okay, we’ll start with that.” I move to my desk and settle myself into my space. “Are you seeing a physician for any ongoing illness or health issue?”

He shakes his head, and I mark it down. Aside from the scrapes and bruises, I don’t need the evaluation to tell me he’s in perfect health. Vitality exudes from him, tempting me closer. Years of lessons at Vic’s hands force me to keep my distance, but I can’t help but wonder what it would be like to have this man’s attention on me in a different setting.

I glance back down at the questionnaire to redirect my thoughts. As the gears in my brain grind to a halt, I tap the pen on the side of the clipboard, trying in vain to rally the remains of my professionalism.

“Are you taking any prescription or over-the-counter medication?”

He gives another shake of his head, and it occurs to me we may go through this whole interview without him ever saying a word.

We do.

He answers every question with a nod or a headshake. I learn he’s never had a major surgery, has no allergies, and has no familial history of any major diseases without ever knowing his name or the sound of his voice.

Once I come to the end of the medical history, I stop worrying about him trying anything. If he were going to hurt me, he would have done it by now. I’ve done these intake screenings a thousand times, so once I get in the groove, it gets easier to forget my first impression of him along with my intrigue and go through the motions.

“Let’s get you on the scale now so I can get a record of your current weight.”

He grunts, which I take as his agreement, and I nod to the scale by the office door. Despite his bulk, he moves with the grace of a feline as he crosses the room. The scale clangs as he steps up, and I busy myself with adjusting the measurements and making notes on the chart.

When I glance up again, I have to stifle a gasp because he’s staring at me with startling intensity. Blatant curiosity makes his gaze sharp and causes my stomach to flip with nerves and arousal the likes of which I haven’t felt in, oh, years. It’s a reaction that, if I were to act on it, could land me in ten different kinds of federal trouble.

“Uh, let’s get your height now.”

I indicate the measuring tape affixed to the wall next to us, and he shuffles over obediently, all the while he eyes me with a puzzled

expression, as if I'm a problem he's determined to solve. He submits to my handling as I record his height. Six feet of animal male towers over my five-foot-six frame.

Without thinking, I shove up the long sleeves of my scrubs as I record his measurements and check the clock as I desperately countdown to my first break. I just got here and I'm already impatient for ten thirty to roll around so I can get fifteen minutes of solitude.

A shiver runs down my spine, and like the prey I am, I freeze before forcing myself to look to the doorway. I expect to see Vic standing there, watching me. That's the only explanation I have for the way my whole body freezes and the urgent need to flee takes over. I scan the room, certain he's there waiting for me to do something wrong. Like breathe without his permission. Instead of my husband's eyes on me, it's the inmate's attention that's causing my panic. My gaze follows his, and when I move to hide my wrists, his muscles go rigid.

Dark, purpling bruises encircle my wrists from the vicious grip Vic had this morning in bed. Sweat beads on my upper lip, and my ears ring. Frozen in stasis, I can't think of an appropriate response or excuse—not that I need to give him, of all people, an excuse. After a moment of suspense-laden pause where my eyes flit to his narrowed ones, I turn my back on him and head to the infirmary to call the officers back for their prisoner. Since we always seem to be understaffed, it isn't uncommon for them to split between both rooms, and right now, I'm cursing that for all it's worth.

I don't make it that far.

I should have known better. Every instinct since I stepped into the room has been telling me to keep my guard up because the moment I took my eyes off him, he'd pounce.

And, fuck me, it's exactly what happens.

In the long space of a protracted moment, he's so close to my back his warmth surrounds me. He pins me between his body and the wall, his front to my back. A stab of profound fear engulfs me, and I can't control the whimper that explodes from my throat.

He doesn't make the mistake of touching me, but the threat is there nonetheless. Which is exactly what he wants me to know. He may be the one behind bars, but he's the one with the power right now.

He speaks for the first time, and my body turns to ice. At least I hope it's ice. The only other explanation is one I won't even consider.

“Did someone hurt you, little mouse?” His voice is as empty and hard as his gaze was. An abyss of secrets and lies. He shifts but still doesn’t touch me as he leans forward and inhales.

Is he smelling my hair?

“Is that why you look like you want to crawl back into a hole?”

Words are an impossibility.

It doesn’t seem to matter to him because he goes on speaking. “What’s a girl like you doing in this place anyway? Hmm?”

He doesn’t expect me to answer, so I don’t. I don’t think I could if I tried.

He nudges my shoulder, touching me for the first time to indicate he wants me to turn around. So, I do, making sure to keep a wary eye on him. Breath stutters past my lips in staccato bursts. My hands clench into fists by my sides.

His hands raise, and I flinch. My reaction is so subtle that I wouldn’t expect him to even notice, but his eyes flash to mine in abrupt understanding. There’s a tug at the breast pocket of my scrubs, but I don’t dare look away from his gaze.

I can only wait.

White edges into my vision as he raises my ID card to his line of sight. I shiver from the ice collecting in my stomach as he studies my picture and name.

“Tessa Emerson, RN,” he murmurs, peering deeply into my eyes. “It’s nice to officially meet you. I suspect we’ll be seeing a lot of each other.”

Maybe it’s the morning spent underneath my grunting husband. Maybe it’s the all too self-assured gleam in this criminal’s eyes. Maybe it’s insanity. Whatever it is, it builds inside me. My skin pulls tight, and I almost expect it to crack and split, but it doesn’t. Instead, my arms shoot forward, and I shove at his chest with my palms. They come in contact with the wall of firm muscle, emphasizing how impotent I am. It doesn’t move his mountainous form, but he relents and gives me a few scant inches of breathing room, which I desperately need. The air between us is thick with tension, and I find myself drawing it in with greedy gulps, but it isn’t enough.

My flare of anger seems to please him, though, because the creases at the corner of his eyes twitch and he bares his teeth in a feral grin.

I find my voice, my irritation growing at his amusement. I'm the one in control. "Back away," I order, willing a bit of steel into my voice.

He holds up his hands in a show of uncharacteristic complacency as the officers choose the next moment to make their appearance. Their eyes swivel back and forth between the inmate and me until they finally stay trained on me.

"Is everything okay here?" one of them asks.

I could report his misconduct, but even as the thought occurs to me, I know I won't. What's worse is he seems to read my mind on the matter, and his smirk widens. Explaining what happened to an officer will only mean whispers will leak back to my husband and I'll pay the price. For the first time, I resent this life Vic's forced me to live. The officer who spoke impatiently sucks through his teeth. The sound skitters over my sensitized skin like an unwelcome insect, and I shiver.

"Fine," I answer a few seconds later, unable to stomach the uncomfortable pause. "Everything is fine."

Everything is most assuredly not fine.

Blood drips from my nose, and I can't see out of my right eye. The dark red liquid splatters on the pristine tile floor and races along the grout line. Vaguely, I contemplate how long it will take for me to scrub it out as my husband grips my hair and wrenches me back to my feet.

"You made me look like a fool," he says, spit flying from his lips.

No doubt the handsomely compensated officers had run to Vic the moment they left the infirmary. It didn't matter that nothing had happened between the prisoner and me. It didn't matter that I'd never laid a hand on the man outside of trying to push him out of my personal space. What mattered was whatever fucked-up scenario Vic imagined in his twisted little brain. To absolve my imagined sins, he is subjecting me to his version of torture.

Till death do us part, right?

I'd gone to the police before to report his abuse. I went so far as to press charges. I was terrified, but I did what I thought I had to do to save myself. But the Honorable Judge Edward Milton—I'd never forget his name—dropped the case. Instead of Vic being punished, I was the one sentenced

and written off as an emotionally unstable woman. Now I do the only thing I can...endure.

My eyes move to the stain in the grout, and I start listing the ways to remove it.

First, scrub the stain with a sponge and some cold water.

Vic—he hates to be called Victor, as I learned the first night he hit me on our honeymoon—backhands me, making my head snap to the side. The force of the blow knocks me back, causing the hair still wrapped in his hand to rip from my scalp.

If that doesn't remove the stain, then use a toothbrush with baking soda.

"I don't want you associating with that inmate again, do you hear me? McNair and Summers couldn't stop smirking at me when they found me. You humiliated me."

I swallow back the blood pooling in my mouth, my eyes still on the stained tiles. The metallic taste lingers in the back of my throat and burns its way down to my stomach. It settles there, a stone dropped into a pond of bile. Then he kicks me in the stomach for good measure, and the stone disintegrates with the force of my rage. "I understand," I say, though the word comes out as a quaver. I let him assume it's due to fear.

His fist tightens in my hair, forcing my head back until his disdainful expression fills my vision. "See that you do," he murmurs. "When you see him again, I don't want to hear about you flirting with him. Do you understand me?"

He knows there are circumstances when only one nurse is on call, but I nod anyway. There's no use pointing it out. In times like these, logic only seems to feed Vic's madness.

"I want to hear you say it." His words are grit as he spits them at me.

"When I see him again, I won't flirt with him," I repeat mechanically, blood dribbling down my chin from where I bit my cheek to keep from saying what I want to say.

He reels away, wiping his hands on his suit pants and sneering as I crumple to the floor. The cold tile pressed against my face grounds me, and I dig my fingernails into the piling of the rug instead of into his face.

"Clean yourself up before you make dinner." He pauses to peer into the mirror and preen. "I think I'd like steak tonight."

He leaves me in a ball, blood steadily dripping into the grout. It takes me a minute before I can pull myself to a sitting position. Every scream of a muscle fuels the same flush of rage that inspired me to shove at that inmate. I retrieve a sponge from underneath the sink and imagine what would happen if I did the same thing to Vic.

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THREE

The only “good” thing about Vic’s fist in my face is it guarantees I won’t be required to fuck him for at least a few days. According to him, he doesn’t fuck ugly. In his way, I suppose it’s an underhanded compliment. Though, it’s his fault I have a split lip and black eye in the first place.

I call into work during the time it takes for the swelling to go down and feign the stomach flu. My face isn’t exactly back to normal, at least normal enough to cover the bruises with makeup. Vic’s forgotten what pissed him off enough to plant his fist in my eye, at least for now. Thankfully, I’ve been able to placate him with blow jobs and his favorite meals and he’s returned to a bittersweet temperament. Sweet in that he dotes on me; bitter because I know it’s only a matter of time until he’ll want me to fuck him again. I both dread and crave the release it will provide, but I’m afraid he’ll be able to tell how much touching him turns my stomach.

He chatters as he gets dressed, and I do my best to ignore him. It isn’t as easy as it used to be. Not when I keep imagining what it would be like to pour the scalding hot coffee over his balding head or “accidentally” dump antifreeze in his oatmeal. I never used to fantasize about what it would be like to cause him harm, but each time he beats me, the fantasies get more and more vivid. In the week I’ve been off from work, I’ve started to lose grasp on what’s real and what isn’t as I wait for whatever horrible punishment he has for me next.

“Did you hear me?” Vic asks.

I wince as I dab concealer a little too hard over the bruises surrounding my eye and then blink rapidly. The mental byplay I’d been having where I jabbed my cuticle scissors into the meat of his thigh melds with reality, and I refocus on the mirror and Vic, who’s standing behind me.

“I’m sorry,” I say once I find the words. They aren’t as easy to force out as they once were. “I was thinking about work. Can I get you a cup of

coffee?”

He stares at my reflection in the mirror long enough to cause my heart rate to kick up a notch. When he only lays a hand on my shoulder and squeezes it, I release the breath I’m holding.

“No sugar,” he says as he turns to put on his shoes.

I follow his movements until he strides down the hall, only then do I relax my spine. I’m not the only one who’s been acting peculiar this past week. Vic’s been overly solicitous, slower to anger, and dare I say it, considerate. It only makes me more suspicious. I’ve been so on edge I have barely been able to eat or sleep. Work will be a vacation at this point.

Before he can holler at me to hurry, I manage to focus enough to finish getting dressed. I’d like to leave my hair down to cover the shadows on my cheeks, but it’s against regulations, so I plait it back into a twist. People at work have gotten disappointingly used to my excuses, so I doubt anyone will even bother to ask about my appearance. If I’m lucky, today will be slow, and I won’t have as many patients to treat, either.

Vic is waiting in the kitchen, and I scurry like the good little girl I am and prepare him a thermos of coffee. He watches over my shoulder, and I lift my cheek to receive his kiss as I press the thermos into his hands. I fantasize about bashing it over his skull and can almost hear the sharp crack it would make, how his body would crumple to the ground, and how the blood and coffee would spill across the tile.

As he whistles on his way out the door, I decide it’s a good thing I know how to get bloodstains out of grout. Just in case.

There are two nurses in medical assessing patients when I get to work, but the infirmary is empty. I spend too much time throughout the early morning replaying the events from breakfast in my head and trying to decide if I’ve finally gone over the edge. It’s why, when I look up and see the last prisoner I want to see standing in the doorway, I freeze, certain I’m hallucinating.

What the hell is he doing here?

“Work detail,” he answers, and I realize I must have spoken aloud.

Furious to find myself feeling cornered and even embarrassed, I turn away from him. Corralling my emotions and impulses is like trying to keep waves from wetting the sand. No matter how many barricades I put up,

some of it always manages to spill over the edges. Having him around isn't going to help. I've only met him once, and I feel like he can see past those barricades and right through me. Even worse, he makes me want to tear them down and show him all my soft and vulnerable parts.

"Since when?" I ask when I can look at him without wanting to run in the opposite direction. Working in medical is a coveted position by inmates. His presence can only mean Vic has changed his tactics. I knew his mood was too good to be true. He was using this prisoner to remind me who has the power in our relationship, and if I put a single toe out of line, I'll be punished.

He lifts a shoulder and shoves his hands in his pockets. "Couple of days ago."

My teeth clack together in an automatic response to the heated words determined to spew forth. I guess Vic's beatings are good for something. If nothing else, they've taught me to control my sarcastic mouth. "They could use you in medical for the long-term patients."

Before I've even finished the sentence, he's shaking his head. "They told me to come in here." Then he smiles a little. The bastard's enjoying watching me squirm.

"Fine. The mornings will be slow, but you can start by organizing the supplies in the cabinet." Anything to keep him out of my personal space. I doubt he even understands the meaning of personal space.

His smile widens just a fraction, and I'm thankful for the guards who rotate between medical and the infirmary.

Without another word, I look back down at the paperwork and jot down some more notes. My brain is full of white cotton, though, and I barely remember what I've written. I keep seeing flashes of the twisted fantasies I've been having of Vic. Only now they have the added horror of the prisoner's heated gaze on the fruits of my self-destruction.

Get it together, Tessa.

The tip of my pen digs into the piece of paper, and I curse under my breath when it rips right through and scrapes against the surface of the desk. I'm such a mess. I mentally sigh. Oh, who am I kidding, I've always been a mess. My life has been a train wreck from the start. Abusive father. Absent mother. I was born strung out on drugs and abandoned. I didn't see my parents until two months later when the doctors believed I was stable enough to withstand going home. Child Protective Services kept a wary eye

out, sure, but I was one of the lucky ones who slipped through the cracks. I guess I'd been good at being invisible even as a baby.

It wasn't surprising that Vic saw the victim I was born to be.

"Are you all right?" comes the prisoner's voice an indeterminable amount of time later.

I don't know how long I sit and stare at the ripped sheet of paper any more than I'm aware why his question fills me with such sadness. Then again, I don't know why I do many of the things I do these days.

"I'm fine," I say, pleased to note my response is toneless and apathetic. I find myself slipping into the same numb state I revert to when Vic decides to force himself between my thighs. Like I'm viewing my life from the outside in, from a place where nothing and no one can truly hurt me. "When you finish with the cabinet, the beds could use a fresh change of sheets." I indicate the shelving with neatly folded squares of sickly green.

I force myself to go back to the paperwork I've been filling out, certain he will do as instructed if I continue to ignore him. The tediousness of the task distracts me in my newly numb state, and a few minutes pass before I think to look up to check and make sure he hasn't decided to buck my orders.

He hasn't moved an inch to take care of the beds. If anything, he's closer than he was moments ago.

With a sigh, I get to my feet and head to the door that leads to medical to find another nurse to deal with him, but I think better of it. I won't run from this confrontation, and if we're going to work together, he's going to learn to put up with a woman giving him orders.

With great difficulty, I return to the room where he waits, hip propped against the desk where I'd been working. "What do you need?" I ask, pointedly looking between the shelf, the beds, and him. I want to get this over as soon as possible, and I don't care if he knows it.

He thrusts a sheet of paper at me. "We never finished the other day."

A snort of derision escapes me. I slap a hand over my mouth, startled by my reaction. My widened gaze flits up to him, but I find a smile instead of a frown. It's just a quirk of the lips, but what is most arresting are his eyes. I was too distracted when we first met to notice them, but they're a shade of green I've never seen before. So bright they look almost chemically altered.

When I can drag my gaze away, I realize he isn't smiling anymore. And I'm staring. My mouth firms into a line as I take the paper from him before

turning my back on him and moving toward my desk. Our short history has already taught me I'd be better served to keep my distance at all times.

With a businesslike tone, I go through the questions, hoping to conclude the interview quickly. I don't make the mistake of looking up again, and after a quarter hour, I've finished without incident.

I hand him back the paperwork. "Will that be all?" I ask with a sharp glance at the shelves for him to get back to work.

But he just scoots closer on the stiff wooden seat and braces his elbows on the edge of the desk. He shifts and directs his stare to my wrists as though reminding me of what caused the tension and all-too-delicate awareness in the first place. He's a snake waiting to strike, waiting to ask questions I don't want to answer. So, I pull my own hands back and lay them across my thighs where he can't inspect them.

Stay professional, Tessa, I remind myself as I imagine blood-stained tiles and searing pain, of mechanical sex and labored grunts. If I'm going to have to put up with him, it would be a mistake to let him cross any more lines.

Those eyes come back to mine, and he cocks his head to the side, and I realize what a futile attempt it would be. Apparently, this man makes it his mission to cross all the lines.

"I have work to do if that's okay with you."

His eyes narrow, and I dig my nails into my palms at the fierce look on his face. "Your man enjoy putting those on you?" he says with a nod at my face and the bruises I must not have covered completely.

"That's none of your business." I get to my feet to put some distance between us. A helpless glance through the small window into the central area of medical shows the nurses in an in-depth discussion or attending patients. I don't want to draw too much attention to us. If I do, the news will surely get back to Vic, but I also want him to leave. Caught. Trapped. One look in his direction shows he knows and delights in it.

I keep one eye on him and the other on the nurses so I can shoo him away as soon as they pay one iota of attention to us. Seconds tick away like hours, and even though I'm screaming at myself to do otherwise, I don't move when he gets to his feet and does his prowling shuffle until he's standing right next to me. He's so close I can smell the soap he must have used in the shower.

It isn't a complicated scent, not like the expensive cologne my husband puts on like it's his mission to bathe in it. On this big, dangerous man, the scent is elusive. It hides secrets. Secrets my nose wants to investigate. I want to search out all the hollows where it hides and map them. Discover each and every hiding place and plunder and plot until there aren't any places left unexplored.

"And what if I say I'm making it my business?" he murmurs. The rough cloth of his jumpsuit hisses as he lifts his hands to trace the shadowed bruises on the rise of my cheek.

Shock washes through me, a cold dip in a frigid river, followed by a heated blast of shame. I put distance between us and cross my arms over my chest. "Then you'd be wasting your time."

Those green eyes study me as if they know exactly what I was thinking just a few seconds before. Nerves clamor inside me, and I pray silently for a riot, a rash of stomach viruses, a goddamn epidemic, anything to distract this man's laser-like focus.

"I don't think I would."

"Look, Mr. . . ." I remember I don't even know his name and huff out a breath, irritated with us both. "Look. What I do in my personal life is none of your business. Now, if you'll excuse me, we both have work to do."

"A woman like you," his deep, dark voice follows even as I brush by him to go back to my paperwork, "doesn't deserve to be treated that way."

I spin around. "You don't know me at all." Not that it matters. Not that I'd ever leave the prison of my own making. The apparent derision is evident. He's a prisoner, a criminal.

His expression turns predatory. "What if I said I wanted to get to know you?"

I don't dignify that with a response. He's obviously the type of guy who enjoys the cat-and-mouse game, snaring his prey and watching them suffer. I have one overbearing man in my life—I don't need another.

At my silence, he says, "C'mon, Tessa. What do you have to lose? It's not like I can do anything while I'm here. There are guards in the other room, and besides, we're going to be working together. Let's not make it more awkward than it has to be."

"It's not awkward now. We work, and that's it. I don't see why there's any reason to get to know each other." My clawing curiosity

notwithstanding, I know it's in my own best interest to keep professionalism at the forefront of our interactions.

"Fine, you can get to know me. Ask me anything you wanna know." He grins. "I'm an open book."

"I highly doubt that." I smother my smile by turning away so he can't see it.

"You know you want to," he says over my shoulder. He's right; I do more than I probably should. More than is professional. In fact, my interest is most certainly unprofessional.

"I'll cave, but only so we can get back to work."

"Whatever you say." I hear the smile in his words. "Shoot."

I consider my options as I sort through patient files I've already organized. I could ask his name, but I'm not sure I want to know. Somehow, I feel like knowing will make him all too real, too powerful. The same for whatever crime he committed that landed him in prison in the first place. Murder, rape, assault, robbery. None of the answers lead to anything good. Too many things in my life are too complicated, and this rapport with him is effortless. Even though I know it's wrong, I want to keep it that way. At least for now.

"Where are you from?" That seems safe enough.

"That's too easy, but I'll give it to you. I'm from Georgia, originally." His smile is saccharin-sweet as his accent deepens. "A good 'ole Southern boy, just without the manners."

"Clearly."

"What about you?" he asks as he finally starts to strip one of the beds.

"I've always lived here."

He dumps the dirty sheets in a bin and then grabs a fresh set from the shelf. "Really?"

"Yes, really."

"You realize there's a whole hemisphere with sun, right?"

"Sun?" I say with a laugh. "What's that?"

We lock eyes, and my heart beats a clipped rhythm in my chest. I refocus back on the files, the rhythmic hum of the air conditioner and the swish of fabric fills the silence. This was a bad idea.

"You deserve better, you know," he says after a few minutes.

The filing drawer shuts with an echoing *clang*. "Oh, so what? You think you would treat me better?"

Thankfully, just as he's about to break my fragile composure, the door opens, and another patient walks in. The guards escorting him hover by the doorway until I dismiss them with a nod. I cross quickly to the new arrival's side, beaming a touch too brightly at their timely appearance. This inmate, whose jumpsuit name tag identifies him as Salvatore, is cradling one bleeding hand with the other.

"Cut myself in the kitchen," he explains.

"Let's get that taken care of," I say as I lead Salvatore to an empty bed where he reclines with a grunt, his face ashen. "You sit right here, and we'll have that stitched up in no time."

I turn to get my supplies from the very storage closet I had him organize, and find Green Eyes still waiting, watching, except this time his focus is on the patient. "You're welcome to get back to work," I tell him with forced nonchalance.

"Yes, Mrs. Emerson." He hands me the kit I was going to get, eyes bright with unshed laughter.

I lift a shoulder before taking the kit from him. "Suit yourself."

"I normally do, but I'll tell you what—I'll let you get back to your work here, and I'll stay out of your way for the rest of the day if you do me one favor."

My responding smile is calm, or at least I hope so. "What is that?"

"Tell me. Admit to me who hurt you, and I'll leave you alone." His voice is barely a whisper when he asks it, so I know Salvatore couldn't possibly have heard.

The paper from the suture kit crinkles under my strangling hold. He's too close. Not physically. No, he's not trying to crowd me right now. He's too close emotionally, psychologically. Those green eyes are more than just pretty window dressing. Something tells me he sees far more than I'd ever be comfortable with.

"Why does it matter so much to you?"

He leans against the doorjamb. "You're avoiding answering the question. Tryin' to keep me here longer?" His eyebrow lifts in question.

My throat bobs with a swallow because I was right. He can read me too well. He knows I don't want to answer the question. Not only because I'm afraid of what it'll mean if I do, but because it wouldn't matter if I shouted my problems from the rooftops. There isn't one person in my life that cares what happens to me. Not one. I'm surrounded by hundreds of people who

are supposed to uphold the law, but they let Vic get away with everything he does to me. That isn't something that is going to change. Then I realize how pissed Vic would be if I did tell this man what he does to me. What does this no-name inmate matter anyway? He'll eventually screw up and get transferred. After that, I'll never have to see him again. This is my one chance to let someone know, to reach out and connect. I've been isolated for so long I'm practically vibrating with the need for positive attention from someone, anyone, even if it's the last person on earth I should want it from.

"My husband," I say quietly and then turn back to attend to my waiting patient.

The sound of my heartbeat fills my ears as I carefully unwrap the sutures and prepare to close Salvatore's wound. I shouldn't have told him that. I shouldn't have given him the advantage. I shouldn't have let him think he could have power over me in any fashion.

But I did.

And no doubt I'll suffer the consequences.

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FOUR

He's quiet for the rest of the shift. Almost eerily so. I keep peering up at him as he disposes of medical waste, changes sheets, and mops around each patient, waiting for him to press me for more information. He doesn't, which can only be part of whatever game he's playing.

For the first time in maybe forever, it's almost a relief to leave the infirmary during my lunch break. The escape I get from my work is one of the only aspects of my life to bring me joy. To have it ruined puts a sour taste in my mouth as I try to force down the leftover sautéed chicken and vegetables I brought from home.

I let the sounds of the staff cafeteria wash over me and try to forget the four tense hours I spent skirting around what felt like a live grenade. A few more weeks of working with him and I'm going to be as taut as a bowstring, ready to snap at the slightest provocation. Vic will certainly enjoy toying with me about it.

Appetite thoroughly thwarted by the thought, I dump my trash in the bin and make my way back to the infirmary. As I grow closer, the few bites I did manage to get down churn in my stomach and threaten to make a reappearance. I lick my dry lips and silently berate myself for not getting a bottle of water from the vending machine. As I pass the hall to the exit, I give a fleeting thought to pleading off work for the rest of the day so I don't have to go back and face him, but I don't. I've been absent long enough. Another day would probably raise suspicion, even for me and it would certainly piss Vic off.

Medical is busy with regular patients taking their after-lunch medications. I nod to one of the new nurses, Annie, and a veteran, Patricia, who both smile, if a little absently, in return. Their gazes slide over me, and my attention falls on the doors to the infirmary. I paste on a relaxed smile in case anyone is watching and force my feet to carry me the rest of the way to the door.

The room is empty.

I don't dare call out for him, too afraid to break the tenuous silence. Doing so would only admit to a part of me wanting to see him again, which is ridiculous. As I take my seat at my desk, I decide that the less time we spend together, the better.

I pull a stack of paperwork in front of me, my hand poised to write, but the tip of the pen stops, hovering just above the page of scrap paper sitting on top of my file. I blink several times, trying to comprehend what I'm seeing. Then I realize, awestruck, the face I'm looking at . . . is my own. I push away from my desk and run both of my hands over my hair, my breathing is erratic and harsh even to my ears. My face feels hot, and the tips of my fingers are numb.

I rub my eyes with my knuckles, but there's no mistaking the exquisitely rendered drawing in front of me. It must have been done today because my hair is in the same braided twist and I'm working on Salvatore, whose frame is but a shadow in front of me, my expression a quiet study of concentration.

When had he done this? I'd kept him busy, so he didn't have time for any more probing questions. It must have been after I left for lunch.

In it, I look almost beautiful. Serene. Is this what he sees when he looks at me? At the bottom corner in a slashing masculine scrawl is one word: King.

I don't know how to handle my response or what to do with this information, so I carefully fold the drawing into a small rectangle and tuck it into my pocket. I'm not too closed off that I don't acknowledge the rush of tenderness I felt the moment I realized he'd paid such attention to me, but that's a dangerous emotion. So, I tuck away my emotions along with the drawing for examination when they don't feel so terrifyingly close to the surface.

A knock comes at the door, and I whirl around with my heart in my throat. It sinks when I realize it's just Annie. "Got one for you!" she says, cheerfully ignorant of my inner turmoil.

"Thank you," I say and lead the groaning inmate to a bed.

The next inmate assigned to the infirmary work detail arrives shortly after that, and I don't know if I'm relieved or disappointed when it isn't King.

t turns out, Vic hadn't placed King in the infirmary to torture me. Whoever I had King assigned to the infirmary was either powerful or well-connected. Vic complained about it for days afterward, and he did his best complaining with his fists. As warden of Blackthorne, he enjoyed controlling his little kingdom down to the smallest detail. When he didn't get his way, I was the one who paid for it. This time, he was careful not to mark me up where anyone could see. But he couldn't hurt me where it really mattered. With the constant promise of seeing King again, there was a bright flame of hope inside me that not even the pain Vic inflicted could diminish.

Still, each day I worked with King in the infirmary, there was a heavy silence between us. A week later, the flu swept through one of the blocks, leaving little time for me to notice the tension. After seeing the sketch and knowing how he viewed me, the urge to let him get just a little bit closer has been almost stronger than my self-preservation. It's a constant battle to keep my mouth shut and our short chats solely on work.

Vic's relentless whining, badgering, and beatings don't help, either. I can feel myself unraveling with each passing day, and I certainly look it. The smudges under my eyes from lack of sleep make my olive skin tone appear wan and drawn under the fluorescent lighting. I haven't been able to stomach much food in the past couple of weeks, which has made my cheekbones sharper, my eyes hollow. Hell, even my clothes hang on my frame instead of hugging my curves. I'm fading away right before my eyes, and if I don't do something soon to save myself, there won't be anything left.

"Why do you stay?" King asks me one day.

I turn slowly, mindful of my ribs. "Stay where?" I ask, even though we both know what he's talking about. I knew he'd been biding his time to poke into all my soft spots. I should have known he'd choose a moment when I felt most vulnerable.

My eyes go to the door, but for the first time since the flu blew through, there are no patients. I never thought I would miss the chaos of full-grown men throwing up and complaining like children about hot and cold flashes. Now, there's a somber, almost mellow feeling in the air. If I weren't stranded with temptation personified, I would have classified it as a good day.

He gives me a look that says drop the bullshit, and I almost smile. Warmth unfurls inside me in places long since frozen.

"I'm afraid of what he could do to me if I leave." I shouldn't be surprised at my own admission, but I am.

He plants his legs wide and cracks his knuckles at his sides. His green eyes turn flinty and hard. I don't know why he's in prison, but it wouldn't surprise me if his rap sheet contains a long list of violent crimes.

"You should be more concerned about what he's doing to you now." A vein pulses at his temple, and his jaw flexes as he grinds his teeth to keep from saying any more than he already has.

My own back snaps straight at his accusation, warm fuzzy feelings forgotten. "I handle myself just fine."

I'd forgotten how fast he moves, and a second later, he's inches away, so close I can see the pulse beating in his throat. Instinctively, my hands fly up in front of me, and I swear he presses forward so that I'm forced to lay my palms against his chest. He's so different from Vic it's a shock to my system to have his body touching mine. I haven't touched another man, despite Vic's constant accusations of my infidelity, and to do so makes me yelp and turn my head away. I push against him, but it's like trying to move a boulder. He doesn't budge.

My mouth opens to protest, and then his hands are probing along my ribs. The sharp pain from blows Vic delivered causes me to bite down on my lip. Shame weights my head and brings my gaze down to my feet.

Only when he drops his hands and gives me some room can I look up. He gives me a long, hard look. "That's what I thought."

"Who are you to judge me?" I ask when I manage to recover my breath. Even then, my voice is little more than a wheezing gasp and lacks my usual bite.

His voice deepens, and though it seems impossible, he grows even more imposing. "I'm someone who knows better than to hit a woman."

My suspicions about why he's in prison solidify. This is a man who is capable of great harm. It should scare me, but it doesn't. There is something about the blatant way he displays his dominance that's almost comforting. He doesn't try to hide who he is.

When I dated Vic, he tried to be exactly what I wanted him to be. Caring, subservient, kind. I don't have those delusions with King. What I see is exactly what I get. I don't know if it's a good thing or not.

I roll my eyes at the thought and gesture with the hand not wrapped around my rib cage. "Do you even know where you are? You're in prison. That doesn't say upstanding citizen to me."

"I've never claimed to be upstanding, little mouse." Well, if that isn't confirmation of my assessment, I don't know what is.

I glance at the window and see medical is as empty as the infirmary and scowl as I turn back to him. “Why do you even care?”

He steps closer again, and I stiffen, unsure of how my own body will react to his proximity. “Maybe I know what you’re going through.” I find that statement unfathomable and almost scoff. Almost. There is something about the way in which he said it that gives me pause. The woman inside who’s suffered innumerable assaults recognizes a kindred soul.

I find myself taking a step forward. “What do you mean?”

His eyes meet mine, and he lifts a shoulder. If he were a tiger, right now, he’d be wounded and irritable at showing it. I have no doubt if I tried to get close to him that he’d bat me away like an obnoxious fly. “My dad used to hit my mom and me.” He inches a bit closer. His gaze never wavers from mine. “I’m surprised more people haven’t seen it. But maybe you need to go through it to know for sure. I recognize the signs. It may have been a long time ago, but it’s something I’ll never forget. The way you try to make yourself look smaller and how you seem to walk like every bone in your body is broken.”

I wince, staring at my hands and trying to ignore the prickling of tears and the tickle at the back of my throat. “We shouldn’t be talking about this.” I turn away and look around blindly. “Let’s, uh, we should get back to work.”

“Don’t make the mistake my mother did,” he says as I pass by him.

I settle myself behind the desk, and he watches me for a moment more before going about his morning chores. My breath eases, and I use the mind-numbing task of filling out patient forms to keep my hands busy, but I can’t stop thinking about what he said. My awareness of him was already at a fever pitch. Now, I feel every movement he makes with my whole body.

Once patients begin to arrive, I lose track of him as I tend to their wounds and ailments, but I know he’s never far from me. After lunch, I return to the infirmary with a new sense of eagerness. I’m practically skipping past Annie and Patricia in medical, hoping I might catch him before he leaves for the day. He isn’t there, but there is another drawing on my desk.

I rub my fingers on my scrubs so I don’t smudge the ink, and they’re anything but steady as I pick up the piece of paper. This time, he’s drawn me looking down at my hands like I’d been doing during our conversation, and wisps of hair fan down, blocking my expression. I’m vulnerable and sad like the last picture he drew, but there’s strength to the firm line of my lips and my squared shoulders.

I've never considered myself to be a strong person. If I were, I wouldn't have fallen victim to Vic's machinations in the first place. I would have seen them for the empty promises they were. As I study the drawing of myself, I start to think maybe I can be the woman he sees in me, like how a broken bone grows stronger once it heals.

I carefully fold the drawing and place it in my pocket. As I do, something much more powerful takes root inside me, and as I continue my work, that something pulses just underneath the surface, a bubbling darkness much like the man who inspired it.

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FIVE

The connection, the temptation, I feel whenever King is around only continues to grow the longer we work together. My collection of sketches grows from two to three and is inching toward ten. He draws seemingly mundane scenes, moments I don't even realize have passed and turns them into magic. Turns me into magic.

They have secretly become the single most anticipated moment of my day. I'm slowly becoming addicted to them, and to him.

If I thought I was in a bad situation before, it's nothing compared to the tumult of emotions I navigate now.

I pour myself a cup of coffee, careful not to reach too far or move too fast so I don't irritate my ribs. Vic hasn't been up to sex in a few weeks, which at first was fine, but now his temper is shorter and his fists swing harder. I've barely healed from the last time. When he enters the kitchen behind me, I set my coffee cup carefully on the counter. I'd gotten up before him because I can't stop imagining what I'd do to him if I had the balls. The fantasies have grown so vivid they've begun penetrating my dreams. I woke from one with my skin crawling, and I'd shot from the bed like it was full of bugs.

His arms come around my waist, and I swallow hard, trying not to flinch away. "Good morning," he says, his mouth on the skin at the back of my neck.

"Good morning," I mimic, devoid of any inflection or emotion.

"Missed you when I woke up." I take a strategic sip of coffee instead of a response, and his hands clamp down on the kitchen counter on either side of me. "Come to bed with me," he says, and this time I can't stop the cringe. I close my eyes and will my heart to calm as I wait for the blow to my ribs or his fist in my hair, yanking me back.

When he steps away, expecting me to follow, I can't make myself do the same. I think of the woman in the drawings I have stored inside a box of

tampons under the bathroom sink. That woman can't continue this way. If this relationship doesn't cost me my life, it'll at least be the death of what's left of my spirit.

Instead of following him, I turn around with a brittle, forced smile. "I would, but if we go to bed, we both know we'll be there for a while, and I wouldn't want you to be late for work."

He moves into me. Unlike King, when Vic gets close, all I want is to get as far away from him as possible. He pulls me into an embrace and drops his mouth to the soft curve of my neck.

"Come on, we can be quick," he says. There isn't any fooling me with his cajoling tone. I know if I continue to refuse it could get ugly, but I can't make myself submit.

I swallow the sour taste of my disgust, so my response is seductive. "You don't want to rush it after all this time. When we get back home from work, we can make it last. Whatever you want," I add, my toes curling in my shoes at the thought.

There's a lengthy pause while he considers my request before easing back. My hip resting against the counter is the only thing keeping me from completely sagging in relief. As he watches, I get my cup of coffee and take a sip to cover my nerves.

"I thought we could have—"

His fist catches me in the stomach, and my coffee cup falls from my hand and shatters right before I fall to the floor, cutting my knees on the shards. My chest burns from the lack of oxygen, and I hold a hand in front of my face, which he slaps away. I hear the metallic clatter of his buckle coming undone, and shame and anger and hate war for dominance inside me.

"Vic, please." My voice wobbles around my wheezing. I taste salt on my lips. I never even realized I was crying.

Then his dick is out, its musk filling my nose and causing me to gag. "Shut the fuck up and suck me."

It isn't a request, and he doesn't allow even the barest second for me to object. The next breath I take has the head of his dick pushing past my lips and bathing my tongue with his salty pre-cum. There's no chance to fight back, not when my focus is on breathing and trying not to panic. I make terrified sounds around his heavy, thrusting weight, but it only seems to

excite him more. More tears leak from the corner of my eyes as he presses impossibly deep.

“Take it,” he says as his head drops back.

My hands dig into his thighs as the force of his thrusts threatens to knock me back into the cabinets. I try to push him away when my vision darkens, but he only knots his fingers in my hair to hold me still and thrusts harder, the head of his dick bumping into the back of my throat and triggering my gag reflex. I choke around him, which only causes him to hiss, “Yesss,” above me, excited by my struggling. I give a brief thought to biting him, but I’m scared it will only enrage him more.

He doesn’t even care when I gag and bile and saliva leak out of the available corners of my mouth. My nose burns, and my throat and lungs are screaming for relief, but there is none to be found. In the end, all I can do is hold on and hope for him to finish as quickly as possible. He doesn’t last long, and when I feel his thrusts shorten and hear his groans increase, I take advantage of his loosening grip and pull away before he can come in my mouth.

Semen spurts onto the floor with sickly wet plops. It displeases him. No doubt the less-than-stellar ending sucked whatever pleasure he took from forcing me to bend to his will. As he struggles between disappointment and frustration, I get to my feet and turn away, trying so hard to catch my breath. It’s all I can do to keep from throwing up into the sink. My entire body is shaking so badly I nearly do despite my efforts to hold it back.

Behind me, I can hear Vic getting dressed, and each whisper of movement sends a pang of fear, anxiety, and anger throughout my system. I don’t know whether I want to fall to the floor and sob, run and hide, or claw his eyes out with my bare hands. I compromise and do nothing, even as my mind races with variations of all three. When he’s dressed, he palms my hip, pointedly ignores my flinch, and kisses my still damp cheek. He admires the devastation on my expression for a moment before he smiles and leaves, humming to himself.

When I look up again, I realize I’m late for work. Very late. I squawk, and in my hurry, I slip on the remains of the fallen coffee cup. Cursing, I get down on all fours and gather the pieces with a kitchen rag. Tears drip from my cheeks and mix with the spilled coffee. I toss the shards from the cup in the trash, rag and all, and set about getting ready for work.

For the first time since King and I had the frank conversation about his father's abuse, I don't want to work with him. I can't stand the thought of him seeing the remnants of my ravaged emotions from Vic's early morning "attention" on my face. I don't want to hear him say I told you so.

I catch him looking at me often, trying to figure me out. He hasn't even been covert about it. Each time he finishes a task and strolls over for another assignment, I can feel his gaze like a heavy weight, except it has the opposite effect, buoying my spirits from whatever dreadful misery awaits me at home. No amount of heated looks or flirtatious gestures will pull me from the pit of despair threatening to devour me.

Despite my resolution to keep away from him, it's become the highlight of my days, working with him. It energizes me the way a bolt of lightning does. A shot of light in the darkness. Electrifying in a dangerous way that I know that if I get too close I'm going to get myself burned. The fact is, he's the only person in my miserable life who's ever asked about the bruises on my arms or face.

I don't have any family—that I talk to anyway. Vic doesn't allow me to have any friends, and the people at work are too wrapped up in themselves to pay attention. I've been completely isolated.

Probably exactly how Vic wants me.

After two years under his totalitarian rule, the concern from someone else—even someone like King—is like a welcome ray of sunshine in the middle of a barren winter. I'm a flower turning in his direction for one more drop of light, blooming at each sliver of attention he allows me. It's pathetic, and I hate myself for every quiver in my stomach and each trip of my heart when I catch his presence from the corner of my eye.

But today, after what Vic subjected me to, I don't want his attention. I want to go back to hiding like I used to. Invisibility helped mask me with numbness and King makes me feel too much. He gives me hope and sometimes hope makes a despondent situation seem even more so.

Ernie leers at me as I hand over my badge. "Someone's running very late."

When I don't answer, his smile falters, and he stutters, bobbling my ID as he hands it back. Without saying a word, I gun the engine and fly through the gate, unable to repeat our daily interactions one more time without falling apart.

“You doing okay?” Annie asks. I look around, expecting someone else to be around me, but there’s no one.

I clear my throat and smile hesitantly. “Fine. I’m fine. Just running a little behind.”

“Heck of a day for a late start,” Annie says with a smile.

Alarm spears through me, but its progress is sluggish. “Why? What happened?”

“You know how it is. Someone decided to start a riot in the cafeteria during breakfast. There’s already one waiting for you to get patched up in the infirmary. Good luck!” Annie calls out as I hurry to the door.

“I’m sorry I’m late—” My apology dies in my throat.

Just like the first time I saw him, King is sitting on the bed covered in blood. Only this time, he’s shirtless, and there are rust-brown smears along his chest. Dark purple shadows line his jaw and ribs. Even though I haven’t examined him, I can tell by the way he’s breathing that he’s in pain. Thoughts of my recent traumas fade behind my concern.

I don’t want to feel anything—in my life, it’s always easier to maintain a strict sense of apathy about everything—but when he looks up, his face as broken and bruised as my insides feel, and the thread of kinship strengthens. We are two sides of the same fucked-up coin, whether I like it or not.

“Good morning, Tessa,” he says as he spots me in the doorway. The use of my name almost distracts me from his injuries. Almost.

“What the hell did you do to yourself?” I ask as I move closer to the bed he’s sitting on.

He chuckles, and it ends in a hiss. I was right. He is in pain. “Would you believe me if I said it wasn’t my fault?”

I cross to him. “Not a chance.”

He spits out blood, but I’m too concerned for his ribs to recoil as it splatters on the tile floor. My eyes narrow on the spot of blood, and I flash back to that night a few weeks ago. It had taken me a long time to get the blood out of the grout in my kitchen. Someone is going to have a bitch of a job once I get him patched up.

“Well, I’d be lying anyway.” This time when he laughs, it’s humorless. “The real question here is what happened to you?”

A little sigh escapes me, like pressure building just beneath the surface of all the secrets and lies. “Let’s worry about you first.”

He submits to my poking and prodding, but I can feel him do an evaluation of his own. It's pointless to try to school my expression. I already know he can somehow understand everything I'm thinking. "Looks like you took one heck of a beating."

"You should see the other guy."

My gloved hands tilt his head to examine a gash along his temple. "I'm sure he'll be here eventually."

His hands cover mine, and I go still. "Are you going to dodge the question forever? I thought we moved past all that."

I try to pull my hands away, but he keeps them cradling his face. His eyes close momentarily, and he strokes his skin with my hands. The way we're positioned, I'm nearly between his spread legs. If anyone were to look in all they'd see is me examining a patient, but he and I both know it's so much more.

"I don't want to talk about it," I say softly.

"I think you need to." A tear crests my cheek, and one of his hands leaves mine to wipe it away. "Tell me." When I don't answer, he says, "Why don't I guess, then?"

I press my lips together and nod, sniffing.

"He hit you?" he asks, and I lift a shoulder. His hand drops to my shoulder before sliding down my arm to rest on my waist where it tightens. "He hurt you again?"

Unable to look at him any longer, I pull my hands from his face and take antibacterial wipes from my kit to disinfect the cut on his temple as he talks.

He tips my chin up and repeats the question.

"What do you think?" There's no way in hell I'll submit myself to the humiliation of recounting this morning to anyone, let alone him. Distracted, I press too hard with the antibacterial wipe, which makes him grunt.

"Sorry," I say absentmindedly.

"You didn't tell me he was the warden, little mouse."

"You seem to think everything about me is your business," I comment instead of answering. "I thought you would have known already."

I gather more antibacterial wipes and begin mopping the blood away from his skin. There are thin, vicious cuts along his chest and abdomen. Nothing serious, but they're making a god-awful mess and must hurt like a bitch. The bruising on his ribs is going to make breathing difficult for the

next few days, but I don't see anything life-threatening. I tell him as much as I finish inspecting his wounds.

He doesn't address his injuries, choosing to continue to pry. "You seem to think you aren't my business."

"Probably because I'm not. I'm not sure what makes you think you have the right to interfere, but I don't need to be saved. I don't need anything from you."

"That's where you're wrong. I think I'm exactly what you need."

I don't speak for a few long minutes, unsure of where he's going with this. It was stupid of me to indulge in those long glances at him. Stupid of me to admit anything to him about my personal life. I knew I'd be paying for it at some point, and this new familiarity with him must be the price.

"How can you be what I need when I don't even know your name?" I find myself saying as I apply numbing cream to the bruises.

He reclines underneath my ministrations as though he enjoys my touch and smiles. The corners of his eyes crinkle and I wonder how old he is. Old enough to have made some incredibly bad decision that landed him in prison as a VIP guest courtesy of the United States government.

Then again, I'm only twenty-seven and have done a bang-up job of fucking up my own life, so what do I know?

My heart leaps inside the confines of my ribs when he says, "Is that you askin' for my name, sweetheart?"

SIX

My hands flex on his skin, but he's so intent on my response he either doesn't notice or doesn't care. Beneath my touch, he turns to granite and a part of me wants to take back my question, but I can't.

"What's wrong?" I ask, and I hope it deflects from this line of conversation. "Did I hurt you?"

He breaks eye contact and looks down to where my hands are touching his skin. The moment his eyes land on where our bodies connect, it makes me want to drop my hand. How close he always manages to get to me whenever I let curiosity—or stupidity—get the better of me is astounding.

"Would take more than that to hurt me, little mouse."

I feel his words like dark secrets. They unfurl inside me, a molten mixture of pleasure and shame, a heady combination that invites me to ask for more. He's a craving I can't quite shake. A disease slowly spreading through me. My head tells me I should walk away, but my greedy heart begs for more of his illicit attention.

"Little mouse?" I keep my focus on my fingers. Otherwise, they'll betray my nerves. I swipe antibacterial cream over his skin and realize resistance is practically impossible. Not when I can feel his muscles flexing underneath my hands, the heat coming off him in waves, and my body's answering thrum.

It has been so long since I've felt anything other than violence and fear. The two have become so tightly intertwined that I was certain until now I'd never feel this again. Never feel warmth pooling low in my belly and radiating through my core or the answering wetness slicking between my legs.

Horror accompanies the rush of pleasure, and I want to fling myself backward, but I know I can't let this dangerous man see my reaction. I can't let him know the effect he has on me. Can't let him have that kind of power over me.

"Yes," he finally says. "Because you always look like you want to scurry away into a corner and hide."

His words make me want to do exactly that. My eyes dance to the door and then back to my hand as I swipe away another smear of blood from his skin. It would be so easy to escape him and his all-too-knowing stare. The reaction I can't deny. The yearning. Ten steps would bring me right back to my dreary life where I can drown in the day-to-day misery and the pain that blots out my unfortunate reality.

They are ten steps I don't take. I refuse to let King get the better of me again and return to doctoring his wounds, trading the wipes for clean, white bandages. Unlike Vic, when this man pressures me, tests my boundaries, I find myself wanting to fight back, wanting to go at him with teeth bared and fists balled.

He lays a big, scratched-up hand over mine, pinning it to the heated flesh of his well-muscled chest. I peer up through my lashes and find the corner of his mouth tipped up in a half smile that would look pleasant on any other man.

On King, it's a warning.

Or a threat.

My heart thumps in my chest, a rabbit trying to escape the pursuit of a predator. I take deep breaths to try to calm its frenetic pace, but it's futile while in his presence. I finish the bandage on his chest without taking the bait. Despite how alive he makes me feel, or maybe because of it, I won't encourage him. I won't go down that road. I did it once before, and it cost me everything.

I'm waiting for him to throw out another challenge as I finish with his chest and arms, dump the trash into a bag, and set it by the door.

"Can you stand for me?" I gesture with a roll of gauze I grabbed from my bag of supplies. "I need to wrap your ribs until they can get you in for an X-ray."

He obliges, reminding me of a half-tame animal submitting to human attention only to turn around and rip the person's throat out seconds later. His abdomen ripples, and the low hum of desire that I've steadily been trying to ignore roars back to life made sharper by the edge of danger.

Like fucking in public.

It's wrong and dirty and you sort of hate yourself for enjoying it so much, but you come harder than you ever have in your life. It makes my

breathing grow ragged, and I'm afraid he can hear me but can't find the willpower to back away.

I have to lean close to wrap the bandage around his chest, which doesn't help. His scent fills my nose like a drug. My fingers brush against his stomach, and I'd give anything for five minutes to explore the line of muscles that disappears into his waistband.

The fact that I manage to finish binding his ribs is a small miracle. He doesn't make a move to touch me the entire time, even though I spend it wishing he would. When I'm done, I can feel his eyes on me, patient and predatory as I pack up the rest of my supplies.

"Stop doing that!" I bite out, revealing just how badly he has my nerves frayed.

He gives me that half-grin again. "Doing what?"

"Staring at me like that. Are you trying to piss me off? Do you want me to have you reassigned?"

As though daring me, he takes a step forward. "You won't do that," he challenges.

"No?" I retort though I can hear the flimsy note to my voice.

His grin widens. "No."

I shake my head and feel my body drift closer to his. "I don't know what you want from me, I don't know what you think we're doing here, but we shouldn't. Let's just get that clear right now. Also, I appreciate your concern for my safety, but there isn't anything you can do to help me, and this sort of attention is only going to make my situation worse."

He shifts, and my whole body stiffens as he brings his lips to my cheek where the memory of the bruise throbs.

"Don't," I protest, but it comes out sounding more breathy than firm.

"I'll make you a deal," he says as he closes a bit more of the distance between us. I nearly whimper from frustration, fear, and need. "One kiss. One kiss and I won't bother you again. No one will have to know."

"You can't be serious," I whisper, but I know from the determined look in his eyes he's serious. "Why?"

His lips return to my cheek, surprising me with his gentleness, and I'm almost ashamed that my initial instinct is to flinch away from him. He seems to recognize it, and he sighs, pausing long enough to meet my eyes. We wait . . . watching each other. But when he doesn't follow through with a slap or a biting comment, my traitorous body relaxes.

My body is clearly an idiot.

"C'mon," he coaxes as his lips grow bolder. "Let me give you this. One kiss. I promise you'll enjoy it. Let me show you a little something sweet to take away from the sour. One kiss, and if you want me to walk away after I will."

He's the devil incarnate, the snake that tempted Eve. Though, I'm sure as hell not in paradise. I hate myself for even considering it. Loathe the way my body shouts at me to say yes.

"You won't bother me again?" The responding triumphant gleam in his eyes screams that I've taken a step off a precipice. There will be no going back after this.

"Scouts honor." I snort, causing him to grin. "So, is that a yes?"

"You asked me earlier if I wanted to know your name."

He nods, but it's a quick, jerky movement. For the first time, he's the one caught off guard.

"I think I'd like that." It'll be like saying goodbye, or at least that's what I tell myself. Goodbye to the rush of desire, the feeling of being alive. It was fun while it lasted but this level of craziness leads nowhere good.

For a moment, I think my ears are tricking me, but no. King makes a deep, satisfied groan in the back of his throat. I'm so distracted I don't notice he's been slowly moving closer until his body is pressed fully against mine. My hands go to his shoulders, and I'm grateful for the bandages separating us. Too much contact with his skin and my brain would surely short circuit.

"Gracin," he says, his lips so close they graze the shell of my ear. "My name is Gracin."

Then his mouth covers mine.

SEVEN

I am undone.

The kiss is unlike any other I've had in my life. I'd never known such a delicate touch could come from such a big, brutal man.

It's like realizing I have been doing it wrong for years. Like all the touches and fumbling backseat trysts and Vic's brutal lovemaking have been . . . wrong, and this is what a kiss is supposed to be.

Soft.

God, his lips are soft. Surprisingly so considering how cruel and ferocious he seems on the outside.

I'm learning he is nothing like he seems.

It makes me crave more, need more, and he must sense my growing, clawing desperation, because his lips part and his tongue sweeps forward, dominating me in the most welcome way. I open underneath the first stroke and moan with the second.

The gauze and implements I'm holding tumble to the floor with a clatter that I ignore. The nurses next door are too far away to hear the sound. In that second, I couldn't care less if they were standing there watching. All my mental capacity focuses on the tender play of his mouth over mine. The hot, wet heat of him that is more explicit than anything I've ever seen or done before. It lights me from the inside out, turning everything molten and loose.

After a moment or an eternity, he pulls back. My eyes blink dazedly open, and I tremble against him as need roars up in a relentless rogue wave tinged with guilt and shame. Still, my breath catches in my throat when I study his face. It's the first time I've been close enough to see the gold ring of color around his vivid green eyes.

I wish he would bend and put his lips to mine again.

What kind of person wants more from a man like him? What kind of woman aches for another kiss from a criminal?

Me.

I want more.

I want it all.

I want it right here.

Again. And again. And again.

I think of all the nights I've spent underneath Vic's pumping body, all the times my pleasure was used as a weapon, all the times pleasure turned to pain and then numbness. I remember what he made me do only hours before and how my power, my agency was torn from me against my will. I think of all of that, and now I want more of Gracin's brand of forbidden. I want it for the way it makes me feel alive for the first time in years. For the way pleasure is my own again. The way my body feels my own again.

So, I twine my hands around his neck, and I kiss him.

It must have surprised him because he makes a sound against my mouth, and it takes a few seconds for his body to catch up with mine. I like that I've thrown him off balance. I like that I have the power to shock him, make him want me. Me.

His hungry hands are no longer gentle, no longer hesitant. They constrict around my waist until there isn't a breath of room between our two bodies. Until there's no denying the hot, hard length of him against my stomach or the wet heat pooling between my legs, scenting the air around us.

My fingers move over the buzzed length of his hair. The soft, silken rasp of it against my palms causes gooseflesh to cover my arms, and a deep, rumbling sound reverberates in the back of his throat. I've never heard anything so sexy in my life. I repeat the movement with my hands and scrape my nails along his scalp, and something in him snaps. I almost swear I can hear his control breaking.

Then he's shoving me against the wall, and the nonexistent space between us folds in on itself, a black hole of heat and want. He's so close it's as if he's trying to make himself a part of me, which sends a fresh set of shivers dancing along my spine, spider soft.

The prison jumpsuit and my nurse's scrubs are practically a whisper of material combined, making it so I can feel everything. When I don't protest the move, he nudges a leg between mine and then knocks them open. Arms free because his weight is holding me against the wall, he grips my knees

and hoists me up, aligning his hardness against my softness, causing me to cry out against his lips.

He replaces his lips with his hands to stifle the sounds I can't control. His eyes on mine, ever watchful, he uses the hand covering my lips to guide my face to the side, then his mouth does things to my neck and ear that make the hand covering my mouth absolutely necessary. Even so, my moans and cries echo throughout the small room.

As though he's reading my mind, Gracin's lips come to the shell of my ear. He whispers, "They could walk in at any second and see just what a dirty girl you are." He emphasizes his words with a slow thrust of his hips. I swear I can feel every ridge, every vein in his cock as it drags along the seam of me.

I don't respond—it'd be pointless with the hand covering my mouth, but I do respond in other ways. The scent of my arousal grows stronger, and I know my scrubs must be wet. Shame burns my cheeks a violent red at the thought of my arousal being there for Gracin to see. To feel if he can't already. Breathy, choked cries emanate from my throat no matter how hard I try to swallow them back. My mind oscillates between the thought of the officers walking in and the hard cock between my legs, the combination a volatile, erotic stimulant.

I should push him away.

A good person would.

A good person wouldn't have let him kiss them in the first place.

His tongue finds my ear again with startling precision. I've always had very sensitive ears, and one hot, harsh breath undoes any of the ragged reasoning I was piecing together. Shocks dance along my nerve endings as the sound of his harsh breathing surrounds me, envelops me. My hands cling to his shoulders with a bruising grip that he doesn't even seem to mind. I give a passing thought to his injuries, to asking if they're okay—not that his hand over my mouth would let me—and then he shifts, angling his hips upward in such a way that the bulbous head of his cock hits my clit at just the right angle, making my world burst apart.

I forget convention, forget the rules, forget expectations. I even ignore the law. The laws that say I shouldn't touch this man. Shouldn't encourage his attention. Forget that he's my patient. That he's a convicted felon.

A dark and dirty side of me emerges, and instead of pushing him away, I use my legs to pull him closer. He grunts in my ear, a harsh, sexy sound,

and I arch my back, spreading my legs as far as they'll go to accommodate his hips. My thighs burn, and my hips ache at the wide angle, but none of that matters as the warmth grows inside me. I become a wild, mindless thing, and all I know is I want more.

More pressure.

More closeness.

More aching, filthy, rawness.

His teeth leave marks where they bite into my shoulder to contain his sounds of satisfaction, his fingers are near-bruising on my mouth. I taste blood from where my teeth gouge my lower lip.

Then he's whispering into my ear, his voice like the devil himself. "You want it. You want it so fucking bad I can almost taste it."

Needy, animal sounds are my only answer.

"I wanna give it to you, Tessa." The tempo of his hips slows, and I nearly scream. "Let me give it to you."

I would have if he hadn't pulled his hand away from my mouth and replaced it with his own. Then his tongue becomes a metaphor for his cock as they thrust in tandem.

I forget how to breathe. How to speak. How to think. How to care about anything but the steady drive of Gracin's length against me, his mouth against mine.

I didn't know anything could feel so good.

Then he wedges a hand behind my back, forcing my hips to tilt at the same moment one of the nurses laughs outside, just outside the unlocked door . . .

All the bad and all the wrong floods back in, and then his hand is at my throat, causing sparks to dance in front of my eyes. The hard, keen edge of pleasure cuts through me, and my head kicks back, slamming into the wall right before he swallows my long, silent scream.

I come down in waves and awareness flickers—hyper-focused on his hard length still pulsing against me. That's a feeling I don't think I'll ever be able to forget. He's thick and long, and the hollowness inside me calls out for him to fill it. My mouth waters with it, even as the come down from the orgasm cools my lust. Following that, his arms are now around my waist, holding me to him—almost . . . tenderly, or what tenderly would be like for him.

Then, I hear the nurses again.

Their voices are low but discernible; their conversation is about some television show or another—an ordinary conversation, as if the world hasn't just shifted on its axis.

Gracin is watching me with those attentive eyes, and I have no doubt he's seen the progression of emotions flash across my face. He sees too much. Understands too much.

My body, which had just been red-hot, cools and with it comes the horror.

Oh, God, what did I just do?

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EIGHT

I've had exactly two one-night stands in my life, and this is almost exactly how I felt after them, only infinitely worse. The high from the illicit edge is delicious on the rise and mortifying on the fall. Like the man himself, it's both horrifying and addictive. He's a drug personified. A deadly one.

I can feel the wrongness of what we did more efficiently than a vicious punch to the solar plexus. I'd almost prefer one. Violence is easy compared to this.

The wetness between my legs causes my underwear to cling, sparking an uncomfortable awareness of just how much I fucked up as Gracin backs away enough for my feet to drop back to the ground. Heat burns my cheeks and then drains away, leaving me cold and shaken and all too lucid.

I shift from foot to foot, trying to figure out what my next move should be and wince at the remaining ache from how wide he spread my hips to accommodate him. There aren't words. The indecision is paralyzing.

What the hell do you do after such a monumental fuck up?

The steady throbbing ache inside me still craves to be filled, even as shame threatens to drop me to my knees. I didn't feel this bad the first time Vic beat me. The trembling in my fingers intensifies as shock fades and horror follows in its wake.

He tips my face up with a finger, and my neck throbs in response, blood rushing to the place where his hand had been only seconds earlier. Vic has done that so many times before, but I'd never told anyone what I let him do to me. Baring my shame this way hurts deep inside, and I want to run. My eyes want to fill with tears, which I desperately try to lock up until I make it out of this room. I repeat that in a constant refrain. I'll be okay as long as I can make it out of this room.

I open my mouth to speak, but what can I say? I literally asked for it. Whatever repercussions come from what just happened, the only one I can

fault is myself. When no words come, I skirt around him, subtly adjusting my clothes, the uncomfortable warmth of mortification covering me like a blanket, even though the center of me feels so very cold.

“Tessa,” he begins, and I wince.

“Don’t.” My voice doesn’t shake as I settle into the familiar numbness. There wasn’t much mess from his bandages, so I pack up what little remains while keeping my back to him. Somehow, I know he won’t push me now. Somehow, I know he wants more than my pain, which is almost worse.

Pain, I know how to deal with. This . . . whatever it is that he makes me feel is way more dangerous.

When I turn, he’s waiting for me by the hall to the infirmary, his stance deceptively casual. Those arms, which were just around my body, are crossed over the chest I still can’t wait to explore at my leisure, despite the regret coursing through me like venom. I know full well he’s deception layered in an enigma, but my body still hungers for him.

“This can’t happen again,” I say without meeting his eyes. I hold on to his promise like a drowning woman. It is my only lifeline. My only way to make sense of the mistake I made. “You won’t try to kiss me again or come see me,” I say firmly. “I did what you wanted. Now it’s over.”

He nods, but I note he doesn’t confirm or deny that he won’t seek me out again. “Think what you want,” he says instead, “but we’re far from over.”

I don’t want to argue with him for fear of a repeat, so I bundle my things back into my kit and scurry to the storage cabinet like the little mouse he thinks I am. I feel his stare on my back the entire way, and then I spend way more time than necessary organizing and reorganizing the supplies. They’re already perfectly aligned, all the medicines and bandages in neat little rows. I envy their order when I’m in so much disarray.

I have no idea what the hell I’m doing or where the hell I belong.

I know I should be sorting through my next move and preparing to handle what comes next. But my brain is too busy racing, trying to make sense of what just happened. It’s useless anyway. There is no way to impart logic onto chaos. And that’s exactly what Gracin is.

Chaos.

ours later, I finally have a few minutes to myself. Without thinking about it, **H**I pull up Gracin's name in the patient directory. The file I'd received for his patient records lists only his inmate number for security purposes, which is most definitely not the case with his official file.

His intake photo should have been utterly repulsive. I mean, who looks good in the watery blue jumpsuits they make the prisoners wear? He does, of course. His hair is longer in the picture, so they must have shaved it after he got to the prison. He faces the camera with an insolent upturn to his chin and a flinty, hard look in his eye that I've come to know intimately. The stark lighting makes the shadows beneath his striking cheekbones even more pronounced. Turns his face into all angles and hard edges. Just like the man, I think.

I take a deep, cleansing breath as I try to talk myself out of what I'm about to do, but it's useless. Instead, I tear my eyes away from his picture and begin to read the notes in his file. As I do, my heart starts to thud thickly in my chest, and I bite down on one nail as my other hand taps down the report.

Gracin Kingsley.

Gracin Kingsley.

Just repeating his name now has my blood pumping.

The basic, animalistic parts of me that had enjoyed our dirty liaison react with an uncharacteristic viciousness and beg to know more.

After a quick glance at the office door, I hunch over the keyboard and continue to read. According to the birthdate on the form, Gracin is thirty-five, born and bred in Macon, Georgia, as he told me when we first met. He lived a not-so-charmed life of abuse and poverty before his parents died and he was remanded into state custody. I flip to his medical history, and my stomach plummets. He hadn't been lying about suffering abuse at the hands of his father. Included in his file is an extensive list of reports from various officials and healthcare professionals containing dozens of injuries, including but not limited to concussions, burns, and broken bones. My heart breaks as I picture him as a little boy at the hands of a man like Vic. The laundry list of crimes on his rap sheet is both terrifying and . . . impressive. His records don't explain why he's in prison, but it has to be something terrible for him to have wound up at Blackthorne.

I don't know if I even want to know.

Within the confines of the prison gates, our relationship, for lack of a better word, is in a little bubble. I know I'm safe to an extent because he can't get out. Aside from our brief contact during the workday, I don't have to see him if I don't want to, and I know that if I ever needed help, it would be one small call away. Learning more about his past makes it all real, final, definite.

I close out of the file and log out of the computer for my shift, erasing my steps along the way the best I know how. It's a risk looking up the restricted file, but I had to find out more. Now, I'm afraid I know too much and not enough.

The house is quiet when I arrive home an hour late, but already, I feel the tension crackling in the air. I don't see Vic anywhere, but I can sense him. Like prey who knows a predator is near. Watching. Waiting to strike.

For the first time since he hit me, I'm not terrified. I'm angry. And I know Gracin is the reason why. He makes me want things I can't have. A different life. Him. To fight back.

It's dangerous, this seed of hope.

Probably a little crazy.

How can a man like him make me want to be a stronger person?

The irony is laughable.

In fact, as I stand frozen in the front door, I laugh. No doubt Vic must wonder what the hell is wrong with his silly little wife that she's laughing like a loon, but for once, I don't care. I don't care that he's going to take his fists to me in the very near future.

I don't care that I kissed a man who isn't my husband.

I think crossing the professional line, realizing I'm capable of terrible things, has done something to my brain.

Maybe the years spent suffering at Vic's hands have finally made me crack. The girl I used to be would have never let a man like Gracin get past her defenses. She would never have even considered breaking the rules, let alone the law. Then again, she probably never would have thought she'd let her husband use her as a punching bag, either.

A voice that sounds a lot like Gracin himself whispers in my head.

What else can you do?

How far would you go?

How is it possible that one man, someone who is supposed to uphold the law, can tear me down, and another, who is supposed to be the scum of the earth, can build me up?

I take a tentative step inside the house I've spent the last few years hiding in. A house that has only managed to spawn terror and nightmares, and for the first time, I'm not afraid. In fact, it's my lack of fear that terrifies me.

It's a state of being that makes me feel like I can do anything.

Which is no doubt what Gracin had intended.

I glance around the living room on my way to the kitchen, noting the briefcase by the recliner and the snifter of brandy on the side table. Vic is home. Anticipation fills me, dark and potent. A twin of the desire that inspired me to draw Gracin's head down and extend the kiss that was my downfall.

He must be in the bedroom, and the thought of him and a bed fills my mouth with bile. And I know without a shred of doubt that I'll never share a bed with him again. I'll never let him touch me. Never let him hurt me.

I'd rather die.

I open the fridge, more from habit than anything else, and retrieve the pork chops I'd set out this morning for dinner. The mundane task of preparing dinner will soothe the wildness that's brewing inside me. It'll keep me from making any rash decisions. Well, provided that Vic doesn't do anything stupid.

I pull out carrots and potatoes and set them on the kitchen island. I get the ingredients to bread the pork chops and set grease to heat in a fryer on the stove. The bed creaks in the bedroom and an overwhelming sense of expectation unfurls in my stomach. His footsteps cause the wood in the hall to groan and my breath to catch.

"Where have you been?" he asks with deceptive nonchalance.

Which is how all of his "discussions" begin. He finds an excuse, any excuse, to nitpick. Then he rants and raves. Then he gets physical.

It's a cycle. One I've read about in books and seen in movies too many times to count. I just didn't realize I was in one until it happened. Again and again.

I've had enough.

Afraid of the uncharacteristic rage I feel coursing through me, I rinse the vegetables with extra care. A white fog begins encroaching on my vision, and after I set the carrots and potatoes on the counter, I rub my eyes, thinking maybe I'm overtired.

Vic makes a frustrated sound. "I'm talking to you," he says in a voice that used to make me shiver and cower in fear. Now it just makes me weary.

Why have I let him hurt me for so long?

Why did it take me so long to see it?

I don't answer Vic as I select a knife from the butcher block and begin dicing the carrots into thin slivers. As I do, I imagine that I'm cutting into the restraints he has around me. The ones that have been suffocating me for so fucking long, their weight is like a second skin. It doesn't take long for those restraints to morph into a vision of the man himself, and I squeeze my eyes shut to dispel the image.

I chop the carrots more violently. Vic must sense my mood and, in a smart move on his part, doesn't say anything until I set the knife down on the counter and exchange it for a peeler. I skin the potatoes without ever looking up from the task.

I think I'm afraid to.

I'm afraid that when I do, everything will change. That the fundamental parts of me have been irrevocably altered.

"Are you going to answer me?" he asks, and his voice tilts up at the end, as if he can't quite believe I have the nerve to defy him. His dutiful little wife from this morning is gone, and he doesn't know how to handle it.

It must be seriously disconcerting to him. Yet, the power that floods me is immeasurable.

"No," I say as I put a pot of water on to boil for the potatoes.

"No?" he asks, his voice unnaturally high.

I prepare another pot with a small bath of water for the carrots and spare him a quick look before preheating the oven. "No, I'm not going to answer your question. You know good and well where I was."

"What did you say to me?" He rounds the island and stands threateningly close to my back.

My fingers still over the cookie sheet where I am spreading out biscuits for the oven. I look up and nearly laugh at the expression on Vic's face. His complexion is mottled red. Sweat beads at his temples, and his lower lip

quivers. If I had to guess, I'd say he's almost enjoying the possibility of a confrontation. The very thought makes me sick to my stomach. Fear has been a constant, if unwelcome, companion.

Until now.

Vic's hand convulses where he grips the counter, and his knuckles are petal-white where they've split and healed several times over. Those hands are frequent stars of my nightmares. All he used to have to do was raise them, even only infinitesimally, and I'd immediately submit to him. I'd shrink back in panic like the timid little mouse Gracin accuses me of being.

Today, however, even seeing his hands flex threateningly, I'm not afraid. It's as though my emotions are wrapped in cotton and experienced through a glass case.

If I were honest with myself, I would admit this snap has been a long time coming. The abuse, both emotional and physical, was too much. The sense of isolation and desolation too stark.

There's only so much one person can take, and this morning tipped the scale.

It isn't even because of Gracin. He's a symptom of a much larger problem. Maybe I went to his arms to force this confrontation. To put an end to it all.

He is my ruin.

I had to reach rock bottom to see a way out.

The knife glints in the yellow halo of light from the kitchen fixture overhead. When I look up, Vic is watching me with his beady, snake-like eyes. We both know what's coming.

NINE

The next day begins like any other. I wake and shower, taking extra care with my appearance. I even use the sugar scrub one of the other nurses had re-gifted me last Christmas. I wrap myself in one of Vic's big luxurious towels and slather on lavender scented lotion and apply makeup with a heavier hand to cover the shadows under my eyes and the gauntness in my cheeks.

After hopping into the requisite pair of scrubs, I skirt around the mess left over from dinner in the kitchen and throw together a quick smoothie for breakfast. Out of habit, I retrieve the newspaper from the front stoop and place it on the kitchen table. I don't think about why I do it as I grab my keys and purse and hop into my car.

Not thinking has apparently become my default setting to deal with all my problems. But everything is so phenomenally fucked, to deal with them would mean facing all the horrible decisions I've made lately, which I'm just not ready to do.

Nope.

So, I drive to work and pretend it's like any other day.

I pretend as if my marriage isn't a sham. That I didn't fuck up my life the day I married the first man who'd ever made me feel special. That I didn't stay in the marriage because I had nowhere else to go. My thoughts stutter to a stop there because I very nearly thought the name of the person who has probably screwed me up even worse than my sucktastic husband.

Ernie doesn't even faze me as he tries looking down my shirt when I hand him my badge. He's a small fish on my list of shit to worry about. I even flash him a slightly deranged smile that has his leer freezing on his face as I retake my badge and speed away.

My car skids on the gray slush in the parking lot as I come to a haphazard stop, the nose of my car kissing a snowdrift. But I don't think

about that, either. My back end is six inches into the neighboring parking space, but I don't haul my butt back to fix it.

I make it to the infirmary without incident and plan to spend the next eight hours focused one hundred percent on paperwork and patients, minus one, who has the day off after his scuffle to recuperate and relax.

One of the nameless, faceless men sits on the hospital bed trying not to grimace as I search, fruitlessly, for a vein to tap for a blood sample. It's something I've done a thousand times, but for the life of me, my stubborn fingers won't cooperate.

"I'm sorry," I say, again. "Let's try your other arm."

He grumbles underneath his breath as I round the bed to his other side. I doubt he wants me to prick him five more times and still end up without the goods, but I'm determined to keep the cheerful smile on my face and pretend like I'm focused. Two more stabs and I hit pay dirt. Relief floods the inmate's expression, and I take his blood sample, record his information, and send him on his way. He shoots daggers at me and grumbles about suing the prison as he shuffles away and I slide into my desk chair.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see a blurry outline of an inmate's blue jumpsuit, and even though I'd been telling myself all day not to think about him, not to remember the horrible thing I'd done, I can't help it.

The more I try not to think about him, the more my brain focuses on him. Like an itch that I can't reach but am dying to scratch.

I squirm in my seat as I try to refocus on paperwork, but it's useless. For two hours, the words swim and dance in front of my eyes. I've read the same line at least ten times and still don't understand it. When the other nurse on duty sends me a dirty look because I keep letting out deep sighs, I give up.

I would say sorry. Normally, I'm a very solicitous co-worker. I come in, do my job with very little fanfare, and go home. Perfect little girl, that's me. Vic has trained me well.

Frustration and rage bubble underneath my skin and I roll my shoulders as I stride to my locker to retrieve my lunch. Even thinking Vic's name makes me want to tear into something with my bare hands. I have to lean my forehead against my locker to cool my heated flesh.

"Nurse Emerson," says a voice from behind me, causing me to knock my head against the metal locker.

I turn, holding a hand to the offending spot, and glower at the officer who's smiling apologetically.

"Sorry about that," he says. "I thought you heard me calling."

I give a little shake. "No harm done, I have a hard head. What can I do for you?"

He ambles over, his eyes a little too assessing for comfort and hands me a clipboard. "Got some paperwork here for you about the inmate you worked on yesterday. Confidential, you understand?"

My heart beats double-time in my chest. "Paperwork."

He nods to the clipboard that I didn't realize I'd taken and heads for the door. "It's all there. You take care now."

I know before I even look at the page what it'll be and who it's from. There's a possibility the guard will inform Vic, but Gracin would have paid him to keep quiet. I entertain the thought of throwing it straight in the trash, but I can't make myself do it. My ears ring as I focus on the version of me he drew this time. It's how I must have looked right after he brought me to the brutal edge of a powerful orgasm. My eyes are still closed, and my mouth is full and soft and a little bruised. For the first time, he's included himself in the drawing. Just his hand on the side of my throat, his thumb on the edge of my jaw. It wouldn't seem significant to anyone else, but it's everything to me. He signed it with his full name, and under the signature are three words: Come to me.

I'm on my break, but I don't care. Eating is now the last thing on my mind. The impatience, irritation, and rage that's been building beneath my skin all day like a geyser churns and churns with each step I take. I clutch the clipboard in my hand like a shield, and I haven't decided if I want to throw it at his head the moment I see him or not.

The part of me that didn't scoff at his audacity to beckon me luxuriates in his attention. It's a low, mean facet of my personality I didn't even know I possessed. I glut myself on the knowledge that a man like Gracin—a powerful, dangerous man—wants me. I may be his only option, but it doesn't seem to register when all his attention is on me. Even though I know I'm walking a treacherous path with fatal consequences at either end, I can't seem to make myself stop.

The officers at the entrance to his cellblock must have been bribed as well, because they turn a blind eye when I appear. Loud cranks and clangs of the door opening, which are followed by an accompanying shout, are the

only sign they're aware of my presence at all. I linger just outside the gaping maw of the prison block, and the chilling realization that the next step I take will be a defining moment overwhelms me with indecisiveness.

I take an unsure step forward, pulled by the inexplicable connection that's spurred so many of my rash decisions. The dark parts of me find solace in the blackness inside him. Like finding like and set ablaze.

I approach the cell I know is his, unaware or even conscious of any inmates in the surrounding cells. I can hear them catcalling and banging on their doors, but it doesn't faze me. The bars on his cell are in desperate need of repainting. Flakes of gray slough off onto my palms as I grip the iron with both hands.

"Why did you summon me here?" I say. "We had a deal." My words are saying no, but my voice is all wrong. Breathy. Like a little virgin who isn't quite sure she wants to go all the way despite how good she knows it may feel.

His abs contract as he lifts to a sitting position. Try as I might, I can't look away. Surely, I deserve a place in hell for the long seconds I spend staring at his bare abdomen.

He doesn't notice or doesn't comment as he gets up from his bunk to cross to the bars. His posture is deceptively relaxed with one shoulder against the metal. I have a feeling all the things he doesn't say are only stored up for another time, but only because they don't serve him in this moment.

His reaches through the enclosure, his expression contemplative as he twines a lock of my hair around his fingers. Like a cat toying with his prey. "I think the more important question, Mrs. Emerson, is why you came?"

Words knot in my throat and horror leeches all the blood from my face. "Because we crossed a line and you need to know we can't do it again."

He abandons my hair for my jaw, his finger tracing from the point of my chin to the curve of my ear. I start to step away, then realize his other hand wraps around my wrist. I couldn't move even if I wanted to. When had he taken hold of me?

"So you're saying you came to see me because you don't want to see me again?" His voice is so smooth, so guileless and entrancing, I find myself leaning toward him, wanting to taste his words right from the source. When the fingers investigating my chin scrape up and over my lips

and I do taste him . . . the earthy flavor of his skin bursting over my tongue like an aphrodisiac, I shake my head to clear it.

“Stop twisting my words.” I try to yank my arm out of his grip but to no avail. His hold is more effective than handcuffs. “Let me go.”

He cocks his head like he knows how badly I want him to keep touching me. “I don’t think I will. We’re not finished.”

“Finished with what?”

I’m horrified and ashamed to find the back and forth has gotten me wet. It’s all fun and games until the realization dawns that I like this. Not just the forbidden aspect, or the danger, but the wrongness.

There must be something wicked inside me. Those parts Vic broke pieced themselves back together, but the jagged edges don’t quite fit anymore. Panic spurts through me hot and vital—instinctual. He doesn’t hold me hard enough to bruise, and somehow that only intensifies his draw, but he doesn’t let me go, either.

“Our conversation,” he says in a low voice. “Now answer the question.”

“Gracin, please.”

He sucks a deep breath through his teeth, and it causes the hair on my arms and the back of my neck to stand on end. He shifts closer, pressing his body against the bars between us. He’s so close I can feel the heat of him through the metal. If I moved, even the slightest bit, we’d be chest to chest. The temptation makes me shiver.

His groan causes the bars to vibrate, and my blood hums in response. “Say that again.”

I tug at my arm, but his grip tightens, and he pulls me forward so that we’re almost touching. I’m so far over the line that I don’t even know if it was intentional or not. “Stop,” I say, without an ounce of conviction.

With his forehead against the bars, he closes his eyes. “Say it, little mouse.”

“I will if you’ll let me go.”

“Say my name.”

I wish I weren’t trembling. Showing him any vulnerability is only asking for him to exploit it. “Please.”

He growls.

“I—”

“Say it.”

“G-Gracin.”

“Excellent, little mouse. Now tell me why you came. Tell me why you look like you’re about to fly out of your skin.”

Knowing that silence is my only safe option, I shake my head.

His hold on my wrist gentles and I can feel his breath on my jaw. “Tell me.”

“You were right.”

“Good girl.” He nearly groans it. The blatant sexuality in the sound is almost too much to bear. “How was I right?”

I should be worried about the officers, about my job, about my sanity, but there is no room for anything but Gracin.

“I stood up to him.”

“To your husband?” he asks, though, from the smug expression on his face, he knows who I’m talking about.

I try, and fail, to stop the shivers that wrack my body because of his proximity. Focusing with him near is futile. “He tried to . . . he tried to hurt me again.”

His sneer is as sharp and lethal as a blade to the throat. “I bet he did.” There is a beat of silence before he asks, “What did you do? Did you hurt him? Hmm, little mouse?” The last word is soft, nearly purred in my ear.

“I tried to.” My voice is barely even a croak, but my words light him up. “I was making dinner, and he came at me. I didn’t mean to cut him, but I was holding a knife, and he wouldn’t stop.”

“Don’t be ashamed,” he says when my gaze drops from his. “He’s the one who should be ashamed. No man should put his hands on a woman.”

I look pointedly at him and raise an eyebrow even though his record never indicated anything of the sort. “I would never hurt you, little mouse. That’s why you came to me.”

“I came because I’m an idiot.” I try to put energy into my voice, but there is none left. “What do you want from me? What game are you playing?”

“I’m playing a most dangerous game, and you’re the prize. Our deal is off, Tessa. I want you, and I’ll take you any way I can get you.”

Breath strangles in my throat. “I won’t—I can’t do that again.”

“Liar,” he croons as the fingers not wrapped around my wrist trace the fading bruise on my lip. “You’re not upset because you didn’t like it. You’re angry because you loved it.”

Protests stick in my throat, and I'm about to answer when the alarms sound. Someone must have reported us after all. My response is drowned out by shrill screams from the sirens. Time's up. I glance back at him, and his smile is slow and predatory. He's scented blood and is preparing for the kill.

"Tell me," he yells from his cage. "You come back and tell me, little mouse, if he doesn't look at you differently. If he doesn't have a gleam of respect in his eyes the next time he attempts to hurt you."

"I won't do that."

His grin gains a razor-sharp edge, eyes glinting with the red alarm lights as they flash. Officers finally burst through the doors and race down the hallway, but I can't hear the shouts over my panicked thoughts and thundering heartbeat. They rush by me to unlock the door to his cell, and he releases me, backing away with his hands held over his head in a supplicating gesture that we all know is only for show. Even though he's the one behind bars, somehow he still holds all the power.

He keeps my gaze locked with his, and I take an automatic step in retreat. No matter how much distance I put between us, I can still feel his hands on me.

"I'll talk to you tomorrow, little mouse. They cleared me for work detail."
„

TEN

“Are you okay?” Annie asks as she relieves me a few hours later. “I’m all right,” I say and wince when my voice sounds as if I took a chainsaw to it. I clear my throat. “It’s just been one of those days.”

She nods her understanding, though, really, she has no idea, and for that I’m grateful. If she knew precisely what I’d done, she’d be running just as fast as she could in the opposite direction. We’re trained not to get close to inmates for exactly this reason. We lose our objectivity, and that can be dangerous, even deadly. One mistake . . . one misstep and we could fuck up and cost someone their life. Or lose our own.

I berate myself for my stupidity and utter selfishness. It must have been insanity, I reason. Nothing else would explain why I let Gracin touch me. Why I let him do so much more than touch me.

No.

I can’t go there.

“Take care of yourself,” Annie says to me as she winds a stethoscope around her neck.

I say something appropriate back, or at least I hope I do. Annie seems to accept my response and starts checking over charts. God, I need to pull myself together. I push my fingers into my eyes until I see spots.

Compared to my own life, Annie has it easy. She’s about twenty-five, maybe. I’m only two years older, but it feels like a lifetime of differences separate us. According to her, this is only a temporary job, and she plans to use the experience to get a job as a traveling nurse. She wants out of this city and to see the country. I’ve never been out of Michigan, and I don’t foresee an end to my life at Blackthorne, at least not while Vic has any say in the matter. He likes keeping me well and truly under his thumb. She’s happily single, and I suffocate a little bit more each day I’m married to Vic.

A sigh turns into a yawn as I make my way back to the lockers to retrieve my things. My self-pity is exhausting. I put myself into this mess.

My marriage to Vic, my . . . whatever with Gracin. Both are entirely my fault.

I wave goodbye to the people at the front desk, but they pay no more attention to me than they did this morning. Sometimes, I think I could walk into the prison with a gun like a stark raving lunatic and no one would bat an eye. It's as if they've trained themselves not to look at me. It happens that way, I've learned. People don't want to see what scares them. They don't want to help you with your problems. They want you to stay the fuck out of their lives because the complication of your pain is too inconvenient.

The icy wind tears through my hair as I push through the doors. I tug my jacket closer and lean forward, which only serves to let the cold slip down my neck. I let out a bark of laughter. I just can't win. Story of my life.

The interior of my old car is no better, and it takes three tries for the beleaguered engine to turn over. While the inside warms, I huddle into my jacket and rest my head on the steering wheel. I shove my hands, already frozen blocks of ice, between my legs to try to get them to thaw. In the thick of a Michigan winter, it's mostly pointless, but the actions are comforting.

I could use a little comfort.

A lot of it.

Tears pool in my eyes, but I blink them back, which makes my eyelids sting. All my life it has felt as if I'd been looking for affection—something that seems to come so easy to everyone else. My parents—if they could be called that—wouldn't know the meaning of the word. If they weren't screaming and slapping each other, they were screaming and slapping me. If they weren't doing that, they were pretending I didn't exist.

I must have made the perfect target for Vic. I was no innocent. Not since Tommy Blankenship coerced me into the backseat of his Ford Taurus with all the charm and promises his high school senior quarterback reputation could muster. Of course, there hadn't been any affection there, either. The roll in the backseat had lasted all of ten minutes, not that Tommy gave a good goddamn about that. I couldn't fault him. His slight was born from ignorance and not maliciousness.

Still, I should have learned after that, but of course, I didn't. Following sweet fumbling Tommy was a string of boys and then men who only seemed to feed the nothingness. After earning my bachelor's of science in nursing, I met Vic. And, stupid me, I thought he was different.

Boy, was I wrong.

He didn't show me the face behind the mask at first. In fact, he was the most charming man I'd ever met. He lavished attention on me like I was the most fascinating woman he'd ever met. There were impromptu dates, which I later learned he couldn't afford, but by the time he proposed, I was well and truly under his spell. It made the day he first hit me all the more shocking. It didn't take long after that for me to learn what my new life entailed.

I bark out a laugh that's as humanly possible for it to be as my hands finally warm up enough to grip the wheel with some semblance of control. Control. Now that's a joke. I haven't felt in control of my life . . . ever.

As I pull out of the parking lot, I shake my head in denial, but the thought whispers through the walls I've thrown up, as determined as the freezing wind in search of skin. You were certainly in control in Gracin's arms. And just like that, I'm not cold anymore. The desire that's been so hard-won during three years of marriage seems so readily called to the surface where he's concerned.

Wind batters against the car as I carefully navigate the slippery streets back to the house Vic and I share. The confrontation with Gracin today only underscores a fact I've been ignoring myself.

I can't stay with Vic.

I don't know how I'm going to manage to get away from him. Even thinking it to myself makes me want to tremble in fear, but I know I have to. What other alternative do I have, though? Let him kill me? I won't lie to myself and say I hadn't contemplated that. Just let him end it once and for all. Death would almost be a relief.

There's a part of me that simply won't let myself give up. I almost hate myself for it, but despite the times he's tried to beat it out of me, he hasn't quite managed yet.

I begin to plan as I make the long trek home. No doubt, Vic will take retribution for me fighting back, but I will do what I do best . . . I will endure. But only for one more day. One more day, and then while he's at work late tomorrow, catching up on what he missed today, I'll make my move when I get off my shift. I'll run and hide as far and as long as it takes to be free of him.

Gracin—what happened between us was a mistake. I shiver as I pull into the driveway and idle for a few more precious seconds of peace.

Kissing him, letting him touch me and give me pleasure was a measure of control, of freedom, that I haven't had in a long time. It gave me the wake-up call I needed to break out from under Vic's control. I'll leave it at that before anything else happens. Intuition tells me he's just as dangerous as he appears and I've had enough manipulative men for a lifetime.

A light blinks on in the living room window. Vic is no doubt waiting for me inside. Watching, seething, biding his time. Tonight's punishment will probably be worse than anything I've ever had to live through, but live through it I will, because tomorrow . . .

Tomorrow, I will be free of the prison of my own making.

My gait is slow as I navigate the slippery sidewalk. A bone-deep weariness settles over me, making each step a small feat of its own. My show of defiance the night before had caught Vic off guard, but tonight, he will be ready. He's had all day to think about the disturbing things he wants to do to me.

I open the door with steady hands and find him sitting on the couch watching a football game, which makes me want to laugh all over again. The entire time we've been together, Vic has espoused the idea of watching sports. He prefers the news or documentaries. That's how I know he's only pretending for my benefit, trying to lull me into a false sense of security.

"I'm home," I say lightly because two can play at this game.

He grunts but doesn't look my way. As I walk by to put my purse and jacket in the coat closet, I don't miss how his hands clench reflexively on the arm of the sofa. I bet he imagines them around my throat. I go straight to the kitchen to begin fixing dinner. Around an hour later, once the sharp implements are out of the way, he makes his appearance in the doorway.

"Dinner's ready," I say calmly and plate the steak, mashed potatoes, and organic green beans. Habit is the only thing that kept me from charring the meat and overcooking the beans.

I shouldn't have bothered because Vic doesn't spare the food a second glance.

"You're late again," he says, his voice deceptively calm.

"There was a lock down in one of the cell blocks." I try to keep my own response just as calm and matter-of-fact, so he won't hear the lie in my voice.

"Is that so?" But it isn't a question.

Tension rises, and my mind goes to the steps I'll need to clean up dinner. First, I'll have to gather the dirty dishes and put away any leftovers.

"Yeah, there was another fight today, I think. We were pretty swamped."

I'll rinse the dishes in the sink and leave the worst of the lot to soak while I pre-wash and load the rest in the dishwasher. Once that's finished, I'll scrub the oven and countertops and the sink until they gleam.

"Uh-huh," is all he says.

I nudge his plate in his direction and turn to make two tall glasses of tea. The moment I turn my back, I know he'll make his move, and I'm not wrong. I'm only sad he didn't begin in the living room where I secreted a gun underneath a side table for the moment I gathered enough courage to leave him.

His hand whips out, and his fingers tangle in the long line of my hair, yanking back and tearing strands right from the root. I cry out in surprise and pain as my body comes in contact with his.

"I don't know what the hell's gotten into you, but it's going to stop now."

I tilt my chin up in a silent invitation for him to do his worst. "You're right about that, Vic. I want a divorce."

ELEVEN

Everything hurts.

My arms, my legs, my head, even my hair throbs with each dull thud of my heart. There isn't a spot on my body that doesn't ache, but I pull myself out of bed anyway. It's only the thought of leaving that keeps me moving. Like a lodestone, it calls to me.

Now take a shower, it says. Wash your hair, do your face, and get dressed.

They are all things that will convince Vic I haven't changed one bit. No doubt he still believes the thorough beating he gave me last night was enough to quell my small, ineffective rebellion. If anything, the aches and pains only serve to firm my resolve. He thinks he convinced me to stay. He couldn't be more wrong.

Vic left by the time I enter the kitchen. I half-heartedly consider the fact that I'll never see him again. The thought is less concerning than I imagined it would be. Mostly, I just feel tired. How can someone my age feel so damn tired?

I check my reflection in the rearview mirror as I wait for the car to heat up. At least he stayed away from my face this time. I can't say the same for the rest of my body. My arms are so black and blue that I wear a long-sleeved Henley underneath my scrubs to hide them. I learned my lesson. The last thing I need is for Gracin to see what he did to me. I don't know what he would do, and I have no interest in finding out.

My goal today is to keep my head down, do what little work I have to do, get home to pack and get the hell out.

It takes an eternity for me to even get to the infirmary since the cold makes my sore muscles ache even more. I feel like one big throbbing bruise by the time I get there. Luckily, the pathologically punctual Gracin hasn't arrived yet. As soon as I turn on the machines, an officer radios for me to

meet them in the main hall. At the same time, shouts come from outside of medical.

“Get the fuck down!” the officer is shouting. “Nurse!”

Adrenaline spikes, allowing me to move with relative ease. When I see what’s waiting for me in the hallway, however, I want to run right back to the infirmary and hide.

Three officers have an inmate between them, but he’s fighting like hell to get free. I recognize him from a few weeks ago. I’d stitched him up when I first met Gracin. It takes a few minutes for his name to come to mind: Salvatore. I sigh mentally. I’m already exhausted and the day hasn’t even really started. Damn it all to hell, of course I would have an emergency the one day when I need a reprieve.

I watch, horrified and a little removed, as the officers finally manage to subdue Salvatore as he laughs as if it’s all a big game to him. Like he doesn’t realize he’s in prison, seemingly the lowest of low. What must it be like to have that much certainty? I damn sure don’t know. There isn’t a single thing in my life at this moment that I’m certain of, aside from the fact that I’m in completely over my head. I’ve been like a piece of dandelion fluff floating on the wind, my only direction coming from the whim of the winds.

I gulp in deep swallows of air, trying to regain my sense of detachment and calm, but it’s useless when I realize I’ll see Gracin soon.

As though thoughts of him have summoned him from the bowels of the prison, Gracin appears at my side, and despite the way my life feels like it’s unraveling around me, his mere presence soothes my nerves somewhat. He and the prisoner lock eyes, and a silent conversation passes between them. Salvatore growls, and energy snaps around Gracin like a livewire. Do they know each other aside from the first meeting when I stitched Salvatore up?

“Follow us to the infirmary,” one of the officers bites out before Salvatore throws his weight again, trying to free himself from the officers’ hold. He has bandages, some bright red with fresh blood. Was he the one Gracin got into it with? “Damn it, you big bastard, calm the fuck down.”

Grateful for the distraction, I follow the team of officers as they wrestle Salvatore through medical and onto a gurney. My fingers shake as I push them through my hair. When had my life spiraled so spectacularly out of control?

Salvatore calms down by the time we reach the infirmary. He allows the officers to muscle him over to a hospital bed where he sits as though it's his throne. Gracin follows silently behind me, and I gesture for him to get my kit from the storage closet as I snap on gloves.

"You all right here?" one of the officers asks as the others shackle the inmate to the bed. When he sees Gracin coming back from the cabinet, he starts shouting.

The doctor who oversees both medical and the infirmary and the nurses blows in as he often does when he remembers to do his job. With cold precision, he swipes a wipe over Salvatore's shoulder and then presses the needle into his skin. Salvatore tries to fight the sedative, but he's no match for its potency and succumbs within a few minutes. The doctor gives me instructions to check on his previous wounds, bandage the new ones, and monitor him for any change until he can be dismissed.

The officer waits in the doorway until I look up from checking the bandages. "Yes, I have it handled. You can go," I tell him.

"You sure?" the officer asks, his eyes going to Gracin's intimidating form at the bedside.

I roll my eyes as I strip off an old bandage to replace it with a fresh one. "I'm sure. Let me do my job."

When we're alone again, I turn to Gracin and meet his gaze over the unconscious inmate, the words bubbling free of their own accord. "What do you want from me?" I ask. "Since we've met, you've turned my life upside down. I want to know why. What's your endgame here?"

His body goes preternaturally still. How does he do that? How is he in such phenomenal control when it feels like I'm falling apart?

"Tessa," he says, his voice a low rumble. "I think we both know why."

I busy myself with cleaning the blood from Salvatore's brow so I don't have to answer his question. Then I say, "Help me turn him so I can change these bandages."

I don't want to ask why he won't just leave me alone. I don't want to get involved. The questions are burning me up, but I bite my tongue to keep them from demanding an actual answer out of him. As I clean and bind Salvatore's wound, I repeat over and over in my head that it isn't my business. Do my job, get out. Do my job, get out. Once I've patched Salvatore up, I'll keep my head down and finish out my shift. Then I'll be free.

“Can you throw these away for me?” I say absently and thrust a handful of soiled bandages in Gracin’s general direction. My mind is so thoroughly focused on the task, I don’t realize that he hasn’t moved to do what I ask right away. When I look up, ready to reprimand him for not doing his job, I freeze.

At first, I don’t understand what I’m seeing. It’s as though the connection between my eyes and my brain is experiencing a disconnect. Gracin, who had to move to the other side of the bed to help me flip Salvatore, is holding a pair of medical scissors in his right hand. The blunt tip is pressed into Salvatore’s neck and a bead of blood forms, spilling down the side of his throat and into the shadows toward his back.

What seems like hours pass, and the weight pulling on my neck and shoulders lifts, allowing me to meet Gracin’s eyes. I’d seen them closed down before, like the day I first met him in this very room. But this expression is worse. My first instinct is to run. To get as far away from danger as fast as possible, but I can’t leave my patient. Part of me, the part that submitted to his touch, can’t leave him, either. Not without understanding.

“What are you doing?” My breath is harsh, and my head is roaring. “Get your hands off him.”

Those same hands that brought me such pleasure are steady as a surgeon’s and prepared to kill. I can’t let him do it.

I wait for him to say something, make demands, beg, but he does nothing except stare at me with an unreadable gaze. His body telegraphs his intent before he ever moves a muscle, but I’m not fast enough to stop him from plunging the scissors into Salvatore’s neck in one efficient, deadly strike.

TWELVE

A screech tears free, and I lunge forward to staunch the bleeding, but there's too much, and it's coming too fast. Asleep as he is, Salvatore doesn't so much as twitch as Gracin rips the scissors away and his life slowly slips through my fingers. Seconds tick by before Salvatore jerks once and then goes still again, significantly still.

With dark red smears of blood covering my hands and seeping into my scrubs, I stumble backward. All I know is that I need to get away. Away from what just happened, away from Vic, this place, Gracin. Just away.

I spin, intending to do just that when Gracin comes up behind me and braces me against his chest. "Not so fast," he says into my ear, and I shiver against him, feeling both too cold and too hot at the same time. "We're not done yet."

"Please don't kill me," I say. I guess Vic hasn't beaten all the begging out of me after all. "Please, just let me go. I won't say anything."

"Oh, I know you won't." His hands cinch down around my arms. "You're gonna stay real quiet-like while I take care of our man here. If anyone comes in, you tell them you've got it handled, just like you did before. Can you do that, little mouse?"

My insides turn colder than the ass-crack of a Michigan winter morning.

"You bastard," I seethe.

"Awe, now, don't be so upset. Just do as I ask, and no one else will get hurt."

If I had something in my hands, I would have thrown it at his carefully blank face. My thirst for revenge quiets when I hear the squeak of sneakers against the tile floors and all the blood drains from my face. Someone's coming. I shove my feelings aside and try to figure out how the hell I'm going to get out of this mess.

"Hey, Tessa, are you okay?" Annie's voice calls from down the hallway.

My shoulders are tight and I blink rapidly as my mind races for an exit strategy. As if he can sense the direction of my thoughts, Gracin's arms tighten.

"Don't do anything stupid," he says. "Get me out of here, and I won't have to hurt anyone else."

"Out of here?" I say around a gasp.

"Blackthorne. Get me out of Blackthorne, and I won't hurt her. Get me out without tipping off the guards or getting us caught, and I won't tell your husband what you did with me. How you wanted to scream for me."

"Fuck you." I try to buck away from him, but his arms band tighter around me.

The sound of footsteps is just outside the door when he says, "Make up your mind, little mouse, or this all ends here."

"If I do this, you won't hurt her." I don't trust him, but I can't take the chance he'll kill anyone else, especially someone like Annie, who doesn't deserve it.

"I won't. But you'll need to get rid of her before she suspects anything, or I'll have to take care of it."

I don't want to know what "take care of it" means, so I shove out of his arms, and this time, he lets me go. Before Annie can round the corner and enter the room, I throw another blanket over Salvatore's still body and hope it will cover most of the blood on his body. There is nothing I can do about the floor, so I can only hope she doesn't look down. There also isn't anything I can do for the blood on my scrubs, but I wipe off most of it from my hands with a towel and toss it behind the bed just as her concerned face comes into view.

"Hey," she's already saying in a rush, "I heard you scream and wanted to make sure you were okay . . ." Her voice trails off as she takes in my bloody scrubs and Gracin towering just a few feet away. "Tessa?"

"I know, I'm a mess, right?" I try to laugh, but it sounds more like I'm choking. "They just brought this guy in with a hell of a knife wound." I jerk my finger over my shoulder at the prone Salvatore. "Bled like a son of a bitch."

"I'll say," Annie says slowly, as though she can't quite get a handle on the weird feeling in the room or why I'm acting so crazy. "Are you sure everything is okay?"

“Absolutely. Just a hell of a mess to clean up.” When she doesn’t leave after another pause, I add, “Thanks for checking, though. I’m sorry if I scared you. I didn’t know you were working this morning, too.”

She pauses, her eyes flitting back and forth between Gracin and me. “I had to work a double,” she says, and I note the dark smudges under her eyes. “You sure you’re all good here?”

“All good,” I glance over my shoulder at Gracin’s unreadable expression. “He was just about to help me clean up,” I say as though he didn’t just kill a man with a pair of scissors and then threaten to kill her and possibly me, too.

She must read something in my eyes, some emotion I can’t control because she makes a move to run, to call out for help. Before I can warn her to stop, before I can even turn in Gracin’s direction, he’s across the room with his hands wrapped around a stunned Annie’s throat. His arms flex and tears leak from her eyes as she struggles for breath. The fact that I let this man touch me brings bile to the back of my throat.

I manage to look up into Gracin’s eyes, startled to realize the same eyes that I’d found so alluring now seem as dead and as hard as the ice slicking the gravel outside.

His nod is little more than a jerk of his head. “Get me out of here, and I’ll let sweet little Miss Annie run along home.”

“Fine,” I almost shout. I would do just about anything if it meant him getting his damn hands off her.

Gracin releases Annie and murmurs to her words that I can’t hear, but I can guess. Her face pales, and I send her a pleading look, hoping she knows that he really will kill both of us if she doesn’t do what he says. If I make it through today, I may just kill Gracin for this. The only thing that keeps me from going crazy is imagining all the different ways I could do it.

“Don’t do anything stupid,” the devil himself warns as another set of footsteps draws closer to the room.

Surprisingly, Annie manages to compose herself just as the footsteps come to a stop. Whatever Gracin said to her must have been effective, because the only evidence of her distress is the redness circling her eyes and suffusing her cheeks. I hope my control is as absolute as Gracin takes a seat on one of the hospital beds.

“How is everyone doing here?” the officer asks, finally peeking his head in. If he notices anything off about the three of us, he doesn’t say anything.

His eyes merely skitter across the room without actually seeing anything before he nods to the bed Salvatore is in. “Doc give the all-clear for him to get out of here?”

In the end, I don’t even have to think twice about what I’m going to do. The action feels as natural as breathing. I guess I’ve gotten better at lying than I thought.

“I’ll need to keep him for observation. Those guys really did a number on him. He might have a concussion.” I’m pleased to find that fear doesn’t cause me to stutter. I sound as bored and impatient as he did.

The officer shifts, visibly uncomfortable, either from the mention of the sound beating they gave him or the fact that he’ll have to take shit for not bringing the prisoner back. “Sergeant didn’t say anything about observation. He’s supposed to go back to the cell when you’re through with him.”

I have to rally all of the resolve I didn’t know I had when I say, “Do you want to be responsible if he sustains further injury because you were too impatient? Let me do my job. You do yours.” Then I wait because I’ve learned it makes people more uncomfortable when there’s a tense silence, and they will do just about anything to avoid it.

“You’re the boss,” he says, shifting a hand through his hair and taking a step back toward the door. “No skin off my teeth. He’s all yours.” He pauses, perhaps finally sensing the tension rolling off Annie and me in waves. “Are you sure everything is okay here? If you want, I can have another officer come—”

“No, there’s no need, we’re okay,” I say shortly. My tone is sharper than I intend because he doesn’t know how on the mark he is.

The officer, no doubt irritated by my interruption and tone, lifts his hands. “Whatever you say,” he says and backs away.

Heart in my throat, I turn to Annie to offer an explanation or plead my case, but she backs away, her movements so quick and instinctual that she nearly trips over her own feet.

“Don’t,” she squeaks out. “Just—don’t.”

Gracin observes from his spot on the other side of the room, his expression unreadable. The attraction that has been ever-present since we met has turned to flat out rage, but I manage to channel it into determination. I have to make this work. For Annie.

“You’ll need to stay out of the way until it’s time,” I tell him. “We’ll have to wait for shift-change, and you’ve already caused enough fucking

trouble today.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he says, and the amusement is plain in his tone.

I grit my teeth and imagine gutting him with a scalpel.

Annie takes a seat behind the computer, leaving me to face the rush of afternoon patients—a mix of regulars who come to have their meds administered and a handful of inmates in for annual exams. The work keeps my hands busy, but my mind is on Gracin, who sits quietly in the corner. When the nurse in charge of medical stops by to inquire about Annie’s presence, I beg her off, saying I’m swamped and desperately need Annie’s help.

Under her condemning eye, I clean up the murder scene with unsteady hands, silent tears streaming down my face. There’s blood all over the grout again, and I can’t help but compare it to the night I had to clean up my own after one of Vic’s beatings. I gag on my disgust and throw the bloody towels into the appropriate receptacle. I allow Gracin to get up long enough to help me change the sheets on Salvatore’s bed. When I’m done, it looks as though he’s just resting peacefully, which only makes me cry harder.

By the end of the day, my nerves are shot, and I can’t stop from shaking. The poor man whose medicine I’m trying to administer withstands several long minutes while I fumble with bottles until I get my hands on the correct one. I mumble a distracted apology as the patient shoots me an irritated glare.

Even though I’ve desperately tried to ignore Gracin, I find myself looking up while I’m in the middle of treating patients. Each time, he’s watching me, waiting. In response, I bare my teeth, which only causes him to smile. He obviously has me right where he wants me. There’s no need for him to continue the little charade. It makes me want to claw his eyes out.

When Gracin lifts into a sitting position and pins me with a level stare, I know it’s time. With a nod, I glance at the door and find the officer has abandoned his post for the evening shift change. The very thought of how precisely Gracin orchestrated this entire situation makes my whole body go cold. If he can do this, what else is he capable of? Murder may seem like the worst act on the spectrum, but after years of torture from the one man I was supposed to trust, I know there are worse things than a quick death.

Annie still hasn’t said a word to me, and she hasn’t moved from her spot behind the desk. When Gracin gets to his feet and heads in her direction, she shrinks back against the chair, which emits a terrible squeak.

“Gracin, don—”

But before I’ve finished my plea, he strikes out with a swift grace I’m always surprised to see from his bulky form. His fist collides with Annie’s cheek, her eyes roll into the back of her head, and she slumps indelicately in the chair. He ignores my cry of protest and carefully arranges her body at the computer. When he’s done, her back is to the door. Anyone looking in would think she’s working. During shift change, no one comes to the infirmary, and most inmates are busy going to and from the mess hall for dinner. Salvatore is expected to sleep throughout the night for observation, and no one but me will know he isn’t sleeping.

My stomach sinks when I realize this is actually happening. I’m about to wreck my life for this man. All the prisoners who saw us together. The guards he bribed. Everyone will see me walk him out of prison, and I can only imagine the news reports. The trial. Oh my God, Vic is going to be furious.

“Time to play, little mouse.”

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THIRTEEN

“**W**hat is it, exactly, that you want me to do?” I ask. My tongue darts out to wet my dry lips. My throat is so scratchy it causes my eyes to water. Panic will do that to you, I guess.

“I want you to place a call for a medical emergency.”

My mind races, connecting dots that I’d been too distracted—or too blinded—to notice in the first place. That’s why Gracin targeted me the day we met. Why he hadn’t left me alone since. Why he wormed his way under my shell when I was at my most vulnerable.

“You—” I grind my teeth to stem the flow of words. “This is your end game. You didn’t pursue me because you were concerned about what my husband was doing to me. You don’t give a shit about that.”

He draws close, but I don’t back away. His eyes flit over my hard expression. “You can punish me for it later,” he says. “Make the call.”

Gracin prowls back to the bank of computers where Annie slumps somewhat drunkenly over the keyboard. He places a hand on her head and absently strokes her hair.

Threat signed, sealed, and delivered.

My hands don’t tremble as I reach for the receiver and punch in the number to the control room. The line rings for a few long seconds, and then a familiar voice answers, “Control Room, Sergeant Bennet speaking, how may I help you?”

“Sergeant Bennet, this is nurse Emerson from medical. I have a patient here in need of an ambulance for transport to the hospital.”

“Inmate’s number and medical information?”

“Number 8942589. The inmate is presenting with symptoms of appendicitis. He needs to be transported immediately for further evaluation.” I try to interject enough impatience in my tone to make it seem like I’m just doing my job.

“Prepare inmate for transport.”

“Thank you,” I say.

I turn to find Gracin standing behind me. “Get on the gurney,” I snap. “You’re supposed to be sick.”

“I like it when you’re feisty,” he says with a smile as he hops onto the gurney and reclines.

“I like it when you keep your mouth shut.”

He groans as if in pleasure. “You’re only making this better for me, little mouse.”

I strap him down and pat my pockets to make sure my car keys are still there. I won’t have a lot of time between them loading him into the ambulance and making my escape. The next person through those doors will find Annie, who probably won’t hesitate to tell them exactly what happened, then the police will be hot on my tail. I just have to be gone before that happens.

I don’t know where I’ll go, but it will have to be somewhere far enough away that Vic, the cops, and Gracin can’t find me.

Like a deserted island in the middle of the ocean.

“What are you thinking about so hard?” Gracin asks as I begin to wheel him down the hallway.

“A vacation,” I retort. “Now shut up. You’re supposed to be incapacitated and in excruciating pain.”

“Keep talking to me like that,” he croons, “and a part of me will be in pain.”

“Your head, because I may accidentally dump your ass on the concrete. Keep your mouth shut until we get to the ambulance.”

Before he has a chance to reply, the officer summoned by the industrious Sergeant Bennet arrives to escort us to the ambulance at the gate. My chance to turn back comes and goes, and I can only follow the officer as he moves at a clipped pace. I have to take two steps to his one as we speed through the prison and toward the west gate where the ambulance will be waiting.

From there, everything speeds up. So much so that I can almost pretend it’s happening through the filter of a dream. If it weren’t for that filter, the gravity of the situation would have been too big, so big the weight of it could crush me. When a rush of panic threatens to suffocate me, I feel someone’s hand brush my own and find Gracin watching me. I immediately pull mine away and suck in a strangled breath.

You can do this, Tessa.

We burst out into the bracing cold, and I curse under my breath at the slap of frigid air against my bare skin. Without my coat, it's like jumping in the Atlantic—Titanic style. Except there's no hero to talk me off the edge. In my case, it's the villain forcing me into taking that first plunging step.

The ambulance is already waiting by the gate with another officer in a van, which is idling by the control tower. A part of me had been hoping something would go wrong. Someone would discover Annie or Salvatore, call Gracin on his fake performance, or question me about his illness, but none of those things happen.

The officer escorting us guides the gurney to the back of the ambulance, and I cling to it, if only to have an anchor in the maelstrom of my uncertainty. A paramedic emerges from the back of the ambulance, and he and the officer transfer Gracin to another stretcher and load him without any fuss at all. A sick, oily feeling begins to roll in my stomach, and it's only my clenched jaw that keeps me from being sick at their feet.

In seconds, the officer is jumping in the ambulance behind Gracin's prone form as the paramedic slams the door closed. I reel back on my heels, stumbling on the slick pavement and reaching blindly for the door handle to keep myself upright. The ambulance guns for the gate and pauses while it opens. My heart leaps, thudding erratically as I wait for someone to sound the alarm, but they don't. In fact, the ambulance glides through the open gate, and the van follows behind without any fanfare.

It turns out when your life falls to pieces right before your eyes, it isn't with a bang . . . it's with a whisper.

The entire way back through the prison to the control room, I'm certain someone will stop me and demand to know where Gracin is. I jump at every sound and stop breathing each time I hear footsteps or voices coming toward me. But they just pass by without a glance. It should be reassuring, but it has the opposite effect, ramping up my anxiety until I feel like I'm going to snap in half from the tension.

I make it back to the locker rooms and retrieve my things. As I close the door, I realize it's probably the last time I'll ever be back, so I open it back up, clean out all of my belongings, and throw away what little trash is inside. My bag is a bit heavier than normal, and my steps are hesitant and dragging as I make my way to the control room, where chaos reigns.

Two officers are on duty, and they're both so busy it takes a few minutes for them to even see me waiting on the other side of the thick glass. One raises an eyebrow at me, and I put my keys through the slot and sign out. It isn't the end of my shift and Annie is the only nurse on duty, but they don't comment, and I don't dare draw any attention to the fact.

"See you tomorrow," are the first words I wring from the officer.

I make an appropriate reply, but my voice cuts out. I can't force any enthusiasm into the words.

I won't be back. Either I'll escape this place or I'll be in jail myself.

The shock hits me on the drive home, and then numbness floods through me, and I'm grateful for it. It blots out all the doubts, the fears, the hopes. I feel everything through a pleasant layer of warm, fuzzy cotton and only manage to pull into the drive safely because I've driven it so many times it's practically muscle memory.

Moving on autopilot, I park and head straight for the bedroom to pack. There's no reason for me to delay leaving. Plus, I don't want to risk being here when Vic—or the cops—show up. Bras and panties, T-shirts, jeans all get tossed in the bag indiscriminately. I won't need anything fancy. Especially not the trashy lingerie Vic insisted I wear. That stays in the drawer. I give a passing thought to burning it, but it wouldn't be worth the effort.

I grab my things from the bathroom and look around the room I've lived in for the past three years. There aren't any mementos from my childhood, no photo albums or baby blankets. I threw everything from my wedding day away after the honeymoon and didn't bother scrapbooking after it, either. There isn't anything besides clothes that I care to take with me.

Maybe it's a good thing. A fresh start.

I shoulder the bag and head for the front door, plotting my route as I go. Maybe I'll head for Mexico. Somewhere with the sun to burn away all the dreariness.

I wouldn't have even seen the drawing if it wasn't taped to the door right in front of my face. There's only one person who could have put it there. I don't realize I'm saying, "Nononono," until my voice chokes with tears. It's a drawing of me the day I visited his cell. I'm clinging to the bars and looking a bit wild—my eyes bright and my hands gripping the metal like it's a lover.

Certain I'm imagining it, like a waking night terror except in the middle of the day, I don't believe Gracin's standing in the doorway until he says my name.

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FOURTEEN

“**W**hat are you doing here?” I ask, glancing around wildly, as if I’ll be able to pull the answers from the ether. It makes no difference. I know why he’s here. I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t expecting to see him again.

As he pushes his way inside and closes the door behind him, I realize he’s changed clothes. He isn’t wearing the standard issue prison uniform anymore. I squint as he comes into the light, trying to make out what he’s wearing. Then it dawns. The pants are so familiar because I see them at work every day. They’re from an officer’s uniform. It doesn’t take a genius to figure out he must have overpowered the one in the back of the ambulance and escaped somehow.

I swallow around the lump in my throat and ask the question that has knots forming in the pit of my stomach. “Did you . . . did you kill them?”

He raises a brow. After a pause, he says, “No, I didn’t kill them.”

If I didn’t know any better, I’d say his voice sounded almost tired, but that can’t be possible. The energy coming off him in waves has my pulse responding in kind. Adrenaline kicks up and ignites in my blood. As he advances, I take matching shuffling steps backward. With one eye on him, I look for a weapon, nearly seething. I’m sick and damn tired of being hunted in this house. Of being terrorized and bullied by men like him.

Instead of backing away, I charge in his direction. He isn’t expecting my sudden movement, and this time, my shove catches him off guard and knocks him into the wall. Pictures dislodge and rain down, crashing to the floor in a spectacular shower of broken glass. His hands come up to block as I attack with my fists, unleashing a whirlwind of pent-up frustration on any part of him I can reach.

My fury knows no bounds, and I slap, punch, and scratch every available inch of his skin. Unrecognizable sounds tear from my throat, and soon I’m panting from exertion. My nails rake down his cheek and score

along his throat, breaking the skin. He curses and takes both of my wrists easily into one hand and pins me against the sofa with his hips.

“Why are you even here?” I scream at him. “I did what you wanted. I got you out. You win!”

His body goes still, and he presses as close to me as he can. My heart leaps into my throat, and my pulse trips over itself.

“What if I want you?” he asks quietly.

My lips part, and for once, I don’t have a retort. That is the last thing I ever expected for him to say.

When I manage to speak, it’s more like a croak. “You’re certifiable,” I say, and try to squirm away from him. “After all the shit you pulled, you come back for what? A booty call? Screw you.”

He ignores me and says, “Come with me.”

My brain simply short circuits. “What?”

The grip on my wrists loosens. “Come with me. Now. Let’s leave together.”

“You can’t be serious,” I exclaim. “You just killed a man! I’m not going anywhere with you.”

“Dead serious,” he replies. “You can’t stay here, so leave with me. I can keep you safe.”

“Keep me safe? You’re on the run from the cops! I just helped you escape prison.” A laugh escapes me then, and I double over with it, my head going to his chest as the emotions bubble over. “I guess that means I’ll be on the run from the cops, too.”

He tips my chin up. “So run with me.”

I don’t get the chance to answer his question because Vic chooses that moment to walk in the front door. My heart drops to my feet, and my body turns to stone. Gracin doesn’t hesitate to shove me behind himself, guarding me against Vic.

This can’t be happening.

Vic’s eyes find us in the living room, he lets out a puff of breath, and his eyes go wide. The expression would be almost comical if the situation wasn’t so dire. His cheeks color with rage and a vein at the corner of his temple begins to throb as he takes a step forward . . . and runs right into Gracin’s fist.

If I thought he was capable of violence before, it’s nothing compared to the beating he unleashes on Vic. The sound of fists meeting flesh reminds

me of all the times Vic did just the same thing to me. A voice inside my head tells me I should intervene. I should tell Gracin to stop, that we can just leave, anything to get him to quit, but I can't make myself say the words. I derive a sick, twisted satisfaction from each pained sound, each connected hit. It's the vindication I didn't know I was looking for. Vic's face is covered in blood, and his eye is already swelling, but Gracin keeps going.

"Fuckin' piece of shit," he says, grunting with the effort it takes to heave a bobbing Vic back to his feet. "How does it feel, motherfucker?"

"Fuck you," Vic says, spitting blood and earning another punch. The resultant crunch causes him to squeal, and his head lolls back, blood spurting from his nose.

Gracin prepares to levy another hit when Vic lunges to the side and grabs a lamp from the side table. It isn't a cheap one, either. So, when it crashes into the side of Gracin's head, I call out, "No!" as he crumples to the ground by the coffee table.

I scramble to his side, feeling for a pulse and am swamped with relief when it flutters against my fingers.

I don't have time to properly examine him before Vic stumbles to my side and pulls me to my feet with a fist wrapped in my hair. Instinctively, I pivot, gun in hand. I'm not blind to the fact that I didn't pull the weapon I'd saved to protect myself against Gracin.

Vic barks out a laugh. "You think you're gonna use that on me, girl?" His hand comes away covered with spit and blood as he wipes his face. "You don't have the goddamn balls. Fuckin' cunt."

Gracin groans at my side as I square my feet, gun raised and trained on Vic's imposing form. "Shut up and stay where you are," I tell Vic. "One move, and I won't hesitate to put a bullet in that big cocksucker of yours."

I feel movement by my side and glance down swiftly to see Gracin wrap a battered hand around my ankle. Simply having him touch me calms me in a way nothing ever has before. I draw strength from the feel of his hand on me and look back at Vic.

"What are you gonna do? Shoot me?" He laughs, blood dribbling down his chin. "That'll be the day."

"Gracin," I say to his prone form. "Can you get up?" His hand is cradling his head, and he lifts to a sitting position with a groan. "Can you walk?"

I want to help him, but I can't chance taking my eyes off Vic.

Gracin heaves himself up to all fours and then to a crouch. "Yeah," he says, his voice sounding like he's speaking through gravel. "Yeah, I'm all right."

Vic takes a step toward us, and I jerk the gun up. "Don't," I grit out.

"If you're gonna shoot me, then just kill me," Vic says. "Stop pussy-footing around."

I ignore him and help Gracin to his feet with my free hand, which isn't easy considering his size.

"I'm fine," I tell him.

"He's fine, you're fine, we're all fuckin' fine," Vic says. "You gonna tell me what the fuck he's doing in my house?"

"I'm leaving, Vic." The relief at just saying the words, words I never thought I'd be able to speak, is intense and immediate. Gracin's hand tightens around my own. "We're going to go now, and you aren't going to follow us."

His nostrils flare. "You're not going anywhere," he says and takes a threatening step forward.

Gracin straightens behind me, not saying anything, but he doesn't need to. His presence makes me feel safe for the first time since Vic started smacking me around. Instead of crumbling, my knees lock tight, and my wavering arm steadies.

I gesture with the gun. "Keep your hands up and step away from the door."

Vic does neither. Though, I didn't honestly expect him to listen to me in the first place. "You know," he says, "I knew you were a slut to begin with. White trash won't ever be anything but white trash."

My finger pulls the trigger, but the shot goes wild, slamming into the wall. Drywall dust poofs out and covers Vic's arm and the side of his face as he jumps to the side. I jolt backward and meet with the hard wall of Gracin's chest.

"Jesus Christ, you're a fucking psycho," Vic says when he manages to regain his voice, shaky though it is.

"You're damn right. I'm the psycho with the gun. The one who can hurt you for a change. So, stop fucking talking and get the fuck out of my way."

Vic gapes at me like he's never seen me before. And he hasn't. Not this version, anyway. The one who's sick and tired of being his punching bag.

At least he did what I told him to do. The shot scared him enough that he is well out of the way of the door now. I take advantage of his shock and begin inching that way. I don't dare glance at Gracin as he starts to move, because I know what I'm going to do with him when we do get out of here.

If we do.

I aim the gun at Vic's gut, and he holds up his hands. Gracin reaches the door first, and just as I'm starting to feel like I may make it through the night after all, Vic lunges for the gun.

I feel the recoil in my arms before my brain even registers what happened. It jars me all the way down to the bone, nearly causing my hand to go numb. I prepared myself for the first shot, but this one surprises me as much as it does Vic, who can only gasp for breath. The small hole in his chest expels blood, and he grunts, his hands trying in vain to stop the bleeding as he collapses to the floor.

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FIFTEEN

The gun falls to the floor, and I sink to my knees, my hands scrambling to help him cover the hole in his chest, but my efforts are in vain. The minutes it takes for him to wheeze out his last breath are the longest in my entire life. His fingers suddenly clamp down on mine and then release, his arms falling to his side.

I grab his shoulders. “Vic!” Gracin comes to my side, and I glance up, desperate. “Call 9-1-1!”

When Gracin doesn’t move, I slap at him. “Go call 9-1-1!”

He only stares at me with a carefully unreadable expression, and it makes me want to hurt him.

“Why are you just staring at me? He’s dying!”

With a reserve that infuriates me, Gracin says, “There’s nothing you can do. He’s dead.”

I push off from the floor, unable to endure looking at Vic’s blank gaze but not knowing what to do with myself. The air in the room is thick with the copper scent of his blood, and I try to get more breath, but it feels like I’m drawing it in through a thick blanket. I crash blindly around the room, knocking into furniture and smashing into walls until hands pull at me and wrap me tight.

“Hey,” a soothing voice says. “Hey, no, it’s okay. Baby, calm down. You gotta calm down for me. It’s okay. You’re okay.”

It’s a litany of comfort urging me to follow it back to reality. The pieces start to come together slowly but then all at once. Like waking from a terrible nightmare.

“There you go. You got it. Come back to me.”

I open my tightly clenched eyes and find Gracin staring right back at me. Relief—or something close to it—flashes through his green eyes before it’s replaced by another expression I know all too well.

I shove away from his embrace, but I should know better. He's got his claws in me. I don't think he's ever gonna let me go.

"Take your hands off me," I growl and have to look around because I've never heard my own voice sound so wild and desperate.

"Oh, I don't think so." He takes my jaw in his hand and forces me to look at him. "You're done running."

"Fuck you," I yell in his face, spit flying, but I don't even care. I'm so past caring I feel pleasantly numb. "Fuck you. You ruined my life."

He shoves closer until we're chest to chest. He's so close that I can only see his eyes as they bear down on me. "Ruined your life? No, far as I can see, I gave you exactly what you wanted."

"I didn't want this."

I didn't realize I was shaking my head until he takes my face in his hands to hold me still.

"I know what you want," he says and then attacks.

His mouth is on mine before I have a chance to bar it against him. My emotions are untamable, unfathomable, and he tempts them into a fever with a black hole of pleasurable nothingness that I'm desperate to let consume me.

And I so want to be consumed.

I want to drown in the taste of him until it blots out the world with a tidal wave of need. He is cataclysmic, and I ache to beg for my own destruction.

"Not here," he says, and I'm jerked back to reality.

A chill courses over me, and I realize we're still in the same room with Vic's dead body. His blood is pooling on the glossy wood I'd scrubbed a thousand times. It's on my hands and on my scrubs, which I hadn't had time to change out of after work.

He doesn't give me a chance to think about it, though. He just tugs me around the corner to the hall and pulls me close to him. I go with him because I want to get away from the carnage in the other room. I don't know if I want to laugh or cry or scream. Gracin seems unfazed—his only focus is me.

"I've been thinking about this since you came all over me. I could smell you for days after. Been driving me crazy," he says in my ear. I can feel him, thick and long, pressing urgently against my stomach as he rips off my shirt with barely contained violence. His eyes go to my bruises and darken.

When his hands splay over them, they're gentle. "I'm glad the bastard's dead for what he did to you."

"No," I tell him, pushing at his hands. "We can't. Not here. Not like this."

He presses me down to the floor, and I'm so out of it, I'm unable to protest other than to hiss out a breath as my back comes in contact with the cool wood.

"Yes," he says against my lips. "Just like this. I want you to remember what it feels like when I'm not there by your side. I want you to remember how strong you were when you stood up to him. How you won't ever let anyone treat you like shit again, not even me."

"Then let me go. You wanted to escape, so what are you still doing here?"

He doesn't answer. His mouth is too busy at my throat, his lips and teeth and tongue working their way up to my ear. A breath whispers around the sensitive skin, and despite myself, my hips surge up against him. The fact that what we're doing is so horrible, so terribly wrong and immoral only makes my blood heat faster, my body wanting more.

Is this the result of years of abuse—this dark, dirty yearning—or is it just him?

He doesn't give me a second to find my equilibrium. There are no officers here, no cuffs or bars. There is nothing stopping him for taking exactly what he wants. And he wants me.

His fingers twine in my hair and tug my head back for a better angle. "I'm going to taste you everywhere," he says darkly, and God help me, I want him to.

My hands go to his shoulders. "We can't do this here," I repeat, but my hips buck when his other hand trails over my breasts and to the waistband of my scrubs. Suddenly, all my clothes feel incredibly insubstantial against his questing fingers. I arch, grinding my head into the wood, searching for some clarity.

The pain centers my focus, and I reach down to push his hand away. "Gracin, please."

His hand slips underneath my waistband and delves into my panties. "Please, what?" he asks, his touch so gentle I can barely feel it mixed with all the other sensations I'm trying to process. "Please, don't stop? Please, keep going. You're gonna have to be more specific."

He finds me wet and wanting, and we groan in unison. I want to die. I want to scream. I want him to never stop.

“Please. We shouldn’t do this here.”

My hands go to his wrists, but he’s too strong and his fingers are too talented. They have me seeing stars within seconds.

“Here. Right now,” he says.

My head whips back and forth against the wood, strands of my hair get caught and rip out, but I barely feel the pain. In fact, somewhere along my nerve endings, it transforms, merges, and becomes pleasure. I want to stop, I want to stop, but I can’t. My body doesn’t know what it should do. My brain doesn’t know what to think.

“Yes,” he whispers in the dark. “Let me.”

With the barest of pauses, he rips off my sensible tennis shoes and tears my scrubs and plain white panties down and off. Then he pushes my legs up and arranges them so I’m spread like a feast before him. The look on his face is savagely beautiful and there’s a flash of white teeth before he covers me with his mouth.

The hands that had been gripping his wrists transfer to his hair. “No,” I whimper. “Gracin, oh God, please.”

“Sounds like you can’t quite make up your mind, little mouse,” he says, and I can feel his lips moving against my clit as he speaks.

My thoughts fracture as his tongue wages a new assault. I rip at his hair and claw at his back, but he doesn’t even seem to notice. Any resistance is met with increased determination, and my body recognizes his touch as pleasurable, despite my brain’s confusion on the matter. Even the discomfort of the unforgiving wood floor at my back and the clammy stickiness of sweat doesn’t derail my building orgasm.

He spreads my thighs wider and wraps his hands around my legs to hold me open for his broad shoulders. I don’t know if I’m struggling for him to stop . . . or for him to keep going. The line between panic and pleasure is blurred with each flick and glide of his tongue. He sucks and nibbles, teases and tastes until I’m grinding against his face and moaning unabashedly.

I’ve never felt dirtier in my entire life. Not when Vic beat me. Not even when I cheated on him with Gracin.

But I’ve also never felt more alive, and I don’t know which scares me more.

The orgasm grows to overwhelming proportions. I struggle away from it, nearly sobbing, but Gracin merely releases one leg so he can maneuver his pants down enough to free his erection. Before I can move, he's driving into me, and I scream as the orgasm rips through me with a violence as brutal as the man who inspired it.

He reaches his first orgasm quickly, but there's nothing beautiful about it. It's savage, merciless, and ugly. But seeing the riot of pleasure mixed with pain on his face has me begging for more. I hate myself for it. Still semi-hard inside me, he doesn't stop pumping, even when I come back to reality and begin to struggle to get free from underneath him.

There's a second when I manage to scrabble free from his weight while he's still trembling. His cock disengages, and the loss of him inside me makes me whimper. I flip onto my stomach and use my hands to pull my weight along the floor. Moisture leaks from inside me and wets my thighs and the wood underneath.

I make it until my ass is level with his face and then one arm comes around my waist and pins me to the floor again.

"Where are you goin'?"

"You got what you wanted," I say between panting breaths and aftershocks. Simply having him near is enough to cause my brain to short circuit. It's saying leave, leave, leave, and in the same breath, fuck him, fuck him, fuck him. Not even my hormones can make up their mind. "Now, let me go."

"If you think that's all I want from you, you're gonna be in for a real shock in a few seconds."

"What do you—" His hands sneak up and part the cheeks of my ass, and I'm so shocked I can't speak. Can't think. Can only feel.

Fingers bite into my skin, and then his breath warms places on my body even Vic had never ventured to violate. I squirm underneath him and slap my hands against wood to drag my body away from him, but to no avail. In the next instant, his mouth is on me, tasting me, torturing me. In all the years I've been with Vic, in all the things he's done to me, there'd always been limit to what he'd do. With Gracin, there are no limits, no boundaries, no secrets.

"No. Don't," I whisper desperately.

"Yes," he answers, and he kisses one cheek and then the other before placing a final kiss at the base of my spine. "I want all of you, Tessa, and I

mean to have you.”

His name bursts from my lips as he pins my chest to the floor and one of his arms steals around my stomach so his hand can reach my clit. With a grunt, he jerks my hips up and peppers kisses down my seam, skating along the puckered opening as his fingers set about rewiring my brain.

I whimper as his tongue laves me from one hole to the other and then back again. There’s no word to describe it other than dirty. I’ve never been particularly shy about sex—what would be the point? But not only does he conquer the secret part of me with no hesitation to speak of but also he shows no aversion to licking every part of me still covered in his cum. Even as I writhe underneath him, desperate for release, I’m scrabbling against the floor to get away from the sweet violation he’s determined to commit.

“If I let you go, are you gonna run from me?” he asks.

He keeps his fingers strumming on my over-sensitized clit until my hips begin to buck back into his tongue. I press my forehead into the wood grain, hoping the pain will bring me to a sense of clarity, but it doesn’t. There is nothing sensible about what’s happening, nothing logical in the way I respond to him.

“No,” I say and hate us both.

“Good girl.”

He presses a kiss to my spine and releases the hold on my back. I have time enough to suck in a breath before I feel the tickle of hair from his thighs on the back of mine and sense the presence of his body looming over me. My clit aches with each heartbeat, and even as I consider running to the back door just a few feet away, my back arches to accept the first delicious thrust.

A fist twines in my hair, the other clamps down my hip. I’m present in the moment only through where our bodies connect as though my consciousness is dependent on his existence. Hands I’d been using to pull myself away now push into the floor to throw my weight back against him, causing him to fuck me deeper than anyone ever has.

The hand in my hair pulls my head back until I come up to all fours, and he gathers me close enough that his lips brush against my ear. “You think you don’t want this?” he asks, and I know he doesn’t mean what he’s doing to me, because I can’t deny that I do. Not when I’m screaming for him to do it harder, faster. “You shouldn’t.” His teeth bite into my shoulder. “You shouldn’t want me. I am not a nice man. I am not a good man. I do bad

things for bad people.” He licks the bite, and his mouth skims up my throat. “I want to do bad things to you.”

Oh, God help me, I want him to do those bad things. In fact, I’d beg him to do them. But the hand in my hair tilts me violently back, so far that breathing is a struggle, making speaking impossible. As I’m focusing on drawing in air, I don’t pay attention to his other hand until it bumps against the tight entrance he’d so thoroughly aroused. I make keening noises in the back of my throat as his thumb breeches the taut ring just a little, but it’s enough to make my body seize in the first throes of release.

“Ease up around me.”

I think I say I can’t, but it comes out garbled as his thrusts slow, edging me away from the impending orgasm. I reach a hand back for his hip, but there’s no moving him. Frustrated tears spill from my eyes.

“Open up for me, Tessa, and I’ll give you what you need,” he says, and his words are followed by a long, slow thrust that I feel everywhere.

My muscles loosen, and I go limp in his arms. I am his to control, but he isn’t just taking it. He’s asking for it, and I submit to it freely.

“That’s it, sweetheart,” he says, and I cry out as his thumb breeches me fully.

His cock drives into me harder, and he releases my hair to cup my throat. I gasp for breath, and his fingers caress my lips. I bite them without thought, without care. Needing to taste him, to have a part of him like he has all of me, I suck one into my mouth. He roars behind me, and I arch back to take him more fully. There isn’t a place on my body left undiscovered, no part he hasn’t conquered, and yet, I want to find more to give.

It isn’t his cock or his hands or even the violence that takes me over the edge this time. It’s a kiss. He pulls his hand away, and I release his finger from my mouth with an audible pop. With his palm cupping my jaw, he turns me to accept his mouth, and I do, greedily. There shouldn’t be anything right about what I’m letting him do to me, but there isn’t a single brush of lips or thrust that feels wrong. It’s more right than anything I’ve ever done.

As soon as I have that thought, I whimper against his mouth and the orgasm overtakes me, washing away all doubts, all fears, and all common sense. Something in him breaks as I constrict around him, and the tension in his muscles drains away. In one long, slow drag, he removes his thumb,

causing my orgasm to double over on itself. He hisses in response and fills me with his own pleasure as he follows me over the edge.

Sometime later, I come to realize we're still on the floor. My extremities don't respond when I tell them to move, but it's okay. The heavy weight of Gracin on top of me is an anchor securing me to earth. Reality intrudes, along with the cold as he shifts to the side, his arms and legs still entangled with mine.

"We have to get out of here," he says eventually. My brain still isn't quite working, but when he adds, "The police will get here soon, and we don't want to be here when they do," it jump-starts.

"We have to go," he says and stands to pull his pants up and buckle them.

I look around for my scrubs and underwear, but I can't see them in the near absolute darkness of the hallway. The darkness is probably a good thing. As the cold steals over my rapidly cooling frame, the memory of Vic's dead body is enough to clear my thoughts of what just transpired between us. I tuck it away for . . . later. Way, way later when I can't still feel the aching emptiness inside me.

Gracin returns with my scrubs in hand, and I dress, my cheeks alternately burning and blanching as I vacillate between embarrassed and horrified.

"Get dressed. I'll go get a car." He kisses me and leaves me with the taste of myself lingering on my lips.

SIXTEEN

As soon as he leaves, I'm up and getting dressed. I can't be here when he gets back. Regardless how he made me feel and how much I want to do it again, I can't let him.

I thought my marriage to Vic was the definition of abuse, but Gracin has taught me there is something much worse than physical violence.

There were times when Vic would leave me broken and bloody at his feet, and I was certain I could never reach a lower point.

I was so very, very wrong.

How I feel now? Knowing that Gracin has thoroughly destroyed everything good in me and made me like it? It's so much worse than any punch I've ever taken.

I get to my feet and get dressed just a room away from where my dead husband's body still lies, growing colder and colder with each passing second. I take care to keep my eyes diverted. The house is so quiet each sound is magnified, making my ears strain for any sign of the police or Gracin coming back.

But the only sounds are my footsteps and the harsh sound of my labored breathing.

I wince at the soreness in my thighs as I bend down to get my duffel bag. I look for the gun but don't see it and realize Gracin must have taken it with him. The excitement and adrenaline that had been crashing through me, urging me to leave Vic and start over is practically nonexistent now. I feel like I'm just going through the motions because I know getting caught here would be worse than being on the run. Some part of me still recognizes that, at least. I could spin the whole thing on Gracin. He stalked me at work, forced me to help him escape, and then killed my husband and raped me, but even if I could lie my ass off, there's still Salvatore's body and Annie's eye witness testimony. No doubt that the moment she woke up, she told

everyone about what happened. If confronted, I'd have a hell of a time explaining how I was complicit in not one but two murders.

I start to shoulder the bag and then realize I need to change my clothes. The scrubs are spattered with blood from the blowback and are wrinkled and even ripped on the shoulder. If I walk out the door in this outfit, all I'll do is draw attention to myself. Even though it costs precious time, I go to the bedroom and pick the most nondescript clothes I have left in my closet. A plain pair of worn jeans, an average T-shirt, and a pair of old sneakers.

My face is streaked with tears and ruddy, so I give it a quick wash with fresh water. While I'm in there, I throw my hair up in a ponytail. Since I don't have to worry about Vic coming back, I work up the courage to do the one task I've been dreading the most. Originally, I was going to leave without it, but now that he's dead and I'm desperate, I don't have another choice. He kept a safe he didn't know I knew about, and the code for the combination lock is stored inside his wallet. I don't know if I'm in shock or if I've seen so much death and horror in the past twenty-four hours that I've grown used to it, but once I settle on my course, I'm able to block out his body as I shove him over on one side so I can reach his wallet.

Once it's within my grasp, I stumble back on my butt, shivering as I crawl as far away from him as I can get. It might make me a monster, but I don't feel anything now that he's gone. Maybe I am every bit as bad as Gracin, after all.

I spin the combination lock to the numbers listed on the little piece of paper and take the cash he kept stashed there. It isn't much, maybe a couple grand, but I'll need anything I can get my hands on if I'm going to disappear. I stuff it into my purse along with the jewelry he gave me when we were dating. I hesitate by the front door but end up taking the drawing against my better judgment.

I don't know where I'm going to go or what I'm going to do next, but I know I have to get as far away from this house and the prison as possible. I don't dare take my phone or computer in case there is some way to track me from the signal. The car isn't an option either because the plates are registered in Vic's name, and that'll be the first thing the cops look for when they discover his body and my involvement in Gracin's escape.

My only option is to steal a car.

I study the surrounding houses from the cover of shadows on the porch. I don't want anything so close to the scene that it's noticeable. The

neighbors in the immediate vicinity are out of the question, so I focus on those three or four houses down and try to recall any information about them.

Marriage to Vic didn't allow much time for socializing, but from what I can recall, there was one old couple who used to vacation down south during the winter. If nothing else, it's a good place to start since my options are pretty fucking limited.

I curse Vic, curse Gracin, and especially curse myself as my feet sink into the snow as I take my first step off the porch onto the sidewalk. A thin layer of snow crunches under my feet as I try to make my way as casually as possible to the house. It's only two blocks down, but in the sub-zero temperature, it feels like two hundred. I don't worry about leaving tracks because the wind is blowing so strong any I leave will be covered within a matter of minutes.

I check my watch and swear under my breath. It isn't even six o'clock. Already it feels like a century has passed, when in reality, it's only been a couple of hours. Most of my neighbors are hiding in their houses to beat the cold, their windows are dark, and the houses are cemetery silent. The one I think belongs to the old couple is on a corner lot, and the garage is locked up tight.

Most of the houses in the development are left over from an old abandoned military base. Eventually, they were put up for rent for a low price. So most of them aren't wired with security systems, which is a stroke of luck for me. The one in question is practically identical to our house, so I quickly find the side door to the garage and push my way inside.

The musty smell characteristic of disuse is substantial, and I bring up a hand to cover my mouth as dust mixes with snow flurries. For the first time all day, fortune is on my side because sitting in the garage is a little truck that I hope is in working condition. It isn't much, but if it cranks, it may be my salvation.

I duck in the garage and close the door behind me, letting the darkness envelop me. It takes a few seconds for my eyes to adjust, and even then, I have to keep my hands out in front of me to keep from running into the walls. My fingers brush against metal, and I feel my way up to the driver's side door, which is locked. I curse under my breath and start making my way to the entrance to the house. If they left the car, there's probably another set of keys.

My luck runs out as I try to open the door and find it resolutely locked. Fuck. I peer around the shadowed garage for something to help. There isn't much. The old guy who lives here must not be a Mr. Fix It because the only thing resembling a tool is a lone metal pipe, which won't do me any good when it comes to picking a lock.

"Shit," I whisper and look up at the ceiling, feeling heavy with despair.

A flicker of movement catches my eye, and I duck behind the car. My heart leaps when I realize it's a window. Of course. We have the same one that leads to a small utility room off the kitchen. The motion was the shifting of the curtain from the howling wind. I scramble up to a table with the lead pipe in my hand.

When I'm sure I'm not going to fall, I slip off my jacket and wrap it around the pipe, hoping to muffle most of the sound. It's crude, but it does the job, and the window shatters. After muttering a brief apology to the owners, I smash the rest of the glass out of the frame and heave myself up and through the window.

Like most of the owners in the area, the garages were added on after the homes were built to entice more buyers. It works for me since it allows me to get inside undetected. Crawling down from the window is awkward, and I land on my knees on the cold tile, jarring all the tender places from the beating Vic gave me. Has it only been twenty-four hours since then? It feels like years.

I don't dare turn on the light, so I have to hunt in the dark kitchen. When my hands land on a key ring hanging from a hook by the back door, I nearly shout in triumph. I give a passing thought to looking through the house for anything valuable to pawn along with my jewelry but don't want to risk getting caught. There is a stack of mail on the counter that I scoop up. If there is a credit card offer in it, it could come in handy later.

Feeling increasingly desperate to put this place behind me, I hastily unlock the door and retrieve my bags. It takes several tries before I find the right key, but once I do, I toss my stuff in the passenger seat and crank the engine to warm up while I pull the garage door open. I spend a minute watching my house for any sign Gracin has returned, but it's quiet. So is the rest of the neighborhood, which can't last for too much longer. The cops will show up eventually. Another stroke of luck is my neighbor's driveway. I have no idea who's been keeping it clear of snow, but someone has been, and for that, I'm grateful.

Pulling the car out of the garage and putting it in park to close the garage door takes precious time I don't have, but I also don't want to reveal my getaway if I don't have to. The more time and distance I can put between the cops and me, the better. By the time I make it across town, the snow is steadily falling again and the truck whines when I go over fifty, so my getaway is painfully slow.

I turn on the radio, and the first announcement causes my stomach to swoop.

"Police are on the search for an escaped inmate from Blackthorne Correctional Institution. Listeners be advised the escapee is considered armed and dangerous. A recent photo may be found on our website and social media. Please be vigilant and report any sightings to the police immediately."

They'll be looking for him on the main roads, so I stick to back roads. They aren't looking for me, but they will be soon enough, and I'd rather not take the chance of running into the police. It adds hours onto my journey, but I manage to avoid all but one checkpoint, which I clear with surprising ease. Considering I'm in a stolen vehicle, I decide that I'm finally being repaid for all the bad luck I've had for the last three years.

I drive throughout the night, making stops when I need gas or have to use the restroom. Once I hit the outskirts of Detroit, I stop at the first open store and skim off enough money for a burner phone and something to eat. I don't have an appetite, but I get a premade sandwich and soda from a vending machine anyway. As I sit in the parking lot and activate my phone, I scarf down the food without tasting it. Once the phone is ready, I reserve tickets for the next bus out to the farthest destination possible, which happens to be a one-way to Los Angeles that's leaving in two hours.

The thought of sunshine almost—almost—dispels the constant ache of dread that burns through my stomach. I stow away the food wrappers in a plastic bag as queasiness rolls through me. I'd managed not to think about what I left behind on the long drive south, but now that I'm not focused on getting away, it all hits me at once. The sob that wrenches from my chest reawakens all my aches and pains.

I give myself ten minutes to succumb to the battering emotions, but that's it. When my time is up, I carefully wipe my face and press the cold soda bottle to my cheeks. I can't afford to fall apart now. That can wait until I get wherever I'm going. I stop at a pawnshop in town, the first I come to

since I don't have time to be picky, and pawn my wedding ring and jewelry for quick cash. The surly man behind the counter gives me the eleven hundred in crinkled bills. He doesn't ask questions, and I don't complain at the amount because it's eleven hundred more than I had.

Morning traffic snarls cut time close, but I manage to make it to the bus depot with twenty minutes to spare. I park the truck in the long-term parking area and resist the urge to leave the owners an apology note. Best not to give the police any help if they manage to track me this far. I shoulder my bags and keep my head down as I wait in line to pay for the ticket I reserved. The crowd is thin, and I linger near the loading bay as I wait for the bus to board.

My eyes are heavy with exhaustion, but I'm still wired at the same time from the boost of caffeine and adrenaline. Each time a security guard walks by, I tense, waiting for him to spot me and place me under arrest. By the time they call for my bus to load, I'm a complete wreck.

The attendant checking tickets gives me a curious glance. "Long day?" he comments, chuckling to himself.

You have no idea, I think, but I give him a bland smile and take the ticket stub he hands back.

The bus smells like leather, feet, and disinfectant, but the seats are plush, and the heater works. I stow my bag in the area above the seat but keep my purse beside me. The next stop isn't for two hours, and I plan to spend every second of it sleeping, so having my purse anywhere but right next to me makes me uncomfortable. All the money I have is in it, and if it goes missing, I may as well just turn myself in.

As the bus pulls away from the stop and I start to drift off to sleep, my last thought is of Gracin's face and just how mad he must have been when he came back to an empty house.

SEVENTEEN

"Need any help?"

I heft my bag over my shoulder and squint at the guy in front of me. I'd been asleep since the last stop, and I don't recognize him so he must have gotten on then.

"Thanks. I've got it."

"Some view, huh?"

He isn't wrong. Even through the blacked-out windows of the bus, Los Angeles is stunning. Crowds of people traverse the sidewalks near the bus depot, and I can't wait to lose myself in them. The isolation of Upper Michigan was so complete that having so many people around should debilitate me with anxiety, but it doesn't. I wait impatiently for the others to disembark, and as soon as my feet hit the pavement, I lift my face to the sun and luxuriate in its warmth and imagine myself being bleached clean by the heat. It helps alleviate the suffocating guilt, but only marginally.

I have nowhere to go and no one to turn to, but it doesn't scare me. The overwhelming relief wars with that guilt and the struggle carries me away from the bus depot and toward the increasingly strong scent of salt on the air. I don't know how long I walk or where I'm going, all I care about is losing myself. Maybe if I can do that, I'll somehow find myself, too.

I hear the waves before I see the beach. The sound of them crashing against the shore fills my head, blocking out the replay of warm blood splattering against the tile, of a bullet tearing into the fragile framework of skin. My knees wobble as I come to a red light. Those around me jostle with impatience, but I pay them no mind. I move forward with the crush as the light changes and let it carry me across the road to the boardwalk.

The weight of my bag digs into my shoulder and knocks rhythmically against my thigh as I stumble my way down the weathered stairs to the spill of brown sugar sand. I kick off my shoes, roll up my pants, and shed the light sweater I'd been using to battle the frigid air conditioner on the bus.

After I stow the items in my bag, I bee-line for the surf and sink my toes into the sand with a loud sigh of pleasure.

Maybe I'll be okay, and maybe I won't. Either way, I'm going to stop being the victim and start fighting back. No one will ever make me feel like Vic did again, not even Gracin.

I stay at the beach until my toes are blue from the chill and the beach is nearly empty of families and teenagers. The burner phone I picked up is almost dead, but there's enough life left in it for me to track down a cheap hotel to crash in for the night. On the way there, I snag some fries, a hamburger, and a coke from a street vendor, which turns out to be the best food I may have ever eaten in my entire life.

I wish I could say my luck held out, but it doesn't. The hotel looks straight from an episode of American Horror Story, but it's cheap and I'll only need it for a couple of nights. Cracked, water-stained stucco and scuffed floors are the least of my worries. The receptionist doesn't bat an eye at my rumpled, stained clothes, and I prepay for a three-night stay and request a room on the first floor near the busy side of the street in case I need to make a quick exit. After a quick shower in the small, but thankfully clean bathroom, I change into clean clothes and pass out on top of the comforter, my gun within reach, just in case.

It takes all of the three days to locate a suitable furnished apartment and arrange for the change of utilities. I give them a fake name and a forged passport I bought off the internet. The landlord doesn't question it, and neither does the utility company. On the fourth day after arriving in LA, I have a place to live and have landed a job as a waitress at a nearby restaurant.

While I wait for my first day of work, I clean the apartment and set up an exit plan. I don't want to be caught unawares and trapped. I'm not sure if Gracin cares enough to come after me. He probably couldn't care less.

I use a portion of the money to stock up on ammo for the gun I purchased on the way to LA along with mace and a Taser. I keep the mace and Taser in my purse and the gun in an accessible drawer in my living room. With permission from my landlord, I purchase extra deadbolts and chains for the doors. The windows are already painted shut, but I test each one to make sure they aren't going to budge. The preparation makes the days and nights go by quickly. Despite my trepidation, I sleep like the dead each night without the threat of Vic's presence by my side.

On the morning of my first day of work, I get up extra early to dress and navigate the bus route. I turn to lock the deadbolt on my front door and come face to face with a drawing.

I freeze.

Nearby a child screams with laughter, and I flinch away from the sound. Heart jack-hammering, I spin and scan the area for anything out of the ordinary, but the tenants in the nearby apartments are still fast asleep and there isn't a single sign of Gracin.

The picture shows me on my first day in LA at the beach with my feet in the water. I'd been so entranced I hadn't even thought to look for anyone. Why would I have? I was all the way across the country and I hadn't left any clues as to where I was headed.

For a long moment, the urge to get on a bus and escape overcomes me, but my already short supply of cash is rapidly dwindling. I can't keep running forever. Once reason returns, it occurs to me that if Gracin wanted to see me, he would have just found a way into my apartment while I was sleeping.

He hadn't, which told me that while he knew where I was and wanted me to know that, he wasn't going to force me to see him.

I just didn't know why.

I can't be sure, but I think someone is following me.

In the eight weeks since I arrived, I've been paranoid to the point of insanity. I always triple check my locks, take roundabout routes when I go to and from work, and religiously scour the news for signs of Gracin, any leads about the police investigation into the deaths at Blackthorne, or my disappearance. There haven't been any successful leads, but that doesn't mean I should be any less vigilant.

For good reason, apparently.

The man sitting in my section has requested to be seated in my section for the past week straight. Regulars aren't out of the ordinary, but there's something about this guy that has my whole body going on high alert. It's nothing he's done, per se, but after being cornered by one violent criminal, I don't want it to happen again. Everyone is a possible connection to Gracin.

"I think someone has a fan," another waitress, Melinda, says as she sidles up to the window to wait for her order. "You don't ask for his

number, I will,” she adds as she sails away through the crowd with a platter of food lifted over her head.

Her brash attitude and bluntness make me smile, even if it feels a little out of place on my lips. She’s exactly what I love about this city. The sheer number of people, cunty ones included, makes me feel safe. After years living in the desolate isolation of Upper Michigan, the warmth and anonymity appeal to me. At least the people here are upfront about it when they’re complete and utter assholes.

It doesn’t even bother me that my rent for a one-bedroom apartment is outrageous or the Van Nuys neighborhood it’s located in borders Hispanic gang territory. After what I’ve been through, the thugs on the street don’t even faze me. In fact, they’re almost reassuring. I’d much rather have a gun in my face than a sweet-talking, good-looking man who will stab me in the back with false promises.

The man leaves by the end of my shift. I make a mental note to keep an eye out for him, which will be almost impossible since he looks a lot like any other Californian. Nondescript jeans, leather sandals, and a button-up shirt rolled at the sleeves. His hair is neither blond, nor brown, and he’s of average height. But I’ve learned in my two-month crash course to find one feature that sets each person apart. For my lunch companion—it’s his eyes. Not the color, like Gracin’s unnatural green, but their shape. Specifically, his brows.

I noticed them because they reminded me of the caveman from that car insurance commercial. They emphasize his deep-set eyes and lend a brutality that reminds me all too much of everything I’m trying to run away from. More than likely he’s a perfectly nice guy, and I’m overreacting.

Still, I keep a mental picture of him.

Just in case.

Melinda returns with a scowl on her face. “Damn kids are more trouble than they’re worth,” she gripes, slamming the cash register closed and pocketing her tip.

I clip the order up for the table I was just at and turn to her. “Some customer giving you trouble?”

She snorts. “I wish. If that were the case, I could just tell them to fuck off, but no, they are my kids.”

The napkins I’m folding suddenly take all my attention. “Oh?” I pray my voice doesn’t sound as scratchy to her as it does to my ears.

“I hate to ask you this since you’re still getting on your feet, but can you take my afternoon shift?” Her pained expression darts to the phone, and I shrug. It isn’t like I have anything else better to do.

“Of course I can,” I tell her.

The work will keep my mind busy and put more money in my pocket, two things I desperately need. The measly amount I managed to scrape together didn’t last long, and I’m living paycheck to paycheck. I won’t be able to stay in LA forever. I need to keep moving.

My plan is to work and save enough money to risk traveling south to Mexico. After that, who knows? Eventually, the under the table job here is going to fall through, so I’ll also need to save enough to purchase a new identity. The crappy one I landed when I got here won’t hold up under intense scrutiny, but it’s good enough for my hiring manager and good enough to lean on in the interim.

“You’re a doll,” Melinda says and squeezes my arm. “I can’t thank you enough. As a matter of fact, I’ll leave the hot guy to you.” She turns away with a wink and a laugh, and I forget about the hot guy for the rest of my shift.

The city is quiet—or at least as quiet as it’ll ever be—when I wave goodbye to Jean-Paul, the line cook for the dinner shift. I’d been shocked when I first met him because I recognized him from several commercials and syndicated television shows. I learned quickly that most everyone in this city is an out of work actor. Maybe that’s why I feel like I fit in. We’re all playing a part here.

It’s when I reach the bus stop that I feel the niggling between my shoulders that makes the hair on my arms stand on end. I grip my purse tighter to my body and school my face to show no reaction.

When I look up, I don’t immediately see anything out of the ordinary. There are two families, a mother and her children, and a gaggle of girls waiting at the stop with me. Still, I don’t brush off the sense of alarm and keep my guard up as I get on the bus. The stop and go trip across the country wasn’t enough to lose Gracin, and I don’t let myself forget the fact for a second.

I haven’t received any more pictures, or even caught a glimpse of him, but I know he’s there, watching. I don’t know what he’s waiting for. I’m not

sure that I care as long as he stays away from me. What I do know is that this feeling, this person who is watching me, isn't him.

The sense of being watched doesn't diminish throughout the long ride back to Van Nuys. I chew on a nail—a new habit I've taken up instead of something worse like drinking myself into oblivion. No one on the bus swivels in my direction. No one even tries to lure me into pointless small talk.

I have to just be paranoid, I decide. I must have finally snapped. I'm so lost in thought, I almost miss the call for my stop, and then I hustle past the crowd of people and practically throw myself off the bus. It's dusk, but the streets are still steaming hot. The heat will likely cling overnight. I lift my face up to the sky, and even though the smog is particularly thick today, I soak in the last of the day's rays. It took weeks for me to feel like I finally thawed from the bitter Michigan winter. Even now, when I get out of bed, it takes me a few minutes to realize I don't need to brace myself for the chill.

My feet drag as I trek from the bus stop down the couple blocks it takes to get to my shabby little apartment. If it can be believed, it's in even worse shape than the house I shared with Vic, but it's mine, and it's cheap—well, at least by California standards. I'll never get over how less than one thousand square feet of living space can cost as much as a five-bedroom house in Michigan.

I unlock the door and push inside and find myself crashing toward the floor as a weight pushes into me. I curl up instinctively, using my hands to break my fall and cry out when they give under the strain.

EIGHTEEN

I don't give my attacker a moment to plan their next action because I've been waiting for them. Spinning underneath them, I wiggle my feet free and plant them on their broad chest. I heave with all my might and manage to free myself from their hold. Their hands scrabble at my uniform and bruise my arms in an attempt to keep ahold of me, but I kick my attacker in the face and grin as they howl in pain.

It allows me enough time to scoot backward on the slick linoleum floor and dig through my purse for the can of mace I always have on me.

I train the canister on their prone form with one hand, and just as they get to their feet, I shoot them—him, I realize as I note it is the guy from the diner—with a face full of mace. He chokes, his eyes and nose automatically streaming.

There's only a split second for me to escape, and I use it to my full advantage. I grab one side of the pullout couch and shove it so it blocks his path. Without the use of his eyes, the guy stumbles over it and crashes headfirst into the wall, denting the drywall.

I don't stick around to see if he's okay. I dart down the hallway that leads to the back door, leaving a smaller obstacle course in my wake to slow him down even more. Laundry baskets full of clothes, small shelving units I used as a makeshift pantry, and bookshelves scatter their contents all over the floor.

The attacker is still howling and crashing around in the living room as I dive out the back door. I didn't have money for a car for a quick escape, but I do text out an emergency Uber order for a coffee shop a couple of blocks down. I timed it out after I moved into the apartment. If I book it, it only takes just under five minutes, about the same time it'll take for an Uber in the area to arrive.

I'm halfway down the alley when he charges out the back door. I can hear his thundering steps following after me, but I'm lighter on my feet, and

his bulky form is no match for it. My heart is in my throat as if I know somewhere deep down in the primitive parts of me that if I don't escape this man, I may as well slit my throat. It's a pure kind of fear that drives me to keep going past the point of exhaustion.

I turn a corner and see the coffee shop within the next block. The sight spurs me to pump my legs faster, despite the burn in my lungs. The sound of my pursuer begins to fade, and I slow to check my phone, finding the Uber alert that my car is waiting for me.

The sidewalks are full of people, and there's no way he'll do anything when there are witnesses everywhere. I try to slow down and look ordinary, but I'm shoving through tourists and hipsters as I speed-walk to the curb where the Uber is waiting.

Without stopping for pleasantries, I dive in the car and say, "Lakeland and 5th, please. And hurry."

He grumbles and gives me a curious look, but he, thankfully, doesn't argue. When he pulls away from the curb, I look behind me and scan the crowd, but the man from the diner is nowhere to be seen. I heave a tentative sign of relief, but the vice around my insides is still tight with fear.

Traffic is still horrific as we merge with long, snaking lines of cars, but being surrounded by them on all sides makes me feel somewhat safe. Once we get to the storage locker I rented, I'll be able to retrieve the go-bag I stored there for just this occasion. I didn't know if I'd have to use it, but I didn't want to be stuck without a means of escape again. I vowed I wouldn't be helpless again the second I got to LA. I'd realized it would be possible for the most experienced criminal to track me if they had the means, motive, and money. I wasn't altogether certain Gracin had the last, but I knew he had the first two in spades.

The storage locker has a couple of changes of clothes, most of my cash, more weapons, and the jewelry I hadn't pawned yet. I take in the scenery in greedy gulps as we inch along the freeway. I'm going to miss this place. Maybe I'll go to Florida, keeping to areas where sunshine is prevalent. I don't think I'll ever go back up north if I can help it.

As the adrenaline begins to wear off, I wrap my arms around myself to stave off the shakes that wrack me all the way down to the bone. A part of me, the part that wanted to believe in the lie Gracin had spun, wants to break down and cry, but that part of me is shriveled up, a husk of who I

used to be. The woman emerging from the ashes of my past life is harder, less trusting, and determined.

I won't let them beat me. Won't let him be yet another mistake I let ruin my life.

As I begin to crash, the weariness from a long day of work makes my eyes droop, and my mind goes fuzzy. That's why I don't notice we're going in the wrong direction until it's too late.

"Excuse me," I say to the driver, a little annoyed. "You're going in the wrong direction. You should have gotten off at the last exit. Can you please take the next one?"

"Yes, ma'am," he says.

"Thanks."

I blow out a breath. Just what I need. Another delay in getting out of the city. I nearly laugh. Making an escape at seven in the evening is pretty much a fruitless endeavor. Travel between four and eight is practically gridlocked, but there's nothing I can do about it.

At the slow crawl, we're forced to make it takes another thirty minutes before we make the next exit. I strain to catch a glimpse of the sign, and then relax when it comes into view.

"Right here," I tell the driver, who either doesn't hear or doesn't care to follow my directions. "Uh, sir? That was the exit. Can you hear me?"

He doesn't respond, and unease prickles at the back of my neck.

"Excuse me?"

When he ignores me again, I try the doors, but they're locked, and no amount of pushing the buttons will unlock them. Panic spurts inside me, and I almost whimper. Suddenly, being cornered and surrounded by vehicles doesn't feel as safe as it did a few minutes ago. I pull the gun from my purse where I'd stowed it after the attack in my apartment.

I steady my hands and keep the gun close, just in case. I don't think I'm overreacting, but if I am, I'll end up as just another crazy chick in a city full of them. I won't take any chances, even if I have to take another life.

To think just a few months ago, my only concern was saving lives, and now it's taking them to protect my own.

We drive in silence, picking up speed as the traffic slowly begins to clear. I don't know the rest of LA as well as I know the area around my apartment, so I don't recognize where he's taking me. He eventually gets

off the freeway, which drops us somewhere downtown moving too fast for me to risk an escape without potential injury.

“Please,” I say to the driver. “Please just let me go. I’ll give you cash, whatever you want.”

I learn something then that’s more terrifying than a man’s bare fists.

Silence.

Not knowing what’s going to happen.

The anticipation is a thousand times worse than the actual violence.

It claws at me, taunts me.

His lack of response tells me there isn’t anything I could offer him that would deter him. I can’t think of a single person who would kidnap me besides Gracin, and I decide he must be paying him a shit-load to fetch me. I don’t know who Gracin was involved with, and I didn’t want to know. I have a feeling I’ll find out anyway.

I don’t dare risk shooting him while we’re driving. If he crashes, there’s no guarantee I’ll make it out myself. I’ll just have to save my escape for when we stop. The gun gives me an advantage. I just have to be smart about using it.

When we pull to a stop at a nondescript warehouse, my whole body tenses, and the gun is slippery in my damp palms. There are no lights outside, so I can only see the faintest outline of the massive building. Nothing about it is reassuring. I have to get out of here.

My first shot clips the soft tissue of his arm, causing him to emit an inhuman shriek. The second buries itself into his throat. I’ll never forget the gurgling sound he makes as he chokes on his blood. I push it to the back of my mind because I don’t have time to think about that.

I climb over the center console and unlock the front door, avoiding his grabby hands as I shove at his body to dump him out the driver’s side door. He’s heavy, and the angle is awkward, but I manage to topple him over. I’m about to pull the door closed again when three men in expensive-looking suits jog out of the building and toward the car.

The car’s still running, so I slam it in reverse, but before I can gun it, the passenger side door opens and a fourth man points a gun at my face.

“Drop the weapon and get out of the car unless you want a bullet between those lovely eyes,” he orders.

I release the gun, letting it fall to the seat, and he snatches it away. My hand goes to my stomach, not because I’m feeling queasy, though there’s

certainly some of that, but to protect the life growing there.
The life Gracin and I made and that I'd die to protect.

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NINETEEN

Two of the men in suits yank me from the car, completely disregarding the body on the ground. Blood soaks my shoes, and I know there won't be any amount of cleaning that will get the stain out. The two guys half carry, half drag me to the warehouse because there's no way in hell I want to go wherever they're taking me.

My labored thoughts cycle around how to escape and what horrible things they have planned for me.

Inside the warehouse, one lone naked bulb swings from a wire and two chairs are situated by a table. There's a long rope dangling from the ceiling, and the men on either side of me bring me to it so they can bind my hands above my head. One splits off and pulls the rope taut, forcing me to stand on the tips of my toes to avoid dangling.

"Who are you?" I ask them. The words are thick with fear. "Did Gracin send you?"

One of the men looks up from his murmured conversation with the other guy in a suit. He's got the kind of face that induces nightmares, and I know that I'll never forget it. He's dressed in a suit like the others, and just by the close fit and expensive fabric, I can tell it's tailored, maybe even specially designed for him. His gray-and-white hair is immaculately styled, combed back away from the encroaching baldness. Thick gold rings with sparkling diamonds decorate his fingers. He would look average if it weren't for the dead, blankness in his eyes.

It's the sort of gaze that, when it lands on you, makes your insides quake with fear. And mine do as soon as he turns his attention to me the second I say the magic word: Gracin.

He holds up a hand to his associate and sidles over to me, looking like he should belong in a boardroom instead of a back-alley place like this. My guess would be he's the one in charge.

“So, you do know Gracin,” he says after a moment, “Gracin Kingsley. King? Have you spoken to him since you helped him escape?”

My gut tells me if I answer that question, I won’t be doing myself any favors, so I keep quiet.

He sucks his teeth, and his cheek tics. “Very well,” he murmurs. “Take care of her, Danny.” He directs this to a new arrival, who is out of breath as he shoves through the door.

My own catches in my throat as I recognize eyebrows from the diner and my apartment.

“Of course, Sal,” Danny says with an angry look in my direction. I want to tell him not to be pissed at me. I wasn’t the one who told him to try to kidnap me, so it wasn’t my fault he got maced, but that probably won’t work in my favor.

Sal leaves with two of the others, leaving Danny and one other man in the room with me. I try to breathe slowly and deeply to keep calm even though everything inside me wants to panic. Little muscle tremors sneak out, but I otherwise manage to stay in control. Show no fear.

What worries me the most though—more than Sal’s dead eyes and more than the potential pain I’m about to be dealt—is that I don’t know why. Why me? Who exactly is Gracin, and what the fuck have I gotten myself into?

I knew it was bad, but these guys . . . they’re one level up from completely fucking terrifying.

How did he know these men? How did they know I knew him before five minutes ago? What do they want with him? With me?

As Danny and the other man, who he calls Andrew, circle me, I consider all the things I truly did not know about Gracin. And I curse him for everything he’s done to get me into this situation. I swear that if I ever see him again, one of us won’t make it out of the confrontation alive.

I expect them to start in on the questioning, but they surprise me by sitting at the table for a smoke and a tug from a bottle of dark liquor. They’re trying to kill me with anticipation.

And it’s working.

It wouldn’t be so bad if my shoulders weren’t already burning with discomfort at the unnatural position. I glance up and find my hands are already discolored. I try to wiggle my fingers, but they barely move. My wrists are burning. My legs ache and quiver as they try to keep balanced.

They don't touch, talk to, or even acknowledge me at all throughout the first night. I try crying, begging, pleading, screaming, but they may as well have put me on mute for all the good it does. I thought I'd been working past the abuse from Vic, but the moment they tied me up, the same fears and terror I experienced at his hands come flooding back. Each time I try to doze, my legs buckle, my arms scream in pain, and I jerk awake with a shriek, expecting blows to come from all sides.

By morning, tears are falling down my cheeks unchecked because I'm exhausted, frustrated, and numb with pain. I can't feel my arms anymore, and I've long since given up trying to stay upright. Instead, I just dangle, circulation be damned. It doesn't even hurt anymore because I can't feel anything at all.

Light is streaming through the windows that line the top of the walls when they acknowledge me for the first time. Danny's been glaring at me when he thinks I'm not looking, but I can't find it in me to give a damn about his bruised ego.

Danny gets to his feet, his face impassive if a little tired based on the smudges beneath his eyes. If I could move, if my muscles weren't frozen with exhaustion, I'd pull away from him.

I expect him to hit me, to hurt me, to torture me, but these men are much, much too sadistic to make it that easy. Instead, Danny releases the rope from the pulley and allows me to rest flat on my feet and my arms to flop down, limp and useless. I'd think there was something wrong with them if they didn't hurt so damn much once feeling begins to return.

He doesn't say a word, just watches as I shift from foot to foot, trying to improve circulation in my arms and legs. When I do, I want to cry out in pain. The pain is far worse than I thought it would be. Like thousands of bullet ants are sinking their pinchers into my flesh. I bite my cheek to contain the sound, and I do it so hard I draw blood. The taste makes me so sick to my stomach that I puke up bile and blood at my feet.

Danny shows emotion for the first time and takes a step back in barely masked disgust. It almost makes me want to smile. If I weren't gagging, I probably would have. I haven't had morning sickness since I found out I was pregnant, but what a time for it to show up.

Momma thinks you have a sense of humor, I tell the baby. I know it's crazy, but spending the past however many hours strung up, unable to sleep

and surviving on adrenaline, has me twisted up in all kinds of ways. Talking to the baby, small though it is, gives me a certain sense of comfort.

It was two weeks ago, just when I thought I was going to be okay with everything that had happened. I'd been so worried about getting an apartment and a job and keeping out of the police's sights that I didn't realize I'd skipped a period.

At first, I thought it was stress. I'd skipped a couple while I was married to Vic, so that wasn't abnormal. But my body felt different. My boobs more sensitive, my emotions more volatile, my energy nonexistent.

And though it scared me right to my core . . . I just knew.

I also knew the baby was Gracin's. Vic and I hadn't had sex since before Gracin arrived, so there wasn't a chance in hell that I was carrying his child. I was most grateful for that. If I were forced to choose between Vic and a convicted criminal, I would pick the criminal every time.

I spared some of my cash to take a blood test at the health care center, and they confirmed my suspicions. I was without a doubt pregnant. They set me up with an appointment with an OB and a bottle of prenatal vitamins and then sent me on my merry way.

At first, I didn't know what to do. What to think. Melinda started asking if I was allergic to the sun because I was acting so weird. It took me a while to realize it didn't have to be a bad thing. Maybe, this was what was meant to happen. A baby, this baby, was the first good, positive thing to happen to me in a very long time, and I vowed I wouldn't let what happened to me, happen to this child.

I'll endure whatever they do to me to see that we both make it out of this hellhole alive.

When the pain is gone, and I can move my limbs freely, Danny strings me right back up. Only this time, he and Andrew pull the rope just a little bit tighter. My arms go numb much more quickly the second time around, and I'm only semi-conscious from lack of food and water. Not to mention, lack of sleep. Each sway of my body shoots me back to consciousness, and now there's nausea and hunger pains on top of everything else.

This goes on for an endless amount of time. I can only tell it passes because of the light shining through the windows. I lose count of how many times they unhook me, allow the feeling back, and then string me right back up. Danny and the other guy are relieved from watch duty when another

pair of men I don't know shows up. Hours and hours later, Danny and his friend come back, looking refreshed and well fed.

I can barely keep my eyes open but manage to bare my teeth at them, which only causes them to laugh.

If I weren't strung up like an animal for slaughter, I would have put bullets in every single one of them. Gracin included for getting me into this shit.

The next night, or at least I think it is, they bring out a jug of water. My mouth can't work up the saliva at the sight, but something primal inside me aches at the sight of it.

As if he knows what I'm thinking, Danny plops the water on the table in front of me and pours himself a glass. The sound only reminds me of the intense pressure building in my bladder. I look away and up at my discolored hands, hoping it'll take my mind off my body, but it doesn't.

I fight the need to pee, knowing it's what they want, the degradation and humiliation, but in the end, nature wins out. The relief is overwhelming, but at the same time relieving myself after so long shoots knife-like edges of pain throughout my middle. The pungent smell of urine wafts up around me, and warmth soaks my jeans, leaving them sticky against my legs.

That's when they give me sips of tepid water from the jug. I'm so thirsty that I don't even care. They only allow little sips, but it's enough to wet my dry lips.

I sway on the rope trying to reach for the cup as they pull it away, and on the return swing, I spin around and meet a fist that connects right with my stomach.

The cramps are immediate and brutal.

TWENTY

“No,” I say, but it’s more of a croak. I don’t know if I’m talking to the men around me or the ghost of Vic. As black comes into my vision, reality splits, and I feel like I’m back underneath his fists, struggling to stay alive.

It doesn’t matter. They don’t listen. Another blow, this time to the face, no doubt to shut me up. Danny’s fist connects just under my eye, and I snap around on the rope. My arms scream in protest, and my head feels like I have the worst hangover on the planet within seconds. Combined with the breathlessness leftover from the blow to the stomach, I hurt so bad my brain doesn’t know which part of me to focus on.

Someone barks an order, but I can’t hear it over the ringing in my ears. There’s a flurry of activity, and then someone grabs my hips from behind.

For one brief, terrifying second, I think they’re going to rape me, and I struggle back to consciousness, fighting them as much as I can while I’m bound and helpless. Then the one in front of me, Danny maybe, slaps me across the other cheek, and I realize the dick holding my hips is only doing so to steady me, so I don’t move so much.

My left eye is already partially swollen shut, and my other is watering from the smack, but even with my blurry vision, I can see the horror movie quality table of nightmares they’ve arranged at some point.

Knives. Power tools. More rope. Guns. I shudder and throw up the water I managed to choke down. Danny scowls and backhands me again. This time I sway into the body of the man behind me, which only makes me gag again. The sensation of another man’s hands on me is physically revolting.

When I can see again, it’s to find Danny with a small torch in his hand. Behind him, an extension cord trails toward the wall. The torch hisses to life and heat flares across the sensitive skin causing me to wince.

“Tell us what you know about Gracin Kingsley,” Danny says as he casually waves the torch in front of my face.

I don’t owe Gracin any loyalty, and I sure as hell would tell them whatever they want if it meant I’d get out of here alive, but there are two things wrong with this scenario.

One, I have no idea where the hell he is.

Two, I know the moment I give these men what they want, I’m dead.

So, I say nothing.

At my lack of a response, the torch flares, and the hands on my hips tighten to the point of pain. I’m shaking all over, but there’s no controlling that at this point. Danny squats at my side, takes my leg in his arm, and locks it tight. If I had the strength to fight him, I still wouldn’t have been able to break his vice-like hold.

The torch isn’t huge, but the flame shooting out from the tip is very, very real and, I have no doubt, effective. But in the moment, I don’t even care, because the rippling and spasming in my womb coupled with the fresh dampness between my legs can only mean one thing. And if it’s what I think it is, I don’t care how much they torture me. I’ll survive it if only to rip their fucking throats out with my bare hands.

Danny ignores the urine soaking my jeans as he has one of the other men slice them up so they’re little more than rags hanging off my legs from the knees down. He rips them off and tosses them away before bringing the flame closer to my skin. I hear the sizzle of my flesh and smell cooking meat before I feel the pain of the burn. I throw my head back and scream up to the rafters. Before long, I lose my voice and can only grunt out strangled cries until he removes the flame.

When I refocus on him, the flame is dark, and his face is hard and blank. Death incarnate. “Where is he?” he asks.

I don’t answer him. Past caring, I zone out, my tired body resting against the one behind me. There’s another sizzle, and then I convulse, wanting to move away from the pain, but unable to because of the hands holding me still. He pulls the torch away, and my body automatically sags forward. For the first time, I’m grateful for the bindings. I wouldn’t be able to stay upright if it weren’t for them.

This time Danny barely pauses and doesn’t repeat the question. The flame moves up my leg, getting closer to the sensitive flesh of my thighs. His hands slip on my wet skin, but he either doesn’t notice or doesn’t care,

and I forget to mention that it's blood and not urine because he touches the flame to flesh again. This time, I do pass out.

When I come to, the sun is high in the sky, and I feel like I'm a column of burning ice. Freezing and on fire at the same time. I gag against the smell surrounding me—my cooked flesh—and manage to vomit away from myself instead of down my chest. There's nothing but bile to throw up anyway, and soon, I'm back to dangling.

My stomach cramps, and a fresh wave of blood coats my inner thighs. I moan, and tears course down my cheeks. I think I pass out again because the next thing I know, a barrage of water fills my nose and mouth, startling me awake. They keep it in my face full blast until I'm breathing it. Then they turn it off, and I cough and hack up water at their feet.

I hear one of them cursing and then the water hits me in the chest as they hose me down like a dog. It burns like liquid fire when it hits the burned flesh of my legs. I want to pull away from it, to cry, or to scream at them to stop, but I can't. I'm completely powerless.

"The fuck's she bleeding from?" one of them murmurs. "You didn't hit her that hard."

I can feel their eyes on me, but I can't open mine to see. Besides, I already know what they're staring at. What conclusions they're drawing. Let them see what they've done. If they have hearts enough to care, I hope it eats them alive until I can cut them out.

The hose comes back, this time to give me an impromptu shower. I want to tell them it's pointless because it'll just keep coming. They're still grumbling and trying to wash away the blood when orders are barked, and the hands are back on my hips. Danny's shadowy form and the flickering light of the torch are all I can see.

I use my last burst of energy to kick the torch out of his hand, and my foot glances off his shin as I follow through, and he grunts in pain. The metallic clatter of the torch hitting the concrete floor echoes throughout the warehouse. Danny waddles to it and snatches it from the ground. There's a flare of heat and then the screaming pain returns, this time on the opposite leg.

"Where is he?" he asks.

"Fuck you," I whisper.

This time he leaves the flame against my skin a lot longer. So long that I don't feel the pain anymore, which sounds good, but I know it can't be.

Injuries without pain equal death.

What does it matter? I'm dead anyway, right?

He removes the flame, only to bring it back to a new spot, causing fresh pain. Eventually, I have to go to another place in my brain. One where there is no pain. Where there is no death. Where the baby I hadn't planned for isn't leaving me before I ever got to properly love it as it deserved. The place I cultivated at the hands of a husband who didn't know the meaning of the word mercy.

I'm ripped back to reality when they bring back the hose to clean me off again. The man behind me is gone, and I can't hold my head up anymore or stand on my legs, so I'm dangling forward, my eyes on the concrete beneath me. Bloody water travels in rivulets across the ground and to a nearby drain.

Agony doesn't describe what I feel when I realize that's the little life I'd already thought of as mine. Sobs burst from me then. Deep, wracking painful things, and I feel like a part of me has been ripped right from my heart, like I'm changed right down to my DNA. I know if I make it out of this, I'll never, ever be the same.

The water cuts off, and then they're back. I can't stop crying, not even when the flame comes back. Then my tears turn into screams, and I'm shouting and wailing with everything I have. It echoes throughout the warehouse, and the flame shuts off, and Danny hits me again, his fist colliding with my jaw, making my vision explode in a kaleidoscope of stars.

"If you aren't going to answer the question, keep your fucking mouth shut," he growls as he stuffs a strip of cloth into my mouth.

I'm past caring.

My legs too burned to be his canvas of torture, he lifts my foot and the torch clicks back on. The moment the flame touches the sensitive skin of my sole, I scream against the gag and writhe against the man holding me.

"Where the fuck is he?" Danny asks. "Tell me what you know, and this all stops. The pain will stop if you just tell me where he is."

He drops the torch on the floor and removes the gag so I can speak, but instead of talking, I muster up enough saliva to spit in his face. His look of utter outrage causes me to laugh, though, it's tinged with hysteria.

"She's fuckin' losing it," Andrew says. "Completely fuckin' nuts."

Which only causes me to laugh harder.

There's a loud screeching sound from the warehouse door, and I wilt a little inside knowing it must be Sal, whoever he is, coming back to get the results from the past few days or to finish me off. Part of me almost wants them just to put a bullet in me, but the other part, the one who's sick and damn tired of being treated like shit wants one chance, just one, to pay them back for everything they've done, everything they've taken.

"Last chance," Danny says. "Where is he?"

Then a voice that isn't Sal's says, "Well, boys, if you wanted to see me that much, then all you had to do was call."

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TWENTY ONE

I wish I could turn or open my eyes enough to actually see him. That way, I would know he's actually here and it's not some hallucination or shock setting in. For now, I'll choose to believe he's really here and for that thought to light me up. I jerk in the bonds, and the man behind me tightens his hold.

Danny straightens, his muscular body going tense as he turns to face a nonchalant Gracin. "King," Danny says, though it's more like he spits the word out. "We've been looking for you."

"Terrelli," Gracin responds. "What have you got here?"

I black out then, too overwhelmed by pain and disbelief to keep conscious. When I come to, I can actually see him when he throws a thumb over his shoulder in my direction. "This slut? She's just the dumb cunt I convinced to help me get out of Blackthorne." He laughs, bending forward to slap his knee. Danny snarls at Gracin's blatant condescension. "Man, Sal must be hard up if he's sending men after the women folk to get his work done. Tell me, Terrelli, are you that bad at your job that you can't track down a mark without resorting to beating up women?"

"Tell me, King, are you such a pussy you had to run with your tail between your legs?"

Gracin clucks his tongue. "I never ran. Unlike you, I know how to do a job properly. Now, are we going to stand here all day, or are you going to give Sal a call and tell him you're a complete fucking failure?"

His gaze doesn't come to me once, not a single time since he got here. I know because I can't take my eyes off him, and for that, I hate myself. He looks nothing like the man I knew, and yet, he's so familiar that it makes my whole body ache. Well, even more than it already does.

Danny crosses the room to the table, and the others follow after, leaving me hanging, hurting, bleeding. I'm a piece of meat. It doesn't even surprise

me when Gracin doesn't come to me. But that's okay. It keeps my brain busy and off the pain just to watch him as he studies them.

He's wearing a suit, and he looks even more intimidating in clean lines and expensive fabric than the prison garb. The stark color against his tan makes him seem confident, sleek, and capable. Polished and refined and dominant. He keeps his hands at his sides, loose and ready, like a gunslinger or a gladiator ready to fight to the death.

Danny is talking to someone on the phone, Salvatore, and I close my eyes against the pain radiating through me. When I manage to pull them open again, Gracin is close.

His face doesn't betray any emotion, but he looks over me once, noting the bruises on my face, the burns on my legs, and the blood all around me. He doesn't say anything, and after his cursory once over, I'm reminded of all the reasons why I want to be as far away from him as possible. So, I turn my head away from him and wait to see what these bastards have next in store for me.

But Gracin has other plans.

While Danny's on the phone and the others are taking a smoke break, he cuts me down and takes my weight because my foot is burned so badly I can't stand on it.

"The fuck are you doing?" Danny asks with one hand over the phone.

Gracin doesn't spare him a glance. "You got the information you wanted. I'm here. You want to keep going at her?" His mouth twists, and he looks up then. "Didn't know you were into that shit. Must be why Sal got into snuff films, huh? Kinky."

Danny frowns and then returns to his conversation. Gracin begins massaging my shoulders to increase blood flow to the area, but I shrug him away and take a step away. Well, I try to. My legs don't want to hold my weight and the fresh pain that ignites in my limbs makes it so I nearly end up taking a nose dive straight into the concrete.

"Don't," he says, his voice harsh as he helps me back up. "You can't fuckin' walk, so don't fuckin' try."

I force my voice around the rawness in my throat. "Don't touch me."

He studies me and then retreats, his hands held up as he gestures for me to continue. I glare at him and limp to the table where I ignore the things on top of it and crouch down to sit on one of the chairs. I couldn't hide the pain

lacing my features if I tried, so I don't. I let everyone in the room know just how vulnerable I am.

"Boss wants us to take you to him," Danny says as he hangs up the phone and comes to stand behind me. My shoulders tense at his proximity, but I made such a show of sitting down that I couldn't move if my legs had the strength to keep me upright.

"That won't work for me," Gracin replies.

"'Fraid you don't got a choice." Danny and his men form a line between the exit and us.

Gracin sighs as if he's at the supermarket and the clerk won't direct him to his favorite sparkling water. "Then I guess we have nothing to talk about," he says and pulls out a gun.

He fires four times in rapid succession, faster than I have time to realize what he's doing. I fall unceremoniously off my chair, and the pain of the movement is so breathtaking that it causes my whole body to go numb. My arms come up to cover my head, and my eyes squeeze shut. When the shots stop, I look up and find the four men moaning and supine on the ground.

I don't even think, I just get to my aching feet and stumble for the door. Footsteps are close behind me, but I move as fast as my battered body will let me. The last thing I want is to be caught, but it's no use. Gracin's healthy, rested, and still as quick as the snake. He reaches the door before me, barring its way.

With one hand wrapped around my arm like a band of steel, he yanks me out after him and then scoops me up into his arms as though I hardly weigh anything. But I don't want to go anywhere with him, so I'm scratching and clawing at every available part of him that I can reach until we get to a car and he throws me in the back seat.

When I come up screaming and slapping at him, he deflects my arms and knocks me on the side of the head with a quick blow. One second I'm conscious, the next I'm consumed by darkness and shadows.

I sense everything through a haze.

The movement of a vehicle.

The remnants of indescribable pain.

The presence of other people around me.

Panic threatens to swallow me whole, so I give into the darkness once more.

The numbness and haze continues for so long that I start to believe I'm dead. What else can explain the complete peace and sense of calm? Then something jars my body, bringing the crippling pain back to the forefront, and I wish I were dead all over again. It's only a minute's worth of eternal pain before a tiny pinch on my arm has my mind drifting . . .

Then sleep comes. Blissful, uninterrupted endless sleep.

It's the murmured conversation that pulls me out of the drugged stupor with a snap. Immediately, I think of Danny and the band of thugs. I have to protect myself from what they plan to do to me next. I surge up, teeth bared in a snarl and find hands pressing me into the bed.

I fight them, and inhuman sounds come from my throat until I hear a voice I don't recognize.

"Mrs. Emerson, I need you to calm down."

"Give her a sedative," comes a familiar voice.

Maybe I am dreaming.

"She's already had too much," the first voice replies.

Neither of them sounds like the men who'd beaten and tortured me, and it piques my curiosity enough that I open my eyes, if only to prepare myself for my next version of hell. The sight that greets me is enough to choke off my screaming, and I shrink back into the blankets.

A doctor—or at least, I think he's a doctor based off the stethoscope wrapped around his neck—stands by my bedside, looking both concerned and intimidated. He straightens and sends a questioning look to another person standing in the corner.

Gracin.

He pushes himself off the chair he's been sitting on, comes to the foot of the hospital bed, and rests his hands on the footboard.

"Good morning, Tessa," he says.

I nearly laugh. Good morning? Good morning? Like he's a relative, and I have the flu or something. I close my eyes and relax into the softness at my back, trying to remember what happened or where I may be.

The memories of what they did to me are too much to process, so I tuck that back in the recesses of my mind and focus on the end. It's tinged with the fogginess of recollection, lingering effects of the sedative, and marred by pain. First, my mind latches on to Gracin.

He'd shown up at the end in a suit. Called me a cunt and then cut me down. I open my eyes to confirm the image that comes to mind. He's straightened and crossed his arms over his chest. I recognize the shirt as the one he wore when he was at the warehouse, but he's shed his jacket and unbuttoned the top button and rolled up the sleeves.

The doctor clears his throat next to me, and I look up at him.

"Mrs. Emerson. I'm—" He looks at Gracin for confirmation, and Gracin nods. "I'm Doctor Haversham. I've been treating you for the past two days. You've suffered several second- and third-degree burns on your legs. Multiple bruises, contusions, and a concussion."

He pauses, this time asking me for silent permission for something. He wants to tell me about the one thing I have been trying so very hard to not think about.

I can hear my own body's response to the knowledge on the monitors beside me. My heart rate accelerates off the charts, and the doctor's pained expression flits from me to Gracin and then back.

"Tell me," I say, my voice guttural.

"You miscarried the baby," he replies, sounding reluctant.

From the corner of my eye, I see Gracin's hands fall to his sides, but the vision blurs with unshed tears.

"I'm sorry," the doctor says, but there's no point.

I knew long before Gracin even showed up that my body no longer carried a life.

"Baby?" Gracin asks.

TWENTY TWO

I don't answer Gracin, because what is there to say? He doesn't deserve the courtesy, and I'm too tired to say or do all the things I want to, so I close my eyes and pretend to be asleep until he leaves me alone.

It takes me a few hours to figure out that I'm not in an actual hospital. No, I'm in a bedroom in someone's house. Gracin's house. The doctor and a woman I assume is a nurse check in on me for the next few hours. Most of the time, it's quiet, and when night falls, I let the tears come. They fall in streams down my cheeks. I shake so hard I feel paralyzed, but I let the emotions come. I thought I'd cried all I could in the warehouse, but I was wrong.

It seems to go on forever, until I spend all the energy I have left, leaving me to stare at the wall feeling empty. More empty than I used to after Vic fucked me into submission and ignored me like I was less than a person. That tiny life was the only positive thing that came from the last three years of my life, and now it's gone.

"Baby?" comes his voice from the darkness. I hear it, but I'm so tired, so thoroughly used up that I can't summon the energy to move.

I know he means it as a question and not the endearment.

"You were pregnant?" he asks.

"So it would seem," I say dully. "It doesn't matter. I'm not anymore."

"It was mine." It isn't a question. He says it like a claim. Like it's something vital and real. And it was, but it isn't anymore, and I don't want to talk to him, especially about this, so I say, "Probably," even though I know for certain it was.

"It was mine," he repeats, his voice more insistent. I hear the chair creak, and my aching body tenses, bracing for whatever he has planned next.

He doesn't touch me as I expect. He just moves the chair closer to my bed. "How?" I can't tell if he's merely curious or furious. He wants to know

how I lost the baby, but that isn't something I can talk about right now . . . maybe not ever.

My hands knot in the thin bedclothes. "I don't want to talk about it." I pause to clear the tremor in my voice. "Does it matter?"

He sighs, and the sound caresses my skin. I can almost imagine that I feel his breath coasting along my flesh. "I guess not."

For some reason, his words cause my eyes to water again. I don't let them come this time, blinking furiously to stem the flow.

The questions bubble up inside me, and I nearly choke on them. The reasons why Gracin did what he did don't matter anymore. They seem so very childish in comparison to all the things that have happened since then. One day, I'll demand answers, just not today.

I roll away from him, unwilling to say anything else. Thankfully, he doesn't pry. I must fall asleep because the next time I open my eyes, I find the sun has risen and I'm alone. I watch the light for a long time before a knock sounds and a young woman enters. She's wearing scrubs, so I assume she's at least a nurse. I don't ask. I also don't ask how she knows Gracin or came to be in this room taking care of me. I don't want to know.

"Hello," she says in a soft voice that is warm and soothing. I want to lean into it for comfort. I want someone to hold me more than anything, but instead, I swing my legs over the side of the bed.

"Would you mind helping me to the restroom?" I ask brusquely.

She nods, her hands efficient and capable as she helps me navigate the wires and tubes and bears my weight as she guides me to a door off to the left. The bathroom is sumptuous with granite countertops and expensive tile. I spot a walled in shower with a dozen knobs and heads. After I do my business, I ask her to help me undress.

"Do you want me to—"

"No, I'm fine." I soften my harsh words with a small smile. "Thank you, though."

There's a bench seat in the shower, and I ease myself down onto it with a small grimace. There isn't a part of me that doesn't hurt. Dr. Haversham had bandaged my thighs and calves with breathable gauze and some sort of waterproof plastic wrap. According to the nurse, they recently changed them, and I should be okay to shower, provided that it isn't too long. I don't even want to imagine what they look like.

A cursory check of myself reveals blood, which streams down to mix with the shower water. I can't find it in me to be embarrassed. There's only room for the constant ache of grief.

I don't know how long I sit in the shower, but it's long enough that the blood abates, at least for a while. Long enough that the thick glass walls are steamed from top to bottom, and my skin is puffy and wrinkled. Long enough that the bandages on my legs need changing. No matter how long I sit in the spray, though, I feel like I won't ever get clean.

It's Gracin who retrieves me when they've deemed my shower has gone on long enough. I don't fight him, although his touch makes my skin crawl. He simply appears on the other side of the glass and reaches in to turn the water off. Then he sticks his arm in and offers me a towel. I expect him to peek as I wrap myself in it and step out, but he doesn't.

"How are you feeling?" he asks.

I hate that his voice doesn't betray any emotion. The man I knew who was calculating, devious and flirtatious is nowhere to be found. It only reinforces my belief that it all truly was an act. And like the idiot that I was, I fell for it.

Guess it's a good thing I'm not an idiot anymore.

I level him with a look, and he says, "Fair enough. Is there anything I can get you to make you more comfortable?"

"You can tell me when I can get out of here." There's no point in dancing around it. I didn't spend two months on the run because I wanted him to find me. After what he did, the only thing I want is to get as far away from him as possible. Perhaps they're taking new bids on the International Space Station. Yes, that or another planet might be far enough away.

His expression doesn't change, but for a moment, his mouth tightens. "It isn't safe for you to leave right now," he says.

I lower myself onto the bed cautiously and then allow him to cover me with the blankets. "What is that supposed to mean?"

He glances away, and I have to swallow back the urge to force him to look at me. "It means you're staying here until it's safe."

"And where is here?"

"My house."

I slump back against the pillows, more than a little stunned. Gracin has a house? I think back to the bathroom that must have cost a small fortune. It doesn't compute with the man I met at Blackthorne.

The questions give me a bitch of a headache, which probably shows on my face since he closes the shades and dims the lights without my asking him to.

“Get some rest. We can talk later.”

“I don’t want to go to dinner,” I shout at the woman who’d come to invite me down. “I want to leave. Now!”

My imperious tone does little to intimidate her, though she’s five foot nothing if she’s an inch. If anything, she absorbs my rudeness, and her fierce scowl intensifies.

“Master Kingsley would like you to join him for dinner. Six o’clock sharp.”

The implication that tardiness is a mortal sin is implied. She leaves, and I throw myself back on the bed, muttering obscenities I don’t have the balls to say to the tyrant’s face.

Three weeks have passed, and I haven’t left the room once. At first, I was too listless, too emotionally and physically drained to do more than the bare minimum: sleep, eat, bathe, repeat. Once the good doctor gave me a clean bill of health a week after arriving, I thought it would either be time for the conversation Gracin and I were supposed to have or time for me to leave if I wanted.

Boy, was I wrong.

As soon as the doctor left, I showered, dressed in the clothes provided for me, and went to leave. But the door was locked. It stayed that way until the woman, who I only knew as Marie, delivered my meals. She wouldn’t answer any of my questions and only speaks in orders.

I get the feeling Gracin knows how I am doing, but he hasn’t come back to visit—not that I actually want him to. He could go to hell first. He’d have to starve to death before he found me willingly joining him for dinner.

Four o’clock comes and goes, then five. Then six. My apprehension grows with each ticking of the second hand. The television he must have had installed while I was sleeping only entertains me for so long, and then I’m right back to watching the clock. Ten minutes after, then twenty.

The clock strikes half past and the lock on my door clicks. I expect to see Marie; I get Gracin.

He leans against the door. “Now the only reason why I think you’d refuse dinner is that you’re still too sore to walk yourself downstairs. I wish you’d said something. I would have come up sooner, little mouse.”

The reminder of the prison, of what had transpired between us, is almost too much. I launch myself to my feet. “Don’t call me that. I’m fine. The doctor says the burns have healed nicely. You don’t need to keep me locked in here anymore.”

He studies me as if he doesn’t quite understand me but is desperate to figure me out. I don’t like it. In fact, I want him to stop.

“If I go to dinner, will you let me leave?”

“If you come to dinner, I’ll consider it,” he says.

We both know he negotiates deals only to renege after he’s gotten his way, but I don’t have any other choice. I glance around the room, hating these four walls and knowing that his consideration is about all I’ll get. Besides, at least this time, I’m going down on my terms, not his.

Gracin waves an arm, inviting me outside into the hallway. Part of me is afraid of what I’m going to find. I take hesitant steps past him, and my jaw nearly drops. There are elaborate hallways in both directions with dozens of doors on either side. This isn’t a house—it’s a goddamned mansion.

What the hell was a man who could afford a house like this doing in prison?

I shiver as I remember Sal and decide that maybe I don’t want to know. Maybe I just want to get out of here and as far away as possible.

When he puts a hand on my arm, I jerk back. Touching hasn’t been easy for me since the night with Danny and Co. Gracin must realize that, because he doesn’t try it again. He just says, “This way,” when we have to turn a corner or go through a doorway.

I rub the spot on my arm where it came in contact with his hand and try not to remember where else his hands have touched me. He leads me to an intimate dining room with a view of gardens, which are bursting with color. It’s a far cry from the cold grays of Michigan. It’s funny how you don’t know you miss something until you don’t think you’ll ever see it again, not that I ever thought I’d miss the snow. But in this moment, I do.

Silently, he offers me a seat at the table, and Marie brings out the platters of food with a smug smile in my direction. “Anything else, Master Kingsley?” she asks Gracin.

“Thank you, that will be all. See that we aren’t disturbed.”

I help myself to the steak and salad as he watches. After weeks of bland hospital-like food, my mouth waters at the mere sight. I keep my mouth full so I don't have to talk to him, but it doesn't bother him in the slightest. He doesn't eat, just watches, still with the curious expression on his face.

"Why didn't you tell them anything?" he asks when I've finally cleared my plate.

As I reach for seconds, I consider the man across from me. The dressings may have changed, but the air of brutality sure hasn't. He's violence wrapped in a pretty bow. Danger made to shine. Only instead of the prison jumpsuit, his warning label is an Armani suit and a Rolex. Money is power, but on him, it's also lethal.

"They only would have killed me faster," I tell him as I take a bite.

"Some people would prefer a quicker death," he says.

"Some people are also cowards."

He chuckles, surprising me. "I guess we both know you're far from a coward."

"Are you going to tell me who they are? I think you owe me at least that."

He leans back in his chair, his legs spread and his hands resting on his thighs. Posed that way, he owns every syllable of his nickname.

"Telling you any more than you already know will only put you in more danger."

The rope. The blood. My murdered child would say otherwise. "I'd rather know what I'm involved in than be in the dark. Besides, it's about time you tried honesty for a change."

TWENTY THREE

“Sal,” Gracin begins, “the man who hired Terelli and the others?”

I carefully place the fork on my plate—food forgotten—and gesture for him to continue. I keep my hands in my lap so he can’t see them shake. Even hearing the man’s name causes a tumult of emotions to rise in my chest.

“You’ve met his son.” His fingers clench on his thighs, the first sign of emotion I’ve seen from him since I woke up in his house.

“I have?”

He nods and takes a sip of his glass of scotch. “Sal—Salvatore, from Blackthorne.”

I can’t say I’m shocked about that connection.

Gracin continues, unheeding of my silence. “I guess you could say he didn’t take it very well. He was never fond of his son, but the slight to his family . . . his name, isn’t something a man like Sal forgets.”

He gets to his feet and goes to the window, leaving his food untouched. “I told you I wasn’t a good man, Tessa, and I meant it.”

“You did tell me that.” I reach for the glass of water and chug several gulps as he goes on.

“The men who hired me to kill Sal’s son planted me at Blackthorne. I did the job I was hired to do and planned to get out as soon as the opportunity presented itself.”

“Do you break out of jail often?” My tone is sarcastic, but I’m genuinely curious. I know how hard it was to get him out. I can’t imagine anyone who’d willingly get arrested on the chance that they could escape.

“Not jail, but I’ve had to get out of sticky situations before. If you didn’t help me, I would have figured out another way. The paramedics that drove me away? They were mine.”

I don’t even want to know how he orchestrated that one, so I move on. “Why didn’t Sal just have you killed himself?”

He smiles then, and the quirk of his lips is so achingly familiar it causes me physical pain. “They tried, remember? I’m really hard to kill. Plus, they couldn’t find me.”

I don’t have a response. I mean, what do you even say to something like that? So, I hastily serve myself some of the sponge cake Marie placed on the table instead. Gracin keeps looking out the window.

“How did they even know I was in Los Angeles?”

At that, he turns and shoves his hands into his pockets. “If I had to take a guess?” he asks, glancing at me. When I nod, he says, “Because I’d been spotted there. The fact that you were even still alive told them you meant something to me. They are good at what they do, almost as good as I am, so they knew if they found you, I would be close behind. You weren’t hard to find.”

I wince, the sponge cake turning to dust on my tongue. The news reports hadn’t been kind in the weeks following Gracin’s escape and Vic’s death. They spun a story of a whirlwind romance that drove me to break Gracin out of prison and murder my husband so we could run away together. It wouldn’t have been hard for Sal to draw conclusions from there, mistaken though they may be.

“But how did you track me down to California? It ’s not really near Michigan.”

He turns, hands tucked casually into his pockets. “If you thought you could hide from me, you were very much mistaken. I’m very, very good at what I do, Tessa.”

“What, exactly, do you do?” I was afraid to know, but I’m done hiding from my fears.

“I kill people for money, Tessa. Lots of money.”

“So, Salvatore. He was what? A job?”

“Yes.”

I shove that away for another time as my brain starts to spin. “But how did you find me?”

With a sigh, he gestures with one hand. “I knew when I got back to the house you were gone. There are only so many outlets from Michigan, and I assumed you’d stick to a well-known city you thought you could lose yourself in.”

I swallow thickly, waiting.

He glances down at my hand where my wedding ring should have been. "I knew you'd need money, so I checked all the pawnshops around your house first. When that didn't work, I started in Detroit. It took a couple of days, but eventually, I found where you unloaded your rings. You got taken on that deal by the way."

Son of a bitch. "And they just gave you my information? Just like that?"

He lifts a brow. "Anyone can be bought. You just have to find the right price. From there, I checked the nearest transportation, which of course were buses. Of the hundred or so possible choices, only three fit—New York, Dallas, and Los Angeles. I figured you would have gone as far as you could. I was right."

"The police? Why aren't they looking for you? Us? Did you buy them off, too?" At this point, I wouldn't be surprised.

"I work and do business under an assumed name. Gracin Kingsley is my real name, one with a verifiable history for those who thought to check, but that name won't lead any of the authorities to this place. I own it and several others under the name I use to do business."

My head spins. "What about me? Why did you do this to me?"

He pauses, his first during my little interrogation, and then says, "I needed help getting out."

"I was just collateral damage, is what you're saying." I nod, furious with myself that a confirmation of what I had already known makes me want to cry again. "I guess I already knew that."

He doesn't apologize. Maybe he already knows it would be pointless.

"You can stay here until I neutralize the situation with Sal. Whatever you need will be provided for you. Whatever you want," he says.

"I want to leave."

He sighs. "That's the one thing I can't let you do. They're still looking for me, and letting you go now would just put you right back in danger. You are free to explore the property, though."

"What does it matter if I'm in danger?" He just looks at me. His electric green eyes heated with whatever words he's refusing to give me. When I'm certain he isn't going to answer, I say, "Then I guess we're done here, aren't we?"

He starts to walk away, and I call out to his back. "You're no better than Vic was, keeping me locked up, thinking you know what's best for me,

pushing me around, manipulating me. You told me I deserved better. I guess what you really meant is that I should exchange one prison for another.”

He walks out of the dining room instead of answering.

Marie appears to lead me back to my room.

The doors are kept locked at all times. You’d think with a house this size that someone would forget to close one of them . . . or at least leave a window cracked or something, but no. Gracin must have trained them well because over the next week, I test them all for points of weakness to no avail.

If I’m let outside to get some sun or fresh air, it’s only to go to the back gardens, which are walled off and the only gate is padlocked. Scaling them is an impossibility unless I want to risk being sliced and diced by razor wire. It reminds me a bit of Blackthorne.

By the end of the week, I think I’ve scoured all the grounds and searched through all the rooms that aren’t locked. If there’s a trace of who Gracin is behind all the masks he wears, I don’t find one. I do find the libraries, as in more than one, a glass-paned conservatory, and an indoor pool. It would almost seem like a vacation if I weren’t being shadowed by one of Gracin’s men night and day. On the handful of occasions that I’m not being watched by a person, I know there is a camera recording my every movement. Sometimes I flip them off just knowing he’s watching.

Each day starts with breakfast in the south conservatory. The fare varies, but it’s always served at seven. Coffee steaming, fresh fruit, and spicy sausages or crispy bacon with eggs. After I eat, I go to my room and change into a swimsuit that just showed up the day after I found the swimming pool, and I swim until my limbs are numb and my brain is comfortably fuzzy. If I weren’t so incredibly wired all the time, I would have enjoyed exploring the library, but I can’t seem to sit still anymore so if I’m feeling up to it, I do a couple rounds in the gym or prowl the mansion back and forth until it’s time for dinner.

Sometimes Gracin joins me, but sometimes he doesn’t. Our conversations never vary past what I’ve been up to that day, and they never last long because I give clipped answers to all of his questions. He’s lucky I haven’t taken the silverware and stabbed him in the neck. Maybe that’s why he eats at the farthest end of the table across from me.

I don't want to question him about why he saved me that day. I'm afraid if I do, I may kill him instead of just imagining it.

I don't know what it will mean if I kill someone in cold blood. That's a lie. It will mean I'm no better than him.

I'm exploring the third-floor rooms the following weekend when I come across another locked door. I look around, surprised to find my shadow gone and not a single camera pointed in my direction. I turn back to the door, curious. This one is different from the others. I can't say why. Maybe it's the lack of surveillance, as if Gracin doesn't want any record of who comes and goes from this room, or maybe it's a gut instinct. Still, I know this place is special. I know it belongs to him as surely as I am aware I'm going to open it, regardless of the consequences. It's by pure luck that I manage to open it using pins from my hair and a hard shove with all my weight.

His scent assaults me first, and I nearly stagger backward. It's the one thing I can't fight whenever I'm near him, and it only makes me hate him more. The fact that he still, after everything, can make me want him without doing a thing is infuriating.

His room is huge, maybe double the size of the one I've been given. The bed is situated in front of me, and it has a sleek nightstand on each side, and atop each nightstand is a contemporarily styled lamp. A long chest of drawers sits to my left with a tall mirror at the top. On the opposite side, there is a wall mounted flat-screen.

I start with the drawers since they're the most obvious place for him to store all his secrets, which is probably why they're only full of useless things—bits of paper, change, business cards for landscaping and the like. Closing them in disgust, I move to the dresser and snoop through each drawer, even pausing once to bring a white T-shirt up to my nose. Furious with myself, I throw it back in the drawer and slam it shut.

My next area of attack is his closet, but I have to stop in awe when I see the shelves lined with meticulously organized clothes. My memories of him are so rooted in our time together at Blackthorne that the image of sophistication is jarring as a reality. The drawers and shelves in the closet yield no more than belts, cuff links, and shoes. As I investigate his bathroom, I'm starting to think I won't find anything after all. I pull out drawer after drawer until one thing does catch my eye. As I pick it up, dumbfounded, I almost can't believe what I'm seeing.

It's my security ID from Blackthorne. The one he'd read the first day we met. Probably kept it as a trophy when he pulled off his big escape, the sick bastard. I leave the ID where I find it. The reminder of what I've done may get him off, but it makes bile rise in the back of my throat. I was such a stupid, stupid girl.

I put everything back in its place and double-check to make sure it's all just as I found it. Usually, I'd feel guilty for invading someone else's privacy, but as far as I'm concerned if Gracin didn't want me snooping in his things, he shouldn't have locked me in his house.

"Find what you were looking for?" Gracin says from his bedroom doorway. He doesn't seem upset, but based on the significant amount of control he's shown over the past few weeks, I couldn't tell even if he were. Not that I give a damn.

"I wasn't looking for anything specific," I say.

"Weren't you?" he returns.

Rolling my eyes, I make to move past him, but he blocks the doorway. My heart kicks into high gear. "What are you doing?"

"I just want to talk," he says.

"I don't. I think we did enough talking the other day. You made yourself perfectly clear."

He boxes me in, one arm wrapping around my stomach to maneuver in front of me. "I don't think I did," he says and pushes me backward so he can close the door behind him.

The sound of the lock echoes in my ears. "Let me out."

"No."

That's it? Just no?

"Gracin," I begin, and he stills. I remember what happened the last time I said his name. What he did to me because he liked it so much. But that won't happen again. "You can't keep me here forever."

"I can," he says. "And I will."

"Why?" I ask, throwing my hands up. "You got what you wanted. You're out of prison. You'll take care of Salvatore, and you don't need my help for that. You gain nothing from keeping me here."

The arm around my waist tightens, and the next thing I know, he's over me on the bed, his body pinning me down. I freeze, overcome with a tumult of emotions and memories, neither of which are welcome.

“If you don’t want a knee in your balls, you need to let me up right now,” I say with forced calm.

His arms braced on either side of my head, his mouth dipping low to my throat, I can feel his heartbeat against mine and the soft rasp of his breathing against my throat. As he moves against me, getting comfortable, I realize this is the first human contact I’ve had since . . . everything. And even though I hate him, even though he’s the cause of it all, I wilt, my hands going around him.

And I hate myself for it.

Maybe even more than I hate him.

What is broken inside me that I look for love in the worst places? Was it programmed inside me from birth or is it a product of my parent’s neglect? Am I just so fucked up that I’ll take affection wherever I can get it, even if it’s from the worst possible source?

He drops down to his side, and his arms go around me urging me to roll with him until I’m plastered against his side.

“This doesn’t mean I don’t want to kill you,” I say against his throat.

“I know,” he says solemnly. “I’ll let you kill me later, just let me hold you.”

I bristle at his words, but my anger lacks bite. My body needs the comfort more than I thought. My raw heart lifts as he strokes my hair and down my back, his hand coming to rest against my hip. Tears threaten, but I ignore them and press closer to the sanctuary of his body.

“Make me forget,” I whisper, my tongue flicking out to sample the familiar taste of the skin at his throat. “If you’re going to keep me here and want to hold me, then you can help erase everything else.”

He doesn’t speak, but he does as I ask, his mouth finding mine as his hand knocks my legs apart and finds my clit with unerring precision. I arch up to meet his touch, and within minutes, I’m clinging to his arms as I battle my ferocious response.

“Don’t fight it,” he says against my lips. “Let me give it to you.”

I grip his forearm to pull him away, unable to take the pleasure/pain any longer, but he simply takes my wrists, holds them against the bed, and slips his hand underneath my waistband to touch me skin against skin. The closeness is what I crave, and one stroke later, I come without warning, all my muscles contracting in concert.

His muscles quake with restraint as he gathers me close. “That’s it, sweetheart,” he says against my hair.

As I lie in his arms a while later, I allow myself to think of the life I lost. What life could have been like if Gracin were normal and I weren’t so weak. The two of us with a little boy or girl. Fantastic sex and dinners with conversations that don’t revolve around murder or revenge.

“What are you thinking about?” he asks, sounding drowsy.

“Why good things happen to some people and not to others.”

I feel his lips on my cheek, and I sigh. This moment with him is just a reprieve. Tomorrow, things will go back to normal, and I’ll be able to despise him again.

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TWENTY FOUR

I wake back in my room, and I don't know how to feel about it. So, I ignore it completely. I have to get out of here before Gracin Stockholm Syndrome's me or something. Under the guise of my everyday routine, I put more effort into figuring out how to escape.

Not causing Gracin serious physical harm when I was so close to him was the last straw. He's magnetic, and if I don't want to be sucked back into his vortex, I have to do everything I can to run in the opposite direction.

I dress in a simple yoga outfit from my closet and brush my teeth as I plan. My best bet is going to be one of the less patrolled wings, which eliminates the kitchen and the garages, which are on the south side. I can break a window or pry open a door and then find a way around the wall.

Marie greets me in the dining room with a breakfast tray and, thankfully, no lip.

To fly under the radar, I follow my routine. Breakfast, swim, then I go to the library. By the time I get done with everything, it's already one in the afternoon. The libraries are the only places in the house I haven't explored as thoroughly as I want to because too much quiet time only leaves me despondent.

I pick the biggest of the three, and if I'd been any other person, in any other situation, I would have declared the room to be beautiful. Both the left and right shelves are full of books of all shapes and sizes. In the middle, a large rug, club chairs, and a deep-set sofa invite guests to sit and relax with a nice read. Along the back wall are floor-to-ceiling windows that look out the side of the garden.

I ignore the books and head straight for the windows. They're older than the rest of the ones in the house. Maybe they haven't been updated with a security system, yet, though the possibility is unlikely. I study the hinges and note some of them are rusting. Maybe I'll be able to force one open.

"Trying to leave so fast?"

I spin around and find Gracin standing behind me. “What the hell are you doing here?” I stammer.

He lifts a brow. “I live here.”

“I thought you weren’t going to be back until dinner.”

“I had a feeling after yesterday you were going to try to leave.”

I raise my chin, my eyes flashing. “I should be able to go when I want.”

“Not when Sal is still looking for you. Looking for me.”

“Does he not know where you live? What’s stopping him from rolling up right now and gutting us both like fish?”

“No one knows about this place.”

“No one?”

“My home isn’t something I advertise, Tessa.”

Feeling vulnerable and sensitive after letting him get so close to me, both emotionally and physically, I say, “Why did you even bring me here? Why not just let him get it over with and kill me? It would have been less of a hassle for you and would have saved him the trouble.”

He studies me before he says, “What makes you think I want you dead?”

My laugh is joyless, hollow. “Oh, I don’t know. Maybe because I saw you kill a man, you forced me to help you escape from prison, and then had sex with me while my husband’s dead fucking body was in the other room. Not only that,” I continue, working myself into a fine rage, “but now I’m locked in your house, and you won’t let me go.”

I pause, chest heaving and wonder if I should continue, but the words just don’t stop. They spill out of me, inevitable and weighty. “When I found out I was pregnant, I thought it was the best thing to ever happen to me. I figured it was the silver lining in the shitstorm that is my life. I didn’t care that it was yours, that I’d be a single mom raising a kid on the run. For once, I had something perfect and pure, and then it was taken away from me! And I blame you. I wish you’d let me die. I don’t know if I can forgive you for everything that’s happened.”

He shrugs and looks away. “I don’t expect you to.”

“What do you want from me?”

“I want to make sure Sal’s dead, and there won’t be any blowback on you. Once I’m sure you’ll be safe, I’ll let you go.”

The thought should have filled me with indescribable joy, but instead, I’m more conflicted than ever.

“Is that what you’re doing every day? Looking for him.”

He crosses to the window and leans a forearm against it. “Yes, I am looking for him. He’s gone to ground because he knows I’m looking for him, probably planning his next move.”

He’s silent after that, and it affords me the chance to just look at him while I consider his words. He’s wearing jeans today with a button-up white shirt that’s rolled up enough to reveal the shadows of ink unfurling on his right forearm.

I follow the dark pattern under the almost see-through material of his shirt, and my mouth goes dry as a wave of intense desire courses through me when I spot the outlines of twin metal rings in his nipples. When had he had time to do that?

I turn away, not wanting him to see just how badly I want to order him to take his shirt off so I can see them. My body still recognizes him on a primal level despite what it’s been through. It’s primordial, instinctual, and I can no more resist how much I want him than I can resist breathing. When had he become as essential to me as life itself? Reconciling needing him with what he’s done . . . I don’t know if it’s possible.

His feet come into view, and I look up to find him standing in front of me. “Come with me,” he says, and I frown as he leaves the room. I hurry to keep up with him, not wanting to be left behind.

“Where are we going?”

“I’ll explain when we get there,” he tells me as he leads me to a door that has been locked every time I’d jiggled the handle. He holds it open for me, and I realize why I hadn’t dared to force it open before. Rows of monitors line both walls with wide countertops in front of them. Two of his men sit in rollaway chairs and look up when we enter.

“You want out of here? Then you’d better pay attention,” he says. “Pay close attention. Do you want something from me? I want something from you.”

“What the hell do you want from me?” I hiss. “You have me locked up here like a good little pet. What more do you want?”

“Kiss me, Tessa,” he says. “One kiss, and you can go with me to track down those men who hurt you.”

“You’re ridiculous! I don’t fucking think so. Didn’t you already get enough?”

He nods to someone behind me, and the bodyguards I'd forgotten were there come up behind me. One of the big, beefy bastards grabs me by the arms, and I know I won't be going anywhere. I want to scream in frustration.

"Fine! Fine! One. I mean it, Gracin. One kiss and nothing else or I swear to God I will kill you and they'll never find the body."

"Don't tease me," he says as he jerks his chin to the bodyguards, who leave. He crosses the room as they shut the door behind them, leaving us alone in the small space.

"Well, let's get this over with," I say.

"So eager."

"Less talking, more focusing."

He chuckles and tucks his hands under the fall of my hair. His thumbs nudge my jaw, and I lift, glaring at him as he draws closer.

"Is it really so bad?"

The truth is, no. It's not. And that's what makes me so fucking angry. I don't get the chance to answer because his lips cover mine and scatter all rational thought like dandelion fluff in a tornado.

TWENTY FIVE

My fingers clutch at the countertop behind me because if they weren't occupied, they'd already be reaching for a part of him to touch. They'd be skimming along his shoulders and combing into his hair. He, however, has no such qualms about touching me. His hands drop to my shoulders before dancing over the neckline of my shirt and then down my arms, sliding along until goose bumps rise in their wake. On the upward movement, his hands round to my stomach where they trace along my ribs and skim to just underneath my bra.

As his hands are mapping my body, his mouth lays waste to the walls I'd carefully built since I walked away from him and my dead husband. When I can't take it anymore, I release my grip on the counter and push him away.

"Okay," I say, a bit more breathlessly than I would have liked. "That's it. I held up my end of the deal. Now you hold up yours."

He steps back, his lips flushed pink and glossy, and I have to look away to keep from drawing them back to mine.

"So you have," he says a bit dazedly before taking a key ring down from a line of hooks hanging by a door. "This way."

"Where exactly are we going?"

"According to intelligence I've gathered, Danny and his friends like to meet up at a bar a few towns over. If we're lucky, they'll be there, and we can tail them to Sal's place."

"Can I—"

"No."

"You didn't even let me finish my sentence."

"That's because chaos follows you around like a shadow. You'll keep quiet, stay behind me, and do exactly what I say, remember?"

I grumble, but I don't argue. The possibility of finding Danny shuts me right up.

“You know, if I didn’t know any better, I’d think you were almost excited,” he says.

I ignore the teasing tone in his voice and say, “I assumed you killed them. I mean before we left.”

“Unfortunately, no.” He spares me a short look. “I was more worried about getting you out.”

Color me shocked. Gracin just admitted to being worried about me. I tuck that knowledge away and walk next to him in silence. The short hallway from the security room to the outside spills out into a six-car garage, which is not the same garage I found last week. I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t jaw-droppingly surprised. Even though I’ve been living in his house with his servants, cooks, assistants, and bodyguards, the reminder of his wealth is staggering. Each of the garage bays has a vehicle parked in it. The first has a truck, black, utilitarian and very capable looking. Next to it is an SUV of some kind, same color and very sleek—almost like it’s one of the government-issue kind I’d imagine the Secret Service uses. I don’t dare ask him how he got his hands on it. The next three spots are high-end sports cars in varying colors and makes.

“Jesus,” I whisper under my breath.

The keys jingle behind me, and I turn to find Gracin watching me. He indicates the SUV. “We’re taking this one.”

I have to swallow to wet my dry throat. “Okay.”

He chuckles. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen you so speechless. Cat got your tongue?”

Forcing my legs to move, I climb into the passenger seat as Gracin swings up beside me.

“I’m not speechless . . . I’m just curious. How is it that you can afford all of this? Or is that an off-limits topic?”

The car rumbles to life, and he maneuvers it out of the garage. I wait as he backs out and then shifts the SUV into drive. “There isn’t a lot that’s off-limits to you, Tessa. You just have to ask.”

“Then tell me, how is it that you have a mansion and a shit ton of cars? You worked for . . . someone to kill Salvatore, but in what capacity? Why?” I’ve been wondering about him since I first met him, and now that he’s in a talkative mood and we have time, I want to know more.

As he gathers his thoughts, I drink in the view and roll down my window to lift my face to the fresh afternoon breeze. I’d been allowed to go

to the gardens, but there's something about being cooped up that takes away its beauty.

"I take contracts for several ghost organizations," he says, and I jerk my attention back to him, swallowing thickly.

"Contracts?" The word is barely a whisper.

He nods, a quick jerk of his head. He'd put on sunglasses so I can't read his expression behind the tinted lenses. "Yeah, Tessa, as I said before."

His admission steals my breath straight from my lungs, but I gesture for him to continue, not wanting to make him clam up.

He pulls out onto a highway, and I realize I don't even know what state we're in anymore. I'd been so out of it after the warehouse that I hadn't thought to ask. The terrain reminds me of California desert, but we're out in the middle of nowhere. We could be in Nevada or Arizona for all I know.

"I got hooked up with a crowd of bad people when I was younger, and I got a bit of a reputation for being a problem solver."

"Should you be telling me this?"

"I can tell you whatever the fuck I want. The people I work for pay me because I'm the best at what I do."

I lick my lips before I respond. "That doesn't sound good."

He shrugs as he merges into the far left lane of traffic. "It isn't so bad. I had a shit home life and nothing else better to do. I had the skills they needed, and they trained me for a long time to make those skills even more deadly."

I try to imagine Gracin as a honed killing machine and am staggered when the image isn't as much of a stretch as I think. After all, he managed to fit into prison as a thug so convincingly that he had everyone fooled. I had no idea this man was lurking just underneath the surface. Sure, I had an idea he was hiding something, but never in a million years would I have guessed this.

"Too much?" he asks when he notes my expression.

I clear my throat. "No, it isn't that at all. It's just I'm realizing I don't know you as well as I thought I did."

He tips my chin up with a finger. "You know me better than just about anyone, little mouse."

That statement says way more than he probably intended, and I hate that I feel bad for him. I hardly know him at all, and if I know him better than

anyone else, it means he has almost no one in his life. He doesn't need, want, or deserve my pity, so I just say, "I didn't know any of that."

He shrugs. "It's just history."

"Yeah, but I feel like you know everything about me."

He shoots me a smile, which I don't return. "Fine. But only if you answer one of mine in return. Remember?"

I scowl, which causes him to laugh. "Fine. What do you want to know? I can promise you it won't be as exciting as a secret past."

He levels me with a look. "Everything about you interests me, Tessa, but we'll start with something easy. Why did you decide to become a nurse?"

I blow out a deep breath and smile a tiny smile. "I guess I didn't want to become my parents. They were both minimum wage deadbeats with no options. Nursing always seemed like a steady job with a good income. Something respectable."

"Why the prison?"

I laugh. "Well, there aren't many employment opportunities in that part of Michigan, or didn't you notice? At first, it was only supposed to be temporary until I could afford enough money for a move to the city or somewhere warmer. Then I met Vic, and well, you know the rest."

"What were your parents like?"

With a groan, I say, "Is that what you want to know? It isn't what you'd call a happy story."

"The real ones hardly ever are. Yes, it's what I want to know."

"Fine, but first you have to answer one of my questions." He nods, and I say, "You mentioned you got into a lot of trouble when you were younger. Why?"

"You already know why. My dad was a drunk abusive son of a bitch, and my mom was more interested in her next score than raising a son."

My hand reaches out to touch him of its own volition, needing to touch him, to soothe. Having grown up in a house just the same, I don't have to imagine what it was like, I already know.

I may not be sure about what the hell we're doing, or why I can't stay away, but he hadn't been lying when he told me about his parents. If I doubted it then, I don't doubt it now. "I'm sorry."

He shrugs. "It is what it is."

"I think I get another question because you slipped in several."

“Fair enough.”

“What happened to your parents? Are they still alive?” I almost hold my breath. Getting Gracin to talk, to open up like this, feels like a fragile opportunity and I don’t want to ruin it.

“No, they aren’t.”

I shouldn’t, but I ask anyway. “What happened?”

He looks at me, tugs off his glasses, and rubs a hand over his face. “Are you sure you wanna know these things?”

There’s a pause while I consider, but it’s a short one. “Yes. After what happened in Michigan, I honestly couldn’t think worse of you, so it isn’t like you’re going to ruin your first impression.”

At first, I think I may have insulted him, but then he smiles. “I guess you’re right, but remember, you asked.”

His left hand lies on the top of the steering wheel, and he rests his right elbow on the center console between us. As he talks, I stare at his arms, at his tattoos, and clutch my own hands between my legs to keep from touching him or pulling him close to me.

“My dad liked to get drunk, like I said, and he had a fondness for cards. He’d get wasted and piss away whatever money he had on him, sometimes more. When he’d win, he’d win big, and things would be great for a while. If he didn’t spend his earnings on more booze and lousy bets, my mom stole it to finance her meth habit. When they were both dry, she’d sell her body to come up with the money for her next fix.”

I don’t realize I’m holding my breath until white spots dance in front of my eyes. Slowly, so Gracin won’t notice, I let out the breath and draw in fresh air.

“When I turned ten, my father nearly beat her to death, but she was okay enough to go out and overdose.”

This admission shocks me into a stunned silence as I remember the way he looked at me when he first saw the bruises on my arms. Had he seen his mother in me? Is that why he chose me out of everyone to help him escape?

I clear my throat. “And your dad?”

“He went away for a while, and I went to live with my grandma, who wasn’t much better than the both of them.” He looks at me, his eyes bright and full of mischief now. “Your turn. Tell me something no one knows.”

This one I have to think about, and when I do, I start talking before I can think better of it. “Vic got me pregnant last year. He didn’t know

because I was afraid to tell him about it. He didn't want kids, or at least that was the impression I got, so I was waiting for the right time to tell him." A tear slips down my cheek, and I wipe it away. "I didn't get the chance. I did something . . . I can't remember what it was, but it pissed him off enough that he beat me. I wasn't that far along, but the baby didn't survive. I kept it from him because he didn't deserve to know. As far as I was concerned, he didn't deserve to be that child's father."

When I glance up, I find that the SUV isn't moving anymore, Gracin's pulled it over to the shoulder. We rock to a stop.

"What are you doing?" I ask as he unbuckles and throws up the center console.

He undoes my seatbelt and pulls me across the console, so I'm in his lap.

"What I should have done a long time ago," he says and wraps me in his arms. "It wasn't your fault. It was mine, and I promise I'll do everything I can to make it up to you."

He holds me for a long time. Until the tears dry and my emotions steady.

"The only way you can make it up to me is to make sure they pay for what they did."

His gaze searches my own, and he nods. "They will."

TWENTY SIX

The bar we pull up to an hour later is like a thousand others. It looks more like a shack than an actual place of business, but the dozen or so cars parked in the parking lot and the music blasting from the open windows says it isn't going to close anytime soon. Alcohol is one of those things that will never go out of favor. There will always be someone steeped in misery and in need of something to drown their sorrows.

Before I open the truck door, Gracin puts a hand on my arm and says, "Wait for a second, we should talk before we go in."

I flash him a wobbly smile. "I think we've talked enough for now."

He shakes his head. "I mean about what we do when we get in there."

Oh. That makes sense, so I nod and wait for Gracin to fill me in on the plan.

"If we're lucky, none of Danny's friends will recognize us."

"And if we're not?"

I should be terrified by the prospect, but I can't deny the buzz of anticipation just beneath my skin. I don't know if I'm excited about the idea of revenge, thrilled to be outside and doing something about what happened to me, or if I'm just high on the intensity that's rolling off Gracin in waves. It doesn't matter. I'm itching to get in there.

He doesn't answer my question, but he doesn't have to, the gun he stuffs in a holster underneath his shirt says enough. He hands me another, and I hide it at my waistband.

"Just listen to what I tell you to do, and we'll be fine." I nod again, and he continues. "They won't know who I am here, so I'm going to join the card game, and you're going to sit where I tell you and be quiet until I speak to you, okay?"

I make a zipper motion over my lips. "Whatever you say."

He considers me for a second. "Why can't you be like this all the time?"

“What fun would that be?” I say and then open my door and hop out.

“I’m starting to think this was a bad idea,” he says as we walk to the front door.

The sign over the porch says simply, Ray’s, and the interior is as unassuming as the exterior. Since the only light in the place is coming from the backslash behind the counter and a few ancient-looking fixtures above that must be on a dimmer, the inside is as dark as the inside of a cave. The smell isn’t much better. Dirt, dust, man, and sweat assault my nose, making me have to work hard to keep from wrinkling it in revulsion. Peanut shells crunch underfoot as we cross the room to the bar where two lone men sit sipping their respective drinks. Music plays on low from an old-fashioned jukebox tucked in the corner.

A woman in a skimpy tank top with skin in desperate need of moisturizer sidles up to us and plops down a rag. “What can I getcha?” she asks around the cigarette clutched between her lips.

“Beer, whatever you have on tap, for me,” Gracin replies.

“The same for me,” I say, pleased to find my voice is steady despite my nerves.

Gracin slides a couple crumpled dollar bills across the counter as she slams two chilled glasses down in front of us. I take a sip to keep my hands busy and twist in my swiveling chair to study the rest of the bar. Gracin keeps his back to a corner as he does the same.

There aren’t many patrons this time of day, and those who are here seem to be solely focused on drinking as much alcohol as possible. I don’t see anyone who looks like they would be involved with Danny, but what do I know?

Gracin leans forward and grabs ahold of my chair. It screeches against the scuffed tile floor as he pulls it over to him, so close that I can feel the heat coming from him.

I lift my brow in question, and he leans down and says, “Play along,” in my ear, causing me to shiver then his lips brush against my skin.

His arm goes to the back of my chair, and he props one foot up on the rung underneath. I take a few deep swallows from my beer before leaning against him and glancing up. I’m so close to him that I can see his eyes have flecks of gold in them. His eyes find mine, and before I can react, he leans down to kiss me.

This time, I don't fight him. I don't know if it's the beer, though I only had a few sips, the conversation, or his closeness. The only thing I do know is it isn't a game. Every touch and taste is one hundred percent real.

His hand comes to my hair as he deepens the kiss and angles my head up to take everything he has to give me. My hands come up to grip his shirt, and I whimper against his mouth.

"They just walked in," he says against my lips. "Don't look, and laugh when I tell you to."

He doesn't give me a chance to respond because his fingers tighten in my hair the same way they did that night in my hallway. I'm so lost in the lust of the memory that I almost miss him whisper, "Now," before he pulls away.

Feeling a little drugged, I laugh over the rim of my beer and down the rest to cool the heat rising within me. I wave at the bartender and use the opportunity to look around.

It would be hard not to spot them right away as loud as they're being. There are three of them who saunter across the bar to the pool tables. They're dressed way too nice to be regular patrons, but the way the others' eyes slither over them like they aren't even there makes me think they've been here before and they're trouble.

Gracin toys with my hair idly as he covertly watches the three of them rack the balls and cue up a table. If I weren't as tuned into him as I am, I'd never suspect he isn't focused on me. I remember getting the same hyper-focused impression from him when I realized he wasn't after me just to get some ass. It's like the cogs in his brain are turning at triple speed.

I take another gulp of beer because he may be focused on the men across the bar, but I'm not. Ever since I got another taste of him, my body's been clamoring for more, and all I can think about is getting another. He's situated us so my chair is positioned in the V of his legs. One of his hands rests casually on the bar, and the other is on the back of my chair, twisting around the ends of my hair.

"I love this," he says as he runs his fingers through the length of it.

"Do you?" I ask dryly. "I hadn't noticed."

"Hmm. The first time I saw you with it wrapped up I wanted to take it out and see it all around you. I couldn't stop thinking about it."

"Why?" My voice sounds hoarse to my ears.

He makes a noise in the back of his throat. "I'm not sure. Maybe because you seemed so uptight. I wanted to loosen you up a bit."

"You have a funny way of doing that."

"Worked, didn't it?"

I consider my current state of affairs. My limbs are loose due to my second mug of beer, and my hair is spread out over my shoulders. Even after all that's happened, I'm out of Michigan and free, so to speak, of the relationship that was slowly killing me.

"I didn't mean to kill him," I say, and I realize it's true.

"I don't think the world is any worse off having lost him," Gracin says, his hand coming to rest on my neck underneath my hair.

"Is that why you say you aren't sorry for what happened?"

"Partially," he replies. I wish he would look at me. "But mostly because I can't be sorry that you're alive. I never planned on being a father. I'm not sure I'd make a good one," he says ruefully. "But I do know I don't know what would happen to me if you hadn't made it that day."

My throat closes, and I take another sip of beer to clear the emotion weighing there. Maybe the drunks at the counter are onto something. I feel better than I have in a long, long time. Or maybe it's the comforting feeling of Gracin's hands now whispering along my back.

"It's time," he says and gets to his feet. He holds out a hand for me, and I take it without hesitation.

The three men are finishing their game of pool when Gracin pulls up beside them. I don't have to act drunk because after two beers on a semi-empty stomach and having a low alcohol tolerance to boot, I'm buzzed.

"Sup?" one of the men says. His brows are pinched and wary as he crosses his arms over his chest, his discomfort with Gracin's commanding appearance apparent.

Gracin jerks his chin. "What's the buy-in for tonight's game?" He starts digging in his pockets.

The one who must be the little ringleader says, "Private game, sorry."

The first one's eyes bulge out of his head when Gracin extracts a rather large wad of money from his pocket.

"You're sure?" he asks with a cheeky grin at me. "My lady and I are looking to have some fun tonight. She's never been to a poker game before."

The two guys look to their leader, who favors Danny enough in the color of his skin and bone structure that it makes me think they are distantly related. This one has about thirty pounds on Danny and a rounder face, but the eyes are the same. I'd never forget those eyes.

Gracin wraps an arm around my shoulder and presses his lips to my hair to whisper, "Stay calm, little mouse. Don't worry, I'll take care of it."

I could end it here. Reach for Gracin's gun and put bullets in the three of them. Killing Danny's relative would send a hell of a message, and I like to think I'm getting pretty good at being just as ruthless as the man beside me. But sending a message like that may cause Danny and Sal to go further to ground, so I relax and send him a sunny smile.

Breaking from his grasp, I brace my hands on the pool table to accentuate my cleavage and bat my eyes at them.

"So, what's it gonna be, guys? Are we gonna have some fun tonight or what?"

TWENTY SEVEN

The tension in the room is palpable, and the three guys, who I learned are named Desmond, Cody, and Jasper, are sweating so much their skin reflects in the yellow light from the overhead fixture.

About an hour ago, the bartender, I still haven't gotten her name, led the five of us back to a dark room with a small card table and a couple of chairs. The felt table is worn to the pressed wood underneath and not one of the chairs sits squarely on the ground, but the three men don't seem to care. After Gracin flashed his money, they only had eyes for the pocket where he stashed it.

The first two hands, Gracin sat back in his seat and quietly listened to the three of them talk shit. He let them beat him until they felt comfortable. Then this attention grew much more focused.

It's their tenth hand, and Gracin hasn't been kind to their wallets. I can tell Desmond—the one who looks like Danny—wants to call him out on something, but he wisely bites his tongue. Which is surprising considering how much they have drunk. While they've been downing Jack and Cokes, Gracin's sipped his warm beer and studied them. A panther waiting to attack, all sleek muscles and dark eyes.

"Call," Gracin says and places his bet. "So are you gentlemen from around here?"

I nearly snort into my third beer, which I've been drinking much slower than the first two, but I manage to contain it. He's lulled them into such a false sense of security and plied information from them so subtly I wouldn't believe it if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes.

So far we've learned they visit California and Mexico frequently and that they all have family in the area. I wanted so hard to perk up when they revealed that little piece of information, but I forced a bored expression on my face and pretended like I'd rather be anywhere else in the world. It

wasn't hard because I'd rather be with Danny watching the life drain from his eyes.

"Yeah, they're from around," Desmond says with a side-eyed look at me. He's the only one of the bunch who wasn't completely charmed by my faux airheadedness or wooed by the stacks of cash Gracin kept piling on the winnings in the center of the table.

"Why are you so interested?" he asks Gracin.

"Just making conversation."

When the others aren't looking, he sends me a look under his lashes, and I tense, my body coming alive. Whatever he's planning is going to happen soon.

Desmond doesn't look mollified. If anything, his suspicion grows. "Then I'd suggest you focus more on your cards and less on chitchat."

He places his cards face up on the table. The others do the same with Gracin at the end. Desmond's aces best Gracin's kings, and Gracin sighs.

"Sorry, baby," he says to me. "I didn't mean to ruin our night."

Desmond sends his friends a wordless order, and they surge up from the table, their hands slipping knives from where they've been stowed in pockets.

"You think we didn't know who you were the second we laid eyes on you?" Desmond says. "You must be dumber than you look."

"That's a possibility," Gracin says calmly without bothering to get up. He takes a sip of his beer and casually places the glass back down. "What is it you think you're going to do with those pig stickers?"

"You're coming with us," Desmond says. "Uncle Sal's been looking for you."

"I don't think I can accommodate you," Gracin says and begins tucking his things back into his pockets. "You can give him a message for me, though."

Desmond scoffs. "I'm not giving him shit. Keep your hands where I can see them. Your lady, too." He jerks his chin at me, and the two men circle the table and bracket me on either side.

"You're going to want to leave her alone," Gracin says with forced calm. "Put a hand on her, and I'm gonna have to put my hands on you, only I won't be as nice. All I wanted was a few answers."

"I've got one," Desmond says, "fuck you."

Gracin sighs like he's dealing with a roomful of children instead of a couple of grown men armed with knives. He pulls the gun from its holster and points it at the man on my right, who pales considerably.

"Step away from her," he growls.

"Don't you fucking dare," Desmond snarls as he pulls out a phone. "Shoot one of us, but you won't be able to get us all, and the second you try anything, one of these boys is gonna have a knife to your girl. Don't fuckin' push me."

"You think so?" Gracin asks, and I shouldn't be surprised he's so calm.

"You're damn right I do," Desmond says.

I pull out the gun Gracin had given me and train it on the man on my right and then the knife I kept in my pocket goes to the throat of the man on my left.

"You really think so?" I say and smirk.

While Desmond is staring at me dumbfounded, Gracin lunges with his characteristic feline grace and smashes the gun against Desmond's head. The two on either side of me are too stunned to move for a second, so Gracin advances on Jasper, this time hitting the man with his fist. Gracin gets the same result, and the man crumples to the floor next to his buddy. The third moves faster than Gracin expects and has me in his arms, his knife slicing right through my shirt and into the meat of my upper arm.

I cry out, and Gracin shouts, stunning the third guy enough that I can drop to the floor and out of his reach without getting hurt. By the time I scramble away and climb back to my feet, Gracin has him in a chokehold. The man bucks, trying to get free, but it's almost laughable. A moment later, he joins his friends in la-la land.

"Fuck," Gracin says as he takes in the shallow slice in my arm. I start to protest when he takes off his outer shirt to press it against my wound, but I'm cut short. "Fuck, baby, I'm sorry."

"It's fine. I'm okay."

"I shouldn't have let you come," he says.

"Gracin!" I say sharply. When he looks at me, I admonish, "I'm fine. Let's finish what we came here to do, okay?"

"Keep pressure on the wound, and I'll take care of these guys and bring the car around back. Don't move anywhere." He turns and takes two steps before thinking better of it and coming back to my side. "I fucking mean it. Don't move from this spot or I swear to God . . ."

As soon as he leaves, I slump against the chair behind me, feeling woozy and punch drunk. The men at my feet twitch, but they don't rouse. I keep the gun in my hand just in case, but no one wakes.

Gracin comes through the back door and helps me down the short hallway to the exit before tucking me in the front seat of his SUV and disappearing back inside. Yes, I can walk perfectly fine on my own, but again, I keep my mouth shut. I'm not sure what he does with two of the guys, but when he comes back out, he is dragging Desmond behind him.

Once the Danny look-alike is tied up and tucked into the back of the SUV, Gracin tears out of the parking lot, and I grip the oh shit handle to keep from falling into his lap.

"We're fine," I say. "We got what we wanted."

He isn't listening to me, of course. Instead, he has his cell phone pressed to his ear. "Get Doctor Haversham. I don't care if he's on call for the goddamn Pope, I want him at the house in an hour, or he'll be hearing from me personally." He slams the phone into the cup holder, and I try to keep from smiling.

"You realize I'm a nurse," I say to him. "I can probably take care of this by myself. It's really not that deep at all. Just a couple stitches."

"We're going to have the doctor look at it, end of discussion," he says, his tone implacable.

"Fine, but I want to know whenever you get any information out of frat boy here." I jerk my finger over my shoulder to Desmond, who's still out cold.

Gracin grunts.

"Seriously, Gracin. I'm fine."

"I'll believe that when Haversham gives you the all-clear."

Both of his hands are clutching the steering wheel for dear life, and sympathy cuts through my frustration at his insistence that I see a doctor. I press a hand to his arm like I wanted to do when we were driving earlier.

"Gracin," I say tentatively.

"Don't . . . just don't."

I sigh and sit back in the seat. It's going to be a long drive back.

As soon as we pull into his garage, two men stride to the SUV to deal with Desmond and Gracin hustles me up to my room where Haversham is already waiting.

"I told him it wasn't a big deal," I say to Doctor Haversham.

The doctor glances from Gracin to me, and I know he won't be on my side on the matter. "Let's get you cleaned up. Shouldn't be more than a few stitches."

I shoot Gracin a look that says I told you so, and he scowls.

The doctor cleans the cut on my bicep, which is only a couple of inches long and not very deep. He numbs it with a local and begins stitching with efficient movements. I ache to ask Gracin what he's done with Desmond, but I assume what I have to say is better left until the doc is gone.

Fifteen minutes later, Gracin shakes the doctor's hand. "Thank you so much for coming at such short notice."

Dr. Haversham gives Gracin a small smile. "Anytime, Mr. Kingsley. I hope not to see you for a while, though." With that, the doctor closes the door behind him, leaving me alone with Gracin.

"You should get some rest."

"Rest?" I'm disappointed that he doesn't want to stay. "What about Desmond?"

The soft expression on his face hardens. "I'll handle him."

"And what am I supposed to do now?"

"Rest," he repeats and guides me back to the bed. "I'll come get you if I learn anything from Desmond."

I do as he says only because the wound in my arm is throbbing so much it makes it hard to concentrate on anything other than lying still.

The next morning when I wake, it's to the sound of Vic's voice.

TWENTY EIGHT

I immediately, I shrink back into the pillows, not realizing where I am or what's going on. All I know is the man who abused me is near, and I have to do everything I can to get away. I stumble out of bed and fall into a crouch, paying no mind to the pain in my arm. I only have enough focus for the fear coursing through me.

A cold sweat dots my brow, and it takes agonizing seconds for me to realize Vic isn't in the room with me. I wipe a hand across my face and strain to hear the sound again.

The room and hallway beyond the yawning door are dark except for the thinnest glow of light coming from the far end. I listen to the sound again, and my heart stops beating right there in my chest.

"Mrs. Victor Emerson! How about that, ladies and gentlemen? Isn't she beautiful? Tell me she isn't the most beautiful woman in the world. I'm a lucky man, I tell you." The background is garbled, but I'd recognize the voice anywhere.

Confused, still thrumming with panic and disoriented from sleep, I stumble into the hallway and follow the sound of my dead husband's voice. I wonder if maybe I'm having some sort of dream induced by the adrenaline from earlier because I can't feel a thing, and the world around me wavers.

The light is coming from under the door across the hall from the monitor room. The door opens easily, revealing a set of stairs that descend to what I can only assume is the basement. I move down them as silent as I can and freeze at the bottom when the voice comes again.

"Come here, sweetie. Let's show you off!"

I'm breathing too fast, and sweat is streaming down my face. Blood drips from the wound on my arm, but I don't care. I turn the corner and stagger to a stop. The basement is essentially bare save for a small table with a box placed on top. The box whirrs and snaps and then light shoots out and spills onto a figure strapped to a chair. But it isn't the bound man

facing away from the wall who captures my attention. It's the video splashing across the crisp white drywall behind him.

Vic, who is dressed in a sleek tuxedo, holds up his hand, and the crowd around him cheers. Dazedly, my eyes travel to the person next to him. Me. This is my and Vic's wedding video. I can't tear my eyes away from the replica of his face. As I watch us move into the crowd at the small reception I find myself shaking, my teeth chattering.

I'd been so different then. You can see it in my carefree smile and my adoring glances at Vic as he parades me around the restaurant. I don't know how long I watch, entranced and unable to tear myself away. I watch until the video comes to an end and the screen goes black, which shocks me out of my stupor.

As the projector starts the video over from the beginning, I shake my head to clear it. Vic's voice fills my ears again, and I try to block it out by focusing on my surroundings. I take a few hesitant steps toward the shadowed figure. He's strapped to a chair in front of the projector and has a black silk bag fastened over his head. When I'm close enough to reach him, I extend a hand and snag the material with the tips of my fingers, partially fearing I'll find Vic's face underneath. I can't help but feel like this is some sort of fucked-up gift as I pull it off to reveal the man beneath.

As his face comes into view, the black hood drops to the floor, and I take several rapid steps backward, my mouth gaping open in horror. It's not Vic underneath, but it is another man who stars in my frequent nightmares. Andrew, Danny's right-hand man from the warehouse. Only he looks nothing like the man from my memory. If he'd stuck his face in a blender, it would be an improvement. The skin on one-half droops in bloody, matted ribbons and the other half is so swollen his lips have cracked from the strain. If I hadn't spent the past few weeks replaying what he did to me in the warehouse, I wouldn't have recognized him.

I backpedal to get as far away as I can, and I slam into a hard wall behind me. I turn, hands up and ready to defend myself as I dry heave. When I see it's Gracin behind me and not an actual wall, despite what we've been through together, the fear I've been suffering through since I woke up to Vic's voice dissolves, and I relax.

"What's going on?" I ask him, but he doesn't answer. He just raises the tumbler of scotch he's holding and takes a sip. "How did he get here?"

“Gracin?” I fight the tremors attempting to consume me. Again, the glass lifts to his lips, but this time, he drains it and then moves to pour himself more. I brush the hair out of my face and try to piece together what’s happening. Apparently, Desmond talked. I don’t want to think about how Gracin got him to spill Andrew’s location, but he must have nabbed Andrew and brought him here while I was sleeping.

“What the fuck?” Andrew says, and I spin in time to see him open his eyes. He squints against the bright lights, and then his face dawns with clarity. “Fucking shit,” he whispers before struggling against his restraints. His voice is warbled from the severe beating and his swollen lips making it hard for him to speak. “Let me go.”

I turn, expecting Gracin to answer him, but he merely keeps his eyes on me, takes a long drink from the tumbler of scotch, and shifts just enough to reveal the table next to him. The man in the chair must notice it too because he starts struggling more violently.

I’m back in the warehouse. My arms burn with phantom pain and vicious needle pricks ignite in my arm. My legs burn, and my stomach cramps.

There are knives, a torch like the one they used on me, rubber mallets, whips, a baseball bat, and even a gun. It’s all laid out in a neat line, waiting for someone to pick their poison.

“What is all this?” I ask Gracin, trying to keep my response calm.

Again, with the silence as he takes a seat in the chair off in the corner of the room. I pick up the knife, intending to cut the guy free if only so he’ll shut the fuck up until I can figure out what the hell Gracin’s game is.

“Please let me go, please. We never intended to hurt you. We were just supposed to rough you up a little until you talked. Just cut me loose, and I won’t say anything to Sal, I promise. Not a fuckin’ word. Just let me go.”

I start in Andrew’s direction, and then the wedding video stops and restarts again, and Vic’s face flashes over the wall. I doubt it’s a coincidence that Vic’s image aligns exactly with the man who beat me bloody. The knife falls to the floor, and my body goes cold. Memories from the night they beat me and ghosts from my life with Vic flood my thoughts so violently that I have to squeeze my eyes shut to keep from crying out in shock from the maelstrom of emotions.

“Shit, lady. Are you fuckin’ crazy? Please just let me loose. Just kick the knife over here before he does something crazy. Please.”

Over Andrew's shouts, I hear Vic inside my head.

"I don't want you associating with that inmate again, do you hear me? McNair and Summers couldn't stop smirking at me when they found me. You humiliated me."

Tears track down my cheeks, and I clap my hands over my ears for a buffer against the noise, but it doesn't drown out the whisper of Vic's voice inside my head. If anything, it makes it loud enough that I want to claw at my ears.

I give a passing thought to Gracin, but I don't doubt he did this for a reason, however fucked up that reason may be. I've stopped trying to understand him. All I need to do is get the guy on the chair out of here, and then I can leave. Isn't that what Gracin promised, after all? Once everything is over with I can leave.

With that in mind, I reach for the knife and straighten, blocking out the sound of Vic from the projector as best I can. A quick look shows Gracin still lounging in his chaise, watching, waiting. What the hell for? I don't even know, but I ignore him, too. Knife in hand, I cross to the man in the chair and kneel to undo his feet.

I'm doing fine, I get both feet undone, and then I get a closer look at his face. That's when everything goes to hell. I freeze right beside him with the knife in my hand. I remember his face staring down at me while he, Danny, and the others brutalized me.

I must take too long to work through the rush of hate and fury because a second later, he shouts, "Untie me, you fucking slut, or I'm gonna beat you so fucking bloody, I'll have to wash what's left down the drain like I did your fucking baby!"

I lose my fucking mind.

With an inhuman scream, I shove at the plain wooden chair, and it topples over. The guy emits a horse shout and bucks against the concrete as he tries to right himself before I get to him. I stalk back to the table, setting the knife down on the floor out of Andrew's reach, and take the baseball bat. He releases a choking noise that cuts off in the middle as I use the bat like a golf club and hit him as hard as I can in the stomach. I crouch down as he wheezes to regain his breath.

"How do you like that, you fucking slut? Does it feel good? Maybe I should keep you here for a couple of days. Make you piss yourself so you

can see what it's like, hmm? Maybe I'll beat you unconscious and watch what's left of you go down the drain for a change."

Mindless, head full of screams and horror, blood and death, I drop the bat on the floor next to the knife and stand. My eyes fall on the rubber mallet. When I return to the man's side, I swing my hand back and begin pummeling his upper body, completely unaware of his screams and pleas. I go to the place in my head where they beat me, where those memories have been locked since the day Gracin rescued me. I go to the place where Vic brutalized me repeatedly until I can't differentiate one from the other.

"Why did you hurt me like this, Vic?" I scream. "Why did you take our baby away from me?"

When he's no longer screaming and I'm out of breath, the mallet falls to the side, and I drop to my knees. I sit there for a few seconds, numb and emotionally wrecked, my head bowed as I try to drag my scattered soul back from the brink. I take a deep breath, intending to get to my feet, go to Gracin, and leave the no-name bastard to whatever fate he deserves. The man next to me delivers a swift kick to my side, knocking me over. My head bounces off the concrete floor, and while I'm disoriented, he manages to get the knife and free himself from the remaining restraints.

I dodge as he swipes it through the air and miss it's hissing edge by mere centimeters. There's a swipe of a chair as I hear Gracin get to his feet, but I don't have time to worry about what he's doing. My fingers brush against the mallet, and I pick it up, swinging it in front of my face without thought for its destination. It strikes flesh and bone with an echoing crunch, and the man falls to the floor, silent and still and I crumble to the ground in a heap of desolation.

I want to cry, but my insides are hollow. I want to scream, but I no longer have a voice. I want to rage and rage against the man who orchestrated my demise, but there is no anger on his behalf. There is only a sense of peace. An exorcism of demons. The projector shuts off, leaving me in darkness, and then Gracin's arms are around me, soft and hard and warm and cold at the same time. Somehow, he is everything I need, even if it's contradictory.

"Do you want this?" he asks. When he said he'd handle Desmond, I never thought he meant he'd use him to start tracking down the men who hurt me. At least, not with this in mind.

A sob bursts from my lips. “What?” Why in God’s name would I want this?

“Tell me. Do you want this?” He brushes the hair away from my face and tucks it behind my ears. “This is what my life is like, Tessa. It’s brutal. It’s bloody. Just like me. I’m a monster in disguise, little mouse. Is that what you want?”

“Gracin, please, I can’t.”

His lips take mine in a violent kiss, and I lean into him, needing his steadiness to assuage the broken parts of me. My hands go to his shoulders, and I whimper against the brutal thrust of his tongue.

“You can. Now tell me.”

“Yes,” I shout. “Yes, I want you. I hate you, but I love you. I haven’t stopped thinking about you since the day we met. You’re in my dreams. I see you everywhere when you’re not around. Despite everything you’ve done to me, I want you, damn it. Does that make you happy? Why did you make me do this? Why did you bring him here? Did you know I’d hurt him?”

“I brought you here because you can’t be with a man like me and expect to live happily ever after. There isn’t a part of my life that isn’t as dark and brutal as what went on in this room. But the truth is, I didn’t make you do anything. The truth is, you and I aren’t as different as you think.” I start to protest, but he kisses me quiet. “That isn’t a bad thing, no matter what you think. That man? He was a piece of shit. Lower than the worst man you’ve ever met. Lower than Vic. He deserved everything he got.”

“I just want to forget about all of it. I want to finish everything with Sal and start over, pretend none of it ever happened.” I wrap my arms so tightly around Gracin that my bicep screams in pain, but I don’t care. “But first, I think I need to sleep. I’m not drawing judgments about anything, but I’m exhausted. Can we go to bed?” I pause for a second. “Together? I just don’t want to sleep alone. Not tonight.”

TWENTY NINE

After a short conversation with one of his bodyguards instructing them to get rid of the body, Gracin takes me back up to my room. It says a lot that dead bodies no longer faze me. He leads me right to the shower. Neither of us speak. I'm not sure I can find the words to articulate what happened, so I don't try.

I lean against the counter as Gracin turns the shower on and disrobes in front of me. He turns and helps me out of my clothes, but it doesn't feel sexual. It seems like he almost cares about me, in his twisted way. I don't try to muddle it out because there's no use trying to understand him.

He helps me into the shower and pulls me against his chest. I don't fight it. I can't. I'm not sure I'd be able to even if I had the presence of mind or the energy. As I relax against his chest, he carefully washes my hair, and lathers up my body before dropping to his knees to inspect the scars on my legs. The puckered flesh doesn't have much sensation, but I shiver anyway when he presses his lips to each one.

"No one will ever hurt you like this again." He looks up from his crouched position with a devilish smile. "Except maybe me."

I shiver despite the hot spray. "You won't hurt me," I say.

"No?" he asks as he gets back to his feet to rinse my hair.

"No."

"What makes you say that?"

"You could have hurt me when you found me in L.A." I yawn and snuggle closer against him as his hands rub up and down my back. "I wondered why you didn't come after me when you found me."

"I had things to take care of before I came for you. I needed a house and to settle-up with my employers. I didn't think they'd find you so fast or I would have come and gotten you sooner."

"And the video?" I ask sleepily. "How did you get it?"

Once I'm clean, he shuts off the water and guides me out onto a towel. He follows closely behind and wraps me up in one to dry me off. As he's helping me dress, he says, "When I got back to the house and you weren't there, I took it to have something of yours. Something that reminded me of you. There wasn't much, so I had to settle with that. I wasn't sure if I was going to come for you, but I also couldn't let it be the last time I ever saw you."

"And A-Andrew?"

"Desmond and I had a talk. He informed me where I could find Sal and Danny as well as Andrew." He tips my face up for a kiss. "There's no way in hell I'd ever let a man do what they did to you and let them get away with it."

"But why the video? Why have me do it?"

"So you know you're capable of fighting back," he says.

"I think you proved that," I say dryly.

He kisses me again, and then we fall into bed without another word and sleep until just before dawn. When I wake, I find him already dressed, brushing the hair back from my face. I know without even saying a word that having him is inescapable. With a murmured apology, I slide from underneath the covers and make quick work of the bathroom and brushing my teeth. I return to find him on his feet prowling around the room.

He hadn't been back here since I first arrived, and he looks at it now, examining the things I've accumulated with blatant curiosity. The books I've taken from the library but never read, flowers from the garden, and a set of weights I liberated from the gym.

"I always wondered what you were doing here when I wasn't home."

I study him as he picks up a dried flower and twirls it by the stem. "Why?"

He looks back at me. "You fascinate me. Ever since that first day, you've been under my skin, and I can't seem to be rid of you."

"Do you want to be?" I ask.

"No," he says without hesitation, moving to stand right in front of me, his green eyes as stormy as a summer morning and just as vibrant.

"Tessa," he says softly and then groans before taking my head in his hands to press a savage kiss on my lips.

He practically vibrates around me as my fingers wrap around his wrists. He's barely restrained as his mouth works mine over. There's nothing

seductive or sweet about the moment. It's an over-taking, a siege, and I surrender, allowing him to lay me back on the bed with a sigh.

I don't care that it's wrong or that he's a bad man or that he's all the things I know I should run from. All I care about is he makes me feel more alive than I've ever felt in my life. With him, I feel like I truly live, like I can breathe.

I don't know when I forgave him for what happened to me, for what he made me do, but I have. And now the hunger to have him, to take him, has returned with a viciousness that consumes me.

"Do you trust me?" he asks.

I nod beneath him, silent and expectant, aching for his touch. At my answer, his eyes flutter closed. Careful of my arm, he helps me out of my shirt, and his eyes feast on my bared flesh. He meets my gaze as he drops to pepper my skin with soft, slow kisses. I grip his hair with one of my hands and arch into his touch.

"You want me to stop?" he says against my throat. "You want to leave?"

I open my mouth, and he fills it with his tongue instead of allowing me to answer. I forget what I was going to say and suck him deeper inside.

His hands find my pants, and he jerkily undoes the button and rips the zipper down. Fingers dip beneath my waistband and tease me, pulling a cry from my lips and my head back into the pillows.

Deprived of my mouth, he goes to my ear and suckles the sensitive spot there. I can no more help my response to him than I can stop the sun from rising. My gasp of pleasure fills the room as my pussy pulses with heat and my breasts grow heavy and my nipples tighten into hard points. Gracin growls his approval as I grow wet between my thighs. He lingers there, his fingers maddeningly efficient as they toy circles around my clit. I give a little whimper as he flirts around the part of me aching to be filled the most.

"Don't stop," I say when I remember how to speak. "Please, Gracin. Please stay."

At his name, he withdraws his hand, and I squeak out a protest and shoot into a sitting position. When I realize he's only getting to his feet to undress, I quiet and lie back for the show.

God, he has an amazing body. It's unreal. And for now, it's all mine. As he unbuttons his shirt, I drink my fill, my eyes feasting on each bared inch

of skin until there's a gap in the center of the material. He stops then to untie his boots and kick them off. They land somewhere under the bed with heavy thuds.

Unwilling to be a casual observer any longer, I get to my knees and scoot toward him, lifting my hands and resting them on his shoulders. He stills underneath my touch, like a lion allowing a human to pet it. My eyes glued to the action, I slip the shirt off his shoulders and bare his chest to my view.

"I can't believe you got piercings," I say incredulously. Unable to keep my hands away from him, I lift them to touch the twin metal hoops and then rethink it, splaying them on his abs instead. "Do they still hurt?"

"I had them before," he replies jerkily. "I got them put back in after Blackthorne, and yes, they do still hurt. It'll be another couple of months before they heal completely."

"Oh," I say, my response breathy.

"If that intimidates you, you're going to be in for a real surprise in a few minutes."

I don't comprehend his meaning since he isn't pierced anywhere else . .

I swallow thickly, my imagination running wild as my eyes drop to his growing erection.

"Oh," I repeat and choke down my anticipation and excitement.

He draws my hands down to his pants, which he'd unbuttoned at some point. My mouth waters as I move until my legs are dangling off the bed and drag his jeans over his hips and down his thighs. He helps me get them off the rest of the way, and then I focus on the thick length of his cock underneath the black boxer briefs. There's a patch near the tip that's darker than the rest, and I bring my mouth to it, needing to taste him, even if it's through a barrier of cotton. As I trace the line of his dick, I glance up to find those hungry eyes burning with intensity.

He wasn't lying about the surprise. Even with a layer of cotton separating us, I can feel the hard knot at the top of his cock that must be another piercing. With the scent of him, hot and musky, filling my nose, I lift my hands to his hips and drag his briefs down, baring him to my eyes for the first time.

The sight causes my mouth to water, and I take him in both hands to explore. I've never seen a more beautiful dick in my whole life. And there

isn't another way to describe it. He's perfect, thick and long, flushed with color. The head glistens with a drop of pre-cum, and just behind it is the piercing. It's situated vertically and canted slightly forward. There are two beads, one larger at the top and another, slightly smaller on the bottom. I imagine it inside me, and I have to squeeze my thighs together as I bring him to my lips to taste.

Not expecting it, his hands fly to my hair. "Jesus Christ," is all he can get out before my tongue licks away his arousal.

I take him into my mouth and moan as his flavor bathes my tongue. Needing more, wanting to drive him as mindless as he'd driven me all these weeks, I take him as deep as I can. The barbell takes some getting used to, but soon, I catch my rhythm and focus more on how he reacts to everything than the feeling of the barbell against the roof of my mouth.

His hands in my hair guide me until they fist and force me to stop. I release him, and he drags me to my feet to take my mouth with his. His cock sandwiched between us, I arch as high as I can get, but he's too tall for me. I'm gasping by the time he relinquishes my mouth.

"Lie back," he says, sending shivers through me.

I do as he says, and he helps me out of my jeans and panties as I unclasp my bra and throw it to the floor. His gaze roams over me, and his teeth run over his bottom lip until he says, "Spread your legs," in a voice so commanding, I can't help but obey.

I hook them on the edge of the bed, and he places his hands on my knees as he gets to his own in front of me. When I feel his breath against my folds, I throw my head back in abandon. His huge hands grip my hips and he scoots me closer to the edge before tilting me up to meet his mouth.

If I thought he was good at kissing, he's infinitely more talented at licking pussy. I think I call out, I think I moan, I don't even know because I experience everything through a white haze of sensation.

Oh my God.

I don't know if I'm a bad person for enjoying this. I certainly can't be a good one. Morality and right and wrong seem far less important when he torments me with long strokes from his tongue.

The room fills with the wet, sloppy sounds of the thorough tongue-fucking he gives me, and I only want more, crave more, need more. His mouth comes back to my clit, and I rock my hips against each flick of his tongue. I'm unabashed, unashamed, and unfettered. I didn't realize how

much I needed this until the orgasm hovers just beneath the surface. As plaintive cries escape my throat, he increases the intensity until I'm either certain I'm going pass out from its potency or succumb to it.

I reach a fever pitch and then he slides two fingers inside the source of my wetness, and it completely redefines what it means to feel pleasure. He wraps one hand around my thigh to reach the folds of my pussy. Without pausing, he spreads them apart and fastens his lips over my clit as he thrusts his fingers in and out. The combination of his mouth and his touch and the promise of his cock prove to be too much, and I clutch around him with a soundless scream.

His assault gentles as he allows me to come down from the aftershocks. You'd think a violent orgasm would allow for a pause, but it only whets my appetite, and as he gets to his feet, I scoot back on the bed as he crouches over me on all fours.

"You don't know how long I've wanted to do that," he says. His mouth takes mine roughly, and I taste myself on his lips, which swirls the memory of the first time we were together.

"Inside me," I say when I can catch my breath. "I need you inside me."

"That wasn't enough for you?" he asks.

"Not at all," I say.

"Greedy." He leans his weight back on his knees between my legs and looks down at me. "Let me look at you," he says. "I don't want to rush this time."

My head thrashes against the pillow. "Later," I say, but he shakes his head.

"Don't worry, I'll give you what you need."

I feel the slightly colder metal of the barbell first and then the long, heavy weight of his cock as he thrusts it along my wet folds. My eyes roll into the back of my head, and I give up trying to plead with him. He wants to torture me. I don't have the willpower inside me to resist. He punishes me with pleasure, which is akin to pain.

All I can focus on is the cool glide of the bead as it gathers moisture from my center and slicks over the ultra-sensitive bud of my clit. My hips jerk each time it reaches the apex of its journey, and my hands twist the sheets into ribbons. He grips my thighs underneath my knees and spreads them, lifting my hips to attain just the right angle to torment me. His cock

continues to glide against me, tempting us both when it presses against my opening for the barest of seconds.

I'm frantic for him. My brain is incapable of rational thought. I'm powerless to change the angle, to cant my hips to take him inside me because his grip is resolute. This, like most things, is on his terms, at his pace, but it feels so good I can't complain other than to beg for more, more, more.

Then he releases my legs and covers me. Both of our gazes focus on what's happening between us as his cock drags over me one last time. The head of him presses against my entrance, and he groans as I contract around the tip helplessly. The bead of the barbell catches, and he drops down to his forearms, his frame shaking with tension.

"What is it?" I ask breathlessly.

"Condom," he says through gritted teeth. "But I don't know if I can move right now."

He accentuates his statement with a flex of his hips as he pulls back slightly before pushing forward until my body accepts him just past the point of his piercing. I bare my throat to him on a soundless groan. I can feel the metal inside me, and I ache to have it move so much that it steals the words right from me.

It's a long while before I can catch my breath enough to say, "I'm on the pill. Doc gave it to me after I—after everything."

"Thank fucking God," he says and drops his head to my shoulder. "I'm clean. As you know," he adds with a chuckle.

"Good because I don't think I could let you go right now."

He gets back to his knees and brings my legs up to his shoulders. I open my mouth to ask him to come back down and then he flexes his hips and the bead of his piercing drags along a spot inside me that has me seeing stars. I grab for his hands on my legs, scrabbling for something to hold on to because I'm afraid when I break over the edge I'll be in a free-fall. He clasps my hands with his where he holds onto my legs and then all I can do is hold on for dear life.

His strokes start out slow and measured, and judging by the look on his face, if he moved any faster, this wouldn't last long for either of us. I honestly don't give a damn either way because each one lights me up and sends me tumbling down into a mini-orgasm so intense I don't know where one ends and the next begins. When he leans down to kiss me, I clutch at

his shoulders, letting all the emotions I've been holding back for months roll through me. They are chased by an explosion of pleasure that tightens me like a vice around his cock, around his body.

I rouse from a stupor as he flips me over like a rag-doll and positions me, ass-up in front of him. I only have time to clutch at the sheets before he slams into me, working me back into another orgasm . . . and then another before he finally explodes inside me.

He rouses me several times during the night with one word. "Again." And I open my arms, my legs, and my heart to him because what we have is dangerous and volatile, but it's also inevitable.

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THIRTY

The bed is empty. There's only a note on the nightstand that says, "Be back later. -G." Then a hastily added scribble, as if he knew what I would be thinking and wanted to head me off. "Don't come after me."

I've seen what he can do, but that doesn't mean he can take care of everything on his own. Especially not after what happened last night. The son of a bitch should know better.

Part of the blood to be spilled is mine for what they stole from me, so it infuriates me that he would leave without me, knowing how I feel about the whole matter. Not that he gives a damn.

I throw off the sheets and dress quickly and quietly. The gun Gracin gave me for our outing at the bar is still in the nightstand drawer where I left it. I retrieve it and stow it in the waistband of my jeans. The remnants from the night we spent together twinge and ache, but I ignore them as I peer out the bedroom door. Now that I know my way to the control room, I plan to slip through to it and take one of the sets of keys I saw hanging on the wall. There's no way in hell he's going to do this without me. If I have to hog-tie everyone in this whole house, I'm going to find him.

As luck would have it, Marie appears before I can descend the stairs.

"Where do you think you're going?" she asks.

I give a passing thought to lying to her, but I swear the woman can read minds. "I'm going to find Gracin," I say matter-of-factly. "I don't care if you're ninety, if you try to stop me, I will knock you on your ass."

She harrumphs and crosses her arms across her chest. "It's your funeral," she says.

When I'm reasonably sure she won't follow, I increase my speed as I try to retrace my steps to the control room Gracin showed me. If I can just get to one of the vehicles and get away from his house, I'll figure out a way to track him. There has to be GPS of some sort, if not tied to his cell phone,

then certainly in the car itself. Not that I have any earthly idea how to do something like that, but I'm not helpless. I can figure it out.

When I reach the security room, the same two bodyguards who were there the day before look up at me simultaneously.

"Where is he keeping Desmond?" I ask without preamble. "And don't fuck with me right now."

They share a glance. "Mr. Kingsley informed us—"

"I don't give a damn about what Mr. Kingsley said. Either you tell me where he went or I will find a way to get to him myself." I pull the gun from my waistband, and point it at the guy on the left. "Now, either one of you starts talking or I start shooting things."

Ten minutes later, I pull the truck out of its parking space. There should be some remorse for threatening them, but there isn't. I punch in the address the guards provided and consider Gracin's words from the night before. I'm not powerless. I can take care of myself. I've killed a man, wounded others, and evaded the police. I'm sure according to the United States government, I'm a criminal and a fugitive. No better than what I considered Gracin when we first met. Then it makes me wonder if I was ever the good person in this story. Maybe I'm not. Maybe I'm the goddamned villain.

Sal, it turns out, isn't far away. He keeps a house on the California-Mexico border for when he deals with his Mexican contacts and the cartel for drug shipments. According to Gracin, they hadn't had business dealings for a long time, so that's why it took him a long time to track him down. I don't care as long as I make him pay for what he took from me.

The house, which only takes about forty-five minutes to get to, is a sprawling contemporary monstrosity. The type of place that screams wealth and privilege. Well, it would, if the front lawn didn't look like a gangland massacre. There are dead bodies everywhere. The guardhouse blocking the driveway is smoking, and the front gate has been mowed down.

Call me crazy, but the sight makes my heart go pitter-pat, and my girly parts light up like the Fourth of July. Being the person on the other side of Gracin's homicidal rage may be scary, but being the reason why he's seeking revenge makes my twisted little insides melt just a little bit. I pull up the drive, taking care not to run over any of the bodies before pulling to a stop beside Gracin's SUV.

With my gun gripped between my hands, I crouch down and survey the front of the house for movement. Finding none, I slink along the cars

toward the front door. I don't hear anything inside, and for a moment, I think I got here too late, but then the shouting begins.

I hear Gracin's voice and one that sounds like Sal's. Fury burns hot in my belly and cancels out any of the fear I may have had. The front door is wide open, and I peer through, allowing my eyes to adjust to the dim interior.

A gun to my temple stops me from taking even a single step inside.

"What the fuck are you doing here?" Gracin says as his body comes up behind me.

"What the hell do you think?" I hiss back, completely aware of the gun he's pressing into my kidney. "You can drop the gun, you know."

"Didn't I tell you to stay at the house?"

"Since when do I fucking listen to you?" I return hotly. "You knew I didn't want to be left behind again!"

The gun drops, and he forces me around a corner into an alcove off the main hallway. "I thought after last night you'd understand why I can't have you here."

"I don't give a damn about what you want, Gracin," I say. "Did you really think sex would change that?"

There's a scuffling sound down the hall, and we both turn at the same time.

"We'll talk about this later," he says against my hair. "Do you have your gun?" I hold it up and give a scathing look, which causes him to chuckle. Guess I hadn't hidden it after all. "Good girl."

Despite my irritation, I smile back at him.

"Stay behind me," he says, "and for god's sake, don't do anything stupid. I didn't work this whole time to keep you safe just for you to get yourself killed."

We're edging around the corner and back into the empty hallway when Sal's voice calls out. "Might as well get this over with now, King. It isn't like you to drag it out."

Gracin stills in front of me before resuming our trek down the hall. When he doesn't answer, Sal continues, "Fine, have it your way. I was going to negotiate with you, but if you're going to be unreasonable, we'll have to settle matters some other way."

I highly doubt what Sal has in mind for us has anything to do with negotiations. If he had the balls to torture one woman just to get to Gracin

so he could mete out retribution for his son, there wouldn't be anything stopping him from killing us both the moment he lays eyes on us. Our only chance is to get to him first. Then no one will be after Gracin, and I can finally move on from everything. From Vic, from what they did to me. I don't know if that means moving on with Gracin or without him, but I guess that's something we'll both have to figure out when our lives aren't also on the line.

We turn a corner that leads to an open living area. Sal waits there with two other men—the same two nameless ones who were there that night with Danny. The devil himself is also there, and based on the vicious expression on his face, I'm surprised he doesn't growl the moment he sets eyes on us.

My finger twitches on the side of the trigger, but I force myself to stay calm when I meet Danny's murderous gaze.

"Sal," Gracin says as he steps down. His casual, loose limb stride belies the concentration he levels on Sal.

"King. I'm sorry we had to meet again under such circumstances."

"No you're not," Gracin says.

Sal shrugs and smiles, unrepentant, and then turns his attention to me. "And this lovely lady. We meet again. I have to tell you, King. This one is special. It isn't every day someone survives Danny and lives to tell about it."

"What do you want, Sal?" Gracin asks; his tone makes it evident he has no patience for Sal's prevaricating.

"I want you dead," he says bluntly. He turns and meets my eyes. "And I'm willing to offer your cute little girlfriend her freedom to start over if she does the deed for me."

I don't let my expression betray anything. "That's a nice offer," I begin, "but it doesn't cover what I want from you."

Sal raises a brow, and his lips twitch. "What exactly is that?"

Danny freezes, and I turn to him with a vicious smile on my face. "Him," I say with a nod in his direction. "Dead."

Sal considers for a moment, and Danny, who doesn't miss the pause, comes to life with a roar. Gracin jumps in front of me, and the next thing I know, the sound of a gunshot fills the room.

THIRTY ONE

I watch Gracin jerk with the force of the bullet and then fall to the floor, lifeless.

Everything stops.

My breathing.

My heartbeat.

My world . . .

Everything.

Please don't be dead. Please don't be dead. Just hold on for a few more minutes.

"You son of a bitch," I grind out through clenched teeth as my gun trains on Danny. The single brain cell between his ears must tell him to be scared because his face drains of all color.

"You're a feisty one, aren't you, *cara mia*?" Sal croons.

I can't tell from my vantage point if the blood coming from Gracin's body is from a fatal shot or just a flesh wound, but I don't dare take my eyes off Danny for fear that I may be next.

"What do you want?"

Sal crosses the room as Danny and his friends keep their guns trained on me. "What do I want?" he says as he takes out a decanter of whiskey and pours himself a healthy measure. "I have what I want. The King is dead, or he will be soon. He died knowing his woman was in my hands, her fate to be determined by me. He died knowing how I felt when he murdered my son. Children are everything to me, to my family. King's employers knew that. He was supposed to be off limits." Spit flies from his mouth. "King should have known better."

"If he didn't know it then, he knows it now, you asshole," I shout.

"Spare me the theatrics," Sal says with the wave of a hand.

Danny takes a step closer. "I'll take care of her for you, boss."

“Don’t you fucking dare,” I say to him, spit flying. Danny’s agitated expression is too animated. Too nervous just under the surface. “Wait. You didn’t tell him, did you?”

Sal takes another drink and sets the glass down on the bar. “Tell me what?”

“She’s fuckin’ crazy, boss,” Danny interrupts. “Delusional. She’d have to be to be a whore for King. Who can sleep with a psycho like that without medication?”

Sal stops him with a raised hand. To me, he says, “Tell me what?”

I lift my chin. “I was eight weeks pregnant with King’s baby when your guys picked me up.” I look at Danny with all the loathing and hate I can muster. “I wasn’t pregnant anymore when they were through with me.”

My words fall like stones to the bottom of a lake, the ripples shifting and affecting everything in their wake. Danny’s head drops, and he turns to Sal with his hands held up in defense.

“I didn’t know,” he says miserably.

Sal’s rage billows across his face, turning it a florid red. “You fucking idiot,” he says. “If you weren’t family, I’d put a bullet in your head myself. We don’t murder children.”

“Let me save you the trouble,” Gracin rasps from the floor, making all eyes in the room swing to him just as a second shot thunders through the air around us.

A red circle blooms right over Danny’s left eye, his legs fold under his dead weight, and he falls to the floor, landing with a *thud*. The next two shots take down the thugs on either side of Danny before I’ve even processed the first.

Sal bellows in fury, and like I had all those months ago, I react instinctually to protect the one man I can’t seem to live without. The gun fires with the barest of pressure on the trigger, and Sal flies backward and lands with a crash on the couch.

After a few seconds of stunned silence while we both process what the fuck just happened, Gracin looks up at me. “I got hurt again.”

I surprise us both by flying at him and punching him in the jaw. “What the fuck were you thinking you psychotic, suicidal asshole? Did you think you were being heroic jumping in front of a bullet? Did you think I’d be grateful watching you die right in front of my eyes?”

He drops back down to the ground and covers his face with his uninjured arm. "If you're going to yell, can you do it a bit more quietly? My head is pounding like a son of a bitch. I think I nose dived into the tile."

"You better be glad you're hurt. If you weren't, I would rip your balls off with my bare hands."

"I think I've been a bad influence on you," he says, smiling even though he's nearly ghost white beneath his tan. "You're far more violent now than you were when we first met."

"I wonder why?"

Before we do anything else, I inspect the wound on his shoulder. Thankful it isn't life threatening, I tear a strip off my shirt and wrap it around his upper arm, taking pleasure in his pained grunts as I do.

"You shouldn't have done that," I say when I finish and the bloom of fear and anger passes. "I thought you were going to die."

"There was a time when you would have been happy about that."

I let the comment pass because the numbness of adrenaline that had been pushing me all day fades into shock. I came far, far too close to losing him.

He tips up my chin. "Hey. You didn't. I'm here. I'm not going anywhere."

Ignoring the bodies on the floor around us, I crouch down to help lift him into a sitting position. When he's able, I heft his weight up and help shoulder him to the door.

Instead of going down that rabbit hole of a conversation, I change the subject. "What are we going to do about this mess?" Are there going to be more mob bosses and henchmen after us in the morning?"

Gracin blows out a breath as we limp our way back to the vehicles. I don't need to hold him. He injured his arm, not his legs, but I can't quite seem to make myself let him go. I need to hold him to keep myself from shaking.

"They probably won't ever stop. I don't exactly make friends in my line of work."

"Good to know. Are we going to take my car or yours?" I ask as we reach them.

He looks at me with an expression that's a mixture of exasperation and confusion. "That's all you have to say about it?"

"We'll deal with it tomorrow," I say simply. "Now which car?"

He shakes his head. “I don’t care. I’ll have some of my guys get the other when they come back for cleanup.”

“You have guys who do—never mind,” I say, waving my arms. “I don’t want to know.”

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THIRTY TWO

The house looks different when we pull up. Not that I'm surprised. I've never driven to Gracin's house willingly, and when he brought me here, it was the middle of the night, and I was unconscious.

I offered to drive because he's wounded, but he wasn't hearing any of it. Blood still seeps from the bandages, and I sigh as he gets out of the car with a grunt.

He doesn't object when I lead him to the bathroom on the first floor, which is where I've taken to having medical supplies stocked for just this reason.

"Sit," I tell him, and he eases himself onto the closed lid of the toilet.

"Getting into a habit," he says and looks up at me, his eyes partially lidded with pain and a touch of humor. He'd said something similar when I had to bandage his wounds while he was at Blackthorne.

Tenderness blooms inside me like a lone flower taking root in the cracked surface of neglected concrete. To cover it, I lower my face to help him remove his shirt, taking care to maneuver it around his shoulder. The wound doesn't look bad. He should count himself lucky he didn't do more damage.

After I gather my supplies, I brush my hands through his hair just because I need to touch him for my own reassurance and he leans into my palm.

"Someone has to look after you," I say finally.

"Are you offering?" he asks.

I don't answer because I don't know. I'm quiet as I finish applying the new bandage, and the silence grows so overwhelming that I'm afraid to break it.

He must see it on my face because he opens his mouth to speak and then closes it when he decides better. His jaw ticks with indecision, and he gives himself a shake.

“Come to me when you figure it out,” he says and then pauses to kiss my forehead, the single most affectionate gesture he’s ever expressed, and it nearly cracks me in two.

I suppose it’s progress that he doesn’t lock me inside my room, and then I almost laugh. For a moment, I have to fight a smile. How is it that a cage with Gracin is appealing? Maybe because within these walls, I found freedom, even if it was at the hands of my captor.

I clean up the mess and stow the supplies as my mind works through my options.

Gracin isn’t a good man. He’d be the first to tell me. He’s ruthless, bloodthirsty, and lawless. He lives by no one else’s rules but his own, and he doesn’t apologize for it.

I can picture my life without him. It’s a beautiful one. I’d get a new identity, one that doesn’t have a warrant out for their arrest, and I’d eventually settle down with a man, get a house, a dog, and have a couple of kids. It was the life I wanted when I met Vic. The life I thought we’d have together.

Now . . . now I can’t imagine a life that doesn’t have Gracin in it. The lows are low, but the highs, the rush he gives me each time I see him? There is no comparison.

I spin around to find him and nearly run right into him. “I thought you were giving me space,” I say, stunned.

His hands fist at his sides, his chest is stained with blood, and his face is already darkening with bruises. “I changed my mind,” he says.

My teeth bite into the soft flesh of my cheek. “You did?”

He takes a measured step forward. “Yes.”

“And what did you decide?”

Gracin steps close enough that he can lift my chin with a finger. His expression is serious, and even though he can barely open one eye, his gaze is solemn. “I decided I was right when I locked you here so you couldn’t get away and get yourself into trouble.” I bristle a little, but he places a finger over my lips. “I wanted you here so I could make sure you were safe. Seeing you in the warehouse like that . . . it isn’t something I’ll ever forget. I realized when you came running into the room, and Danny turned the gun on you that I didn’t want to spend another day that didn’t have you in it. Letting you leave would be doing just that, so I’ll chain your ass to the bed if I must to keep you in my life.”

“And if I said I still wanted to leave, you wouldn’t let me go?”

“No,” he says with vicious finality. “No, I wouldn’t.”

He pauses to take my lips. I taste the metallic burst of blood from his split lip, but underneath . . . underneath there’s the intoxicating flavor of him and I sigh, stepping forward to press against him more completely.

“I wouldn’t let you go,” he says against my lips, “but I’d spend every day convincing you to stay.”

“How do you think you’d accomplish that?” I’m breathing more heavily now and my heart, which is still thrumming from the adrenaline of our escape, beats double time.

“How about I show you?” he says.

I shiver against him as he tugs me down the hall. He presses kisses to my jaw and ear and then curses under his breath and plasters me against the wall in the stairwell. My hands go to his waist to tug at his belt loops and pull him against me.

“You trying to distract me?” he asks as he tongues the hollow in my throat.

“Maybe. Is it working?”

He nudges his erection against me, and I suck in a breath. “You tell me,” he says.

I groan and tug him down the hallway. “I think I need some more convincing,” I say with an impish grin. “That is if you aren’t too hurt.”

We reach his door, and he presses into me from behind, the hardness of his cock nudging against the cleft of my ass. “Never. I’d be dying and I’d still be hard for you.”

He opens the door, and we tumble inside enough to slam it shut. I struggle to turn, but he keeps my back pressed to his front and arranges my hands above my head.

“Keep them there,” he growls, and I’m strung so tight I don’t have the willpower to argue.

Behind me, I hear the sound of him shucking his clothes: the clink of his belt buckle coming undone, the crash of it against the floor, the click of his zipper, the whisper of his pants hitting the floor. By the time I feel his warmth at my back again, I’m shaking.

I start to lower my hands, which earns me a nip to my shoulder in retaliation. “I thought I said to keep them there.”

“Please,” I whisper. “I want to touch you.”

“You will. Patience, little mouse.” He kisses the spot he bit and soothes it with his tongue.

I do as he asks, but only because he keeps touching me without interruption. My head falls back, and I moan to the ceiling as his hands palm my breasts, kneading through the thin material of my shirt.

“Take it off,” I beg, and he does, slipping the shirt over my head and tossing it away. “All of it.”

This time, he teases instead of listening, and it makes me shift from foot to foot and throw my hair back. His palms cup my breasts over my bra and then he’s drawing circles along the cotton. There’s enough padding that I can’t feel him, but I know his touch is just one layer away, and it drives me crazy.

When I’m mindlessly writhing against him, he tugs the cups down to bare me to his touch. Skilled fingers pay homage to my nipples, pulling deeper moans from me. He tweaks them, just enough to cause me twin edges of pain and pleasure, and then he releases the clasp and his hands travel down to the waistband of my jeans.

My breath stalls in my chest as his fingers dance along the edge.

“Please,” I whisper and this time he gives me what I want by unbuttoning my pants and diving underneath.

He uses one hand to turn my head so he can meet my lips and the other to find the wetness with the slightest brush of his fingers.

“So ready,” he says. “I think you like the idea of staying here with me. Has my little mouse turned into a cat?”

I mumble unintelligible words against his lips and feel him smile. My heart flips over in my chest, and I know there will be no surviving him. There is no recovery for what he does to me. No walking away. Even if it was an option, I don’t think I could.

His tongue invades, plunders, conquers, and I meet him stroke for stroke, eliciting a groan from deep in his throat. The hand at my throat tightens, reminding me unerringly of the first time he had me against a wall. The memory comes to life and causes me to shift against him, hips searching for an easement of the hurricane whipping around inside me.

He only presses closer, so I’m pinned between his body and the door. I tremble with the need for release, the ache to touch him and express all the things I can’t with words.

“Shh, I’ve got you,” he says as his fingers start to move against me.

All I can do is take it. He keeps up the sweet torture until the door vibrates with the result of the tension growing inside me. Just when I think he's going to push me over the edge, he pulls back and allows my arms to drop to my sides.

I turn, and he takes me in his arms and guides me to the bed. Greedily, I take him into my arms and accept his weight on top of me. My legs wrap around his waist and pull him close.

"Wait," he says, a smile in his voice. "Not so fast, little heathen."

"I can't wait," I tell him and undulate against him. "Now."

He tugs down my jeans with the little space I allow him to have, and then he's back against me. "I'm going to take my time," he says.

And he does.

It feels like some sort of penance for everything he'd ever done wrong toward me. The manipulations when he was in prison, locking me up, being responsible for my pain. He worships me with the softest touches, the most maddening caresses until I'm near tears with the power of my need. He never made any apologies for what he's done, and I realize he doesn't have to any more than I have to thank him for saving me.

Tears leak from the corners of my eyes and he laps them up just as he thrusts inside me. My breath catches in my throat as his piercing hits all the sensitive spots inside me and strokes them to life.

His thrusts are slow, measured, and when I open my eyes, I find him watching me.

"Stay with me," he says right before his mouth finds mine in a soft kiss. "Tell me you'll stay with me. I can't lose you."

I lift my hands to his hair and peer into his eyes. "You couldn't get rid of me if you tried."

My words do something to him and his thrusts quicken. His hold convulses around me and I realize maybe he needs me to soothe the broken parts of him as much as I need him to show me there's someone who needs me in return.

As I come around him, surrounded by his arms and anchored by his weight, I know there isn't a chance in hell I'm giving up another minute without him by my side. If he's an addiction, I welcome the rush. Give me another hit, and another, and another, until it kills me or gives me a taste of heaven.

I lose myself in his kiss, his touch, his toxic love.

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EPILOGUE

“**T**he prosecution calls Tessa Emerson to the stand.”

In another life as I walked to the stand, fear would have held me in its grip, much as my ex-husband had in the time we were married. I’m no stranger to its dark embrace, but now I face my fears instead of running.

The bailiff leads me to the stand, and I sit facing a room full of people who have already sat through hours of witness testimony. There were a few guards who testified that Vic was an upstanding man and husband, but those testimonies were canceled out as soon as Annie took the stand. Apparently, I hadn’t hidden anything from her, and she recounted every single bruise and broken rib I’d shown up to work with. That wasn’t all. She produced picture upon picture of me at my desk, me bent over patients, and me hugging my ribs . . . in each one of them, the jury could see the blooms of purple and blue over my skin in various spots.

"Do you solemnly swear that you will tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God?" The bailiff says in a bored voice.

"I do," I say.

Gracin isn't in the room, of course, as he's wanted for the murder of Tino Salvatore and for his escape, but he's around, watching. Waiting. I draw strength from that knowledge as the prosecution grills me about my marriage to Vic. I answer their questions as honestly as I can. When I shot him, I acted in self-defense, and they have no evidence to say otherwise.

"You mean to say you stayed in an abusive relationship for years? Did you ever try to leave?"

"Yes, on several occasions."

"And what happened?"

"He beat me."

The lawyer smirks, and the audience twitters. "You didn't think to go to the police and report his behavior?"

"I did, once."

"Once? And what happened?"

I turn my attention to the Honorable Judge Edward Milton, who shifts in his seat, and raise my eyebrows, silently asking if he really wants me to answer this question in open court. He calls a recess, but it doesn't matter. Once Gracin and I decided it would be in my best interest to clear my name, I knew it was only a matter of time before I was brought face to face with the man who told me women should obey their husbands. The gray pallor bleaching his triple chin tells me he hasn't forgotten me either.

As the courtroom empties, the bailiff gives me the go-ahead to get down from the stand. The prosecutor sneers at me, and I give him a wink in return. It's not his fault he has a thankless job, and besides, I have bigger things to worry about.

I wait in the hall until it empties completely. Nearly all the employees have taken advantage of the lull to slip out to lunch, so no one notices when I carefully maneuver around the velvet rope delineating the public and private sectors of the courthouse. No one stops me on my way back to the judge's private rooms. It's a small town, and though everyone knows everyone, they are also too damn polite to tell me I'm not supposed to be there.

I reach Judge Milton's door and enter without knocking. He doesn't seem too surprised to see me, considering he's more focused on the gun Gracin has against his temple. I close the door behind me and sit in a comfortably worn leather chair situated in front of his desk.

Judge Milton opens his mouth to speak, but it snaps closed when Gracin nudges him with the gun. "This isn't the talking part. This is the listening part."

"I see you do remember me," I say. "Good, then you must know why I'm here. I'm going to keep this quick because you're not worth wasting my time. I will be cleared of all suspicion in my husband's death, and you will make sure that happens. If you don't? Well, I don't think we need to be crass. Do you understand?"

A bead of sweat trails down his forehead and plops onto his pristine desk. When he doesn't answer, I lean forward. "This is the talking part."

A couple of hours later, I walk out of the courthouse and get into the nondescript SUV waiting at the curb. Gracin tugs me by the neck and kisses

me long and hard, oblivious to the line of cars behind us waiting for us to move.

"You're a free woman now," he says when he's done. "What are you going to do with the rest of your life?"

"That's a good question. Got any ideas?"

He sends me a look that has my stomach clenching in anticipation. "Oh, I've got a few."

"I'm sure you do, but we have to do one thing first."

He takes my hand and presses it to his lips as he navigates through traffic. "Yeah? What's that?"

"Why don't I show you?" I say as we come to a stoplight.

Gracin glances over, and I pull out a photo from my purse and hand it to him. "What have we got here?" he asks.

"A surprise," I say. "You might want to pull over, so we don't block traffic."

"I like surprises." He does as I instruct and pulls off the road and into an empty parking lot.

If there are memories that keep me up at night and make me question why I was put on this Earth to endure the things I have, then there are also memories that remind me why I keep going, keep fighting. A lot of them feature Gracin in some way or another. But none of them will ever top this one.

"Tessa, what is this?" he asks, though we both know the answer.

"Gracin, I don't know what the future holds for us, and I don't care. All I know is I can't imagine one without you in it. I love you, so much. I didn't think we'd ever have this chance again, but now that we do, I'm so glad it's with you."

He looks up from the ultrasound picture and says, "You're pregnant?"

Before I can answer, he takes me into his arms and crushes me to his chest.

"There aren't words to describe what I feel for you," he says. "But if there were, they'd still never be enough."

"So, you're happy?" I ask as happy tears fill my eyes.

"I'm ecstatic, sweetheart." He kisses me again and then says. "Let's go home."

DEAR READER

Thank you for joining me on this wild ride. I hope you loved reading about this crazy couple as much as I loved writing about them.

If you enjoyed Toxic, please consider leaving a review at your preferred retailer.

Much Love,
Nicole

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Thank you.

To my mom who answered a million questions about the correctional institution without fail. If it weren't for all of your years of hard work and dedication, I wouldn't be where I am today. I owe a lot of what I've accomplished to you. Your unwavering support and patience. Your unconditional love. (Your hints about how to maybe possibly escape prison). ;) I love you, mom!

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



New York Times and *USA Today* bestselling author Nicole Blanchard lives in Mississippi with her family and their menagerie of animals. She chooses each day to chase her own fairy tale even if they contain their fair share of dragons. She is married to her best friend and owns her own business.

Nicole survives on a diet of too many books and substantial amounts of root beer and slim jims. When not reading, she's lavishing attention on her family or inhaling every episode of *The Walking Dead* and *The Big Bang Theory*.

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