



lessons in sin

new york times bestselling author

PAM GODWIN

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CHAPTER 1

TINSLEY

ONE MEASLY BLOW job, and it all came crashing down.

My social calendar, my high school, my designer clothes... Even my silk pillowcases were taken away, my entire world downgraded in the blink of an eye.

My life was over.

The end.

There was no coming back from this.

Dramatic? Maybe. But I felt a very real sense of dread about my circumstances. It was one thing to be ripped away from my friends and family. But to be sent to an all-girls Catholic boarding school?

I didn't know anyone here. The air reeked of damp wood and misery. Crucifixes hung on the walls like grisly omens. And the green plaid uniforms? *Ew*. The color was all wrong for my complexion. I wasn't even Catholic.

This can't be happening.

The sound of my footsteps echoed through the old, empty classroom as I paced along the wall of windows. Beyond the glass, the sun descended into the mountains, casting the school grounds in shades of lavender. It would've been a majestic view if not for the bars.

Iron bars on third-story windows.

"This isn't a school. It's a prison. Or hell. I'm in hell." Resentment snarled through me as I whirled toward my mother. "I can't believe you're doing this. It was just a blow job. You can't lock me away for that."

"This is hardly a prison." Perched on a wooden seat in the front row, she didn't look up from her phone. "Sion Academy inspires respect and admiration, two qualities you severely lack as of late."

“Because I messed around with a guy? The Queen of England has done more than that at least four times. What’s the big deal?”

“The Queen of England is the longest-serving female head of state in world history. She didn’t achieve that status by engaging in oral sex with a Burger King employee. She earned it through duty, respect, and marrying appropriately.” Her chin snapped up, eyes blazing. “It’s your role as a Constantine heiress to do the same.”

Vomit. Literally, I puked in my mouth.

Caroline Constantine was all about arranged marriages. She wasn’t just the matriarch of our rich and powerful family. When my father died, she became the reigning head, the supreme authority of the Constantine dynasty, and the final word. Who was I to question her?

I was merely the baby. The youngest of six children. Also known as *the precious princess. The belle of every ball. Teeny Tinsley, the nicest Constantine.*

In other words, no one thought I had a backbone.

Well, fuck them. I could be just as ruthless as my mother, despite her overbearing efforts to portray me as sweet and innocent in the press.

“I’m eighteen.” I clenched my hands at my sides. “I can put my mouth wherever—”

“You’re a Constantine. Your mouth represents this family, and I decide what you do with it.”

I hated her for this. It was hard enough to maintain real friendships in Bishop’s Landing. But here? Hours away from home? I was doomed to spend my last year of high school alone.

Leave it to my mother to find a prestigious, high-status, all-girls school in the middle of nowhere. Sion Academy of the Sacred Heart was in an old New England village hidden in the foothills of the White Mountains. In fucking Maine.

As we waited to meet the headteacher, the isolation closed in around me.

A large tower projected vertically from the rear of the classroom, where auditorium-style seating stacked in tiers, overlooking the teacher’s desk and massive chalkboard.

The soaring domed ceiling made it all so very grand and open, but the heavy wooden desks and tarnished brass railings added darkness and gloom

to the old-fashioned ambiance.

The first day of school officially began tomorrow. When I arrived moments ago, I caught glimpses of the residents in the corridors. Their aversion to newcomers rang loud and clear. For every unwelcome glare, I flung one right back, refusing to show weakness.

I couldn't fathom sitting in this room among rows of prissy girls, wearing identical pleated plaid skirts, eager to learn and pray and conform.

Just...*no*.

I wanted to crush on boys, wear my own clothes, and live a normal life. Why was that too much to ask?

The blow job with Robby Howard hadn't been my first. He was just another new guy in town, a college freshman attending the nearby university. He didn't know he wasn't allowed to touch me.

I would've given him my virginity, but just like with the others, my babysitting bodyguard had put a stop to that.

Maybe it was because Robby didn't have a trust fund and had to work at Burger King to pay his tuition, but he was the final straw with my mother.

And here I was, facing the fallout.

Regrets?

Oh, I should have them. I should have a handwritten, tattered-around-the-edges journal full of them. Most eighteen-year-old girls did. But I wasn't like other girls. I wasn't *allowed* to make mistakes or have regrets.

Somehow, I was supposed to learn life's lessons by being perfect.

What a load of shit.

"You think I can't get into trouble here?" I stormed toward her, fuming. "I'll find a way, Mother. I'll find another Robby Howard—"

"Mention his name again, and you'll be writing to him in prison."

"Writing to him?" I screwed up my face, incredulous. "I don't want a relationship with the guy. I just want—"

"Don't—"

"—sex. For once in my life, I want a little fun and excitement." Desperation drove me to my knees at her feet. I clutched her hand on the armrest, my tone taking on a pleading edge. "I want to experience normal girl stuff, explore things, experiment, and stretch my wings. I want to *live*."

"Stand up." She yanked her hand away, her blue eyes crystallizing with ice. "On your feet."

“Please. You can’t leave me here. I’m begging you.”

“Constantines do *not* beg or kneel. Get. Up.”

“I’ll stop begging when you listen to me.” I pressed closer, my chest pushing against her rigid legs. “Can’t you feel the weird darkness in this place? The *oppression*?”

“Don’t confuse oppression with structure and discipline. You need a strict environment.”

“Fine. Send me to Pembroke. Keaton loved it there. Or another co-ed prep school. Anywhere but here. This school feels all wrong. It’s creepy and sad.” I shivered, hating the quiver in my voice, but I needed her to believe me. “It’s in the wood, the bricks. It’s the chill in the air. Cruelty lives in these walls.”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake. That’s all in your head.”

“Is that what you told Elaine?”

Her face paled, and for a fraction of a second, I swore I saw an emotion I’d never seen in her flawless features.

Remorse.

I didn’t know what happened to my sister, but when she was sent away for *religious schooling*, she didn’t come back the same. My mother knew what had driven Elaine into depression and drug use. Elaine had gone to her multiple times, begging for help.

“She confided in you. Whatever she told you about Reverend Lynch’s school, I know it was terrible.” My chest tightened. “And what did you do? Did you tell her it was in her head?”

“Enough.” She stood abruptly, pushing me away as she stepped back. “Get up.”

“You can stop this.” I scrambled toward her on my knees and gripped the hem of her pencil skirt. “You can prevent the same thing from happening to me.”

“Spoiled, melodramatic child.” She captured my wrist, pulling, squeezing the bones too hard. “Stand up before you embarrass—”

The door opened, and a dark, imposing figure filled the gap.

My mother released me, and I fell back on the wooden floor, my breath caught in my throat.

A man stepped in, dressed head to toe in black. His shoes, slacks, and button-up shirt absorbed the shadows in the hall, the somberness of his

attire serving only to accentuate the stark white collar at his throat.

He was a jarring shock to the senses.

I'd never seen a Catholic priest in person, but I had a mental picture of what one ought to look like. Scrawny, old, unattractive, bitter, prudish...

Good Lord, this man decimated every stereotype in my mind.

The starched black clothes failed to conceal his hard physique. He was well-built without being bulky, entrancing without camera filters. Lean muscle flexed at the seams, the threads molding around toned limbs. His shirtsleeves were pushed to his elbows, revealing sculpted forearms, and the definition continued through his legs, trim waist, flat stomach, and broad chest.

Okay, so he loved Jesus and worked out. Not a crazy notion. What scrambled my brain, however, was the outrageous perfection of his face. He had that chiseled jawline that women loved about my brothers. The blunt angles, square shape, and hint of shadow that the sharpest blade couldn't quite scrape away.

He wore his brown hair in finger-raked dishevelment, short on the sides with the longer strands on top, arranged to look messy. A trendy style. Youthful. Not that he was young.

Maturity lined his features. No wrinkles. But there was a distinguished air of authority in his glare. A hardened glare that could only be attained with life experience. He was closer to my brother Winston's age. Mid-thirties, maybe. Way too old to catch my eye.

Way too intimidating.

Except I couldn't look away. With his feet braced shoulder-width apart and his hands resting on his hips, his bearing commanded attention. I didn't know where to fix my gaze. Every part of him conjured indecent thoughts. And danger.

His gorgeous looks didn't diminish the warning that iced the air around him. There was something off about him, something in his expression that triggered alarms in my head.

His eyes, a deep, rich shade of blue, sharpened into slits as he took in my unladylike sprawl on the floor. Thank God I wore pants. But he didn't just look at me. He shouted with those eyes, criticizing and reprimanding everything he saw with unsettling silence. His cold stare punched through my chest and paralyzed my heart, sending my pulse into a tailspin.

I wasn't the only one affected. My mother hadn't moved since he'd opened the door. I wasn't sure she was breathing.

Until she cleared her throat. "You must be Father Magnus Falke."

He gave a sharp nod without releasing me from his gaze. No empathy, no warmth, not a hint of reassurance in his body language.

If this was the headteacher who would be controlling my life for the next year, I was in deeper shit than I'd thought.

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CHAPTER 2

TINSLEY

I SCRAMBLED TO my feet and brushed off my pants while inching closer to my mother. I wanted to grab her and beg her not to leave me here with this priest. But something told me I shouldn't show fear or weakness in his presence.

His gaze fed upon the trembling in my hands. The twitch of his lips said he liked it. He enjoyed my distress. God, I hoped I was wrong. Maybe his frosty greeting was nothing more than a scare tactic to keep new students in line.

"Caroline Constantine." My mother extended a manicured hand, her voice silky smooth. "You spoke to my assistant and agreed to my requirements for Tinsley's instruction."

"I'm aware." He grasped her fingers.

She smiled, tightening her grip. He gave no reaction, and the handshake lingered long after the two-second rule.

Celibate or not, no man could resist my mother. She was a portrait of gilded beauty. With her golden hair and glowing skin, she could be mistaken for my older sister, and she knew it. Her confidence was one of her greatest weapons, and God help the poor souls who fell into her trap.

She slowly withdrew her hand, maintaining eye contact. "You have a reputation, Father Falke."

"Magnus."

"Father Magnus." She cocked her head, wearing a pleasant expression. "I've chosen your school for my youngest because you have a history of success in reforming troubled girls and transforming them into respectable young ladies."

“Wait. What?” My stomach clenched. “This is a boarding school, not a reform school.” A buzzing sound thrashed in my ears. “Right?”

She continued as if I hadn’t spoken. “I understand that you will personally take over Tinsley’s education and discipline.”

“Yes.” His detached tone chilled me.

“Are you serious?” My mouth hung open. “I’m not troubled, and I sure as hell don’t need special treatment. What is this? What are you not telling me?”

She tossed me an irritated glance. “Father Magnus offers a unique training program for girls like you.”

“Girls like me? You mean girls who exist only as pawns for their parents in business negotiations?”

“I don’t have time for this.”

“Oh, right, so you’re referring to the girls whose mothers are too busy, too important to deal with insignificant tasks like parenting.” Rancor burned in my throat. “You’re a monster.”

“If I were a monster, I would sit back and watch you ruin your life.”

“Instead, you’ll happily ruin it for me.” Disgusted, I looked away, forcing my attention to Father Magnus. “What’s the arrangement that was made for me?”

“Most students come in as freshmen.” Rich, deep, and startlingly seductive, his voice curled into my belly, tightening it. “Since you’re a senior, your situation is different. Tomorrow, you’ll take a series of aptitude tests. Once I know your academic skill level, I’ll determine your class schedule. You may have some classes with your peers. But in the courses where you’re struggling—”

“I’m *not* struggling. My grades are stellar.”

“The elite curriculum at Sion Academy is leagues ahead of other private schools. I’ll work with you one-on-one to bring you up to speed on your lessons and religious training, as well as correcting your behavior.”

“There’s nothing wrong with my behavior.”

His hand lowered to his side, drawing my attention to the motion of his thumb rubbing against his forefinger. God only knew what that subtle gesture meant, but it made me wonder if he were fighting the impulse to reach out and strangle me.

Did he think I was disrespectful? Mouthy? Slutty? Ignorant? What had he been told about me? And how much of it was true?

“What do you mean by *correcting* my behavior?” I stood taller, trying to appear as unflappable as he was.

“It can mean many things.”

Vague. Never a good sign.

Hollywood liked to portray Catholic school priests as tyrannical and heartless. But that couldn’t be accurate. Godly people were supposed to be compassionate.

Except I didn’t detect an ounce of compassion in his stony eyes. Instead, they promised insufferable rules and swift punishment.

A creeping sense of dread settled over me. “What are the punishments here?”

“For minor misdeeds, you’ll pray the rosary. Other penances may include an early curfew, manual labor, or social isolation.” His low, velvety baritone was a taunt in my ears. “In extreme cases, corporal punishment is employed.”

“That’s...” My mouth dried. “You mean *abuse*?”

“Physical pain and psychological humiliation.”

“Oh my God.” I wasn’t aware of my feet moving backward until I bumped into my mother. “You *hit* your students? Like...with a paddle? A yardstick?”

“Strap and cane.”

“What?” I froze, certain I hadn’t heard him correctly.

“It’s not a common practice at Sion Academy, but sometimes, a heavy hand is required.”

“Are you hearing this?” I spun toward my mother.

“Do as you’re told,” she said in a bored tone, “and your schooling will be painless.”

“Beating students is illegal!”

“There are no federal or state laws against corporal punishment in private schools.” She smiled, and that hurt more than anything.

“If I come home with bruises, you won’t care, will you? Unless someone notices them in public?”

“When I see you again, I expect you to have grown out of this childish behavior and be long past physical punishment.”

“What do you mean? I’ll see you in a week. Parents visit on the weekends and—”

“Out of the question. If I receive a satisfactory report from Father Magnus in a few months, I’ll allow you a visit home during the holidays.”

“Why are you doing this?” My voice bled cold fury. “Because I broke your rules? Fine. Send me to another school. Uprooting my life is punishment enough. But to turn me over to a stranger who admittedly beats his students? You must truly despise me.”

“Are you finished?”

“No.” I spat away the last shred of respect I had for this woman.

Then and there, I made a promise to myself. She thought I was bad? She had no idea. Bad girls got kicked out of boarding school.

I vowed to do everything in my power to get expelled.

“If you leave me here,” I said, “I’ll tarnish our family name so completely you won’t be able to keep it out of the press.”

Unmoved, she arched a brow at Father Magnus. “She didn’t use to be this quarrelsome. I don’t know what’s gotten into her.”

“Not Robby Howard. Or any other guy.” I lifted my chin. “You’re the world’s biggest cockblocker.”

“You’re walking on thin ice, young lady.”

“Okay, Boomer. You’re the one trusting a priest to watch me instead of a team of bodyguards. Way to lose touch with reality.”

She was technically too young to be part of the baby boomer generation. I only used the term to piss her off.

“Wait in the hall.” A quiet command, but her voice cut like a knife.

“*You* wait in the hall.” I crossed my arms, swallowing the bundle of fear in my throat.

“I won’t tell you again.” She thrust a finger toward the door.

I shook my head, pushing my luck. “Prove you have a grain of decency in your heart and take me home.”

I braced for the pain that I knew her response would inflict. But it was Father Magnus who reacted. He stepped forward slowly, menacingly. I tried to hold my ground, but his powerful strides crushed the distance, forcing me to retreat.

He crowded my space, his towering frame putting me at eye level with his chest. No part of him touched me, but I didn’t give him a chance, my

spine bowing, my entire body recoiling as I fought to refill my lungs. He stayed with me, bending closer. I shuffled back, and he advanced again, and again, every step trampling my boundaries and incinerating my bravado.

If I wanted to survive this, survive *him*, I couldn't let him bully me. But my limbs flinched without conscious volition, my feet sliding in reverse, instinctively fleeing the nefarious vibes radiating from him.

Tight cords and ridges of muscle—too much power lay beneath his unassuming clothes, ready to back up that threatening scowl.

Was he angry? Or did he look at all his students like he wanted to break them over his knee?

“What are you doing?” Pulse racing, I continued to retreat until my spine bounced off the doorframe. “Back off. Don't touch me.”

He didn't lift a finger. No physical contact between us. But he didn't ease up, either. His steps were deliberate and unhurried as he forced me into the hall with nothing more than his proximity.

I couldn't ignore how tiny and breakable I felt next to him, how physically inferior I was compared to his strength and size. But it wasn't just his unexpected physique that had me seeking distance. It was the meanness in his eyes. The unholy promise in them.

This wasn't a teacher who gave a fuck about my circumstances. He was a sick, twisted bully who got off on intimidating his students.

How many girls had he *reformed*? Brainwashed? Abused? How many lives had he broken?

The backs of my legs hit the bench in the hall, toppling my balance. My bottom collided with the seat, and he dove in, bending over me with a hand splayed on the wall beside my head.

Don't cower. You can handle whatever he dishes out.

“I'm going to say this only once.” He thrust his other hand, palm up, between us. “Give me your phone.”

My insides shriveled at the sound of his voice. A terse command that tolerated no argument. A gravelly timbre that vibrated in my chest. A sculpted mouth that dragged me into the darkness.

The corridor faded away as I stared at the brutal beauty of his face. He was close, so goddamn up in my space that I felt the heat of his breath, and oh my fuck, he smelled good. Seductively dark and woodsy, like exotic incense and something more. Something carnal and manly, unlike anything

sold in a designer bottle. My nose rejoiced in the aroma, my nostrils flaring, taking deep pulls, savoring.

Snap out of it.

I held my breath and averted my eyes. What was happening to me? I couldn't be in thrall to a man who meant to hurt me. Nausea swirled, stirring icy fear in my stomach.

He didn't need words to scare the shit out of me. His nearness alone frazzled my nerves all to hell.

I just needed him to leave, and the quickest way to make that happen was to give him what he wanted.

Tugging the phone from my pocket, I slapped it in his waiting hand.

I knew that in a couple of hours I was going to find myself lying in a strange bed, scared and alone, cursing my decision to surrender my connection to the outside world. My phone was my lifeline to my brother.

Keaton was annoyingly overprotective of me, but only because he cared. He was the one I turned to when I needed help, words of advice, or a shoulder to lean on.

I was going to need him more than anything tonight.

My chest ached as I watched the phone vanish in Father Magnus's pocket. Out of my reach.

He returned to the classroom and paused just inside, his hand resting on the doorframe. Every sinew in my body was strung tight as he glanced over his shoulder and met my gaze.

I expected indifference, but what I saw in his expression was worse.

His eyes glinted with triumph.

He thought he'd won. He thought, from here on out, I would cower and cease resisting, that I would be malleable and easy to control. He thought he had my capitulation.

As if.

He'd never crossed swords with a Constantine.

My destiny was of my own making, and I was willing to ruin my reputation to get the hell out of here. If he stood in my way, I would take him down with me.

"I promise you this." I squared my shoulders and stood, facing him head-on. "I'm going to make your life a living hell."

“Hell is fast approaching, little girl. But I assure you, it’s not coming for me.”

With a cruel twist of his lips, he stepped into the classroom and shut the door in my face.

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CHAPTER 3

TINSLEY

STANDING IN THE corridor, I pressed the heels of my hands to my eyelids and waited for the threat of tears to dissipate.

Tinsley Constantine was a lot of things—*and sometimes, she referred to herself in the third person*—but she wasn't a crybaby.

Why didn't they ever talk about my finer points on social media?

They don't know me.

No one knew the real me. Not even my friends in Bishop's Landing. They only saw what they wanted to see—what they could gain from my family's wealth and influence. Deep down, I knew that my closest friends only hung around to get close to my brothers.

Story of my life. My last name preceded who I was in my heart, and it wouldn't be any different here.

But there were advantages to being my mother's daughter. She'd bred tenacity in my veins and steel in my bones. I'd spent my entire life watching her, learning from her. While she wasn't a nurturing person, she didn't take shit from anyone.

To win this, I would have to take a page out of her book, no matter how vicious my opponent.

Hell is coming for me.

Not the words I expected to hear from a priest's mouth, but to be fair, I threatened him first.

I stepped toward the classroom, placing my hands on the door. My mother's muffled voice drifted from within, drawing my ear to the wooden barrier.

"I investigated you, Magnus. You're well respected in the church and held in high esteem by your fellow teachers. But I'm more interested in

your history *before* priesthood. I find it strange that you decided to become a late-vocation priest, considering that before the age of thirty-one, you led a rather excessive, self-indulgent life.”

My breath cut short, my whole body going still.

“Self-made billionaire.” Her heels clicked through the room, punctuating her words. “New York’s most eligible bachelor—”

A flurry of noise erupted overhead. I spun, crouching, and slapped a hand against my pounding chest. *Dammit.*

Craning my neck, I scanned the rafters along the hallway. There was something there, quiet now, but whatever it was had nearly given me a heart attack.

The ceiling crested into shadowed pockets high above the glow of the wall sconces. I strained my eyes, searching for movement.

Nothing.

If it was a critter, it must’ve scurried away.

I crept back to the door and pressed my ear to the surface, catching my mother’s voice.

“—abruptly ended. No one seems to know why you traded your expensive ties for a priest’s collar nine years ago. But I can find out. I can learn all a man’s secrets when motivated. Don’t motivate me.”

My mind spun in the silence that followed. I imagined her arrogant expression as she stared down the impassive priest. If I did the math...

He was forty. Older than I thought. But young enough to be her child. Just another pawn in her self-aggrandizing quest for control. With any luck, he would say something to piss her off, and this would all work itself out on its own.

“I wonder,” he said, his voice rumbling like a distant storm, “what kind of woman threatens a man of the cloth.”

“A smart woman. I trust no one. Not even a priest with a squeaky-clean record.”

“If you’re suggesting—”

“I’m not. You agreed to my conditions. Don’t let her leave the property. No males in her room, including yourself. Don’t allow her in your private quarters, no matter how innocent the reason. Don’t bend any of the rules I put forth without speaking to me first, or I’ll shut down this school and make sure you disappear for good.”

A swallow stuck in my throat. Was she protecting me? My mother, a mama bear? I couldn't believe it, but man, did I feel it. It warmed me to the marrow.

Until she added, "I don't want a scandal, Magnus. It's that simple."

My stomach bottomed out, and my eyes closed, hot and achy.

This had nothing to do with me. It was just another one of her power trips.

"Her tuition is paid in full," she said. "And I signed off on the terms of the endowment—"

The clamor of sound returned to the rafters, jerking me away from the door. Just as well. I'd heard enough.

Turning my attention upward, I tracked the cacophony of rustling, flapping movements. Something small flitted about in the darkness, flying with agitation, crashing into beams, and skidding along the apex of the ceiling.

A bird?

How did it get inside? Through an open door? Oh no, that meant it was trapped. Without food or water, it wouldn't survive. Worse, it seemed injured, or disoriented, darting unsteadily in the shadows. Never landing. Never coming close enough to let me see it.

Shit. It hit the wall.

I inched forward, gasping as it bounced across the floor and came to a stop. What a strange-looking bird. It wobbled, using its folded wings like crutches, balancing itself, and...

Was that *fur*?

It took flight again, swooping awkwardly, almost drunkenly through the doorway at the end of the hall.

A bat.

What else could it be? And the poor thing was hurt. Probably starving to death.

I hurried after it without a plan. I just didn't want it to get stuck somewhere and die. Bursting into the dark room, I flicked on the lights and paused.

Another classroom. Smaller desks. Lower ceilings. But the ambiance was the same, all dark woods and worn surfaces, aged with doom and gloom.

Like Father Magnus.

Why would a self-made billionaire become a priest?

Money didn't buy happiness, but the almighty dollar sure as hell kept this school running. Five-figure tuitions and million-dollar endowments, all that glorious cash pouring in from wealthy families like mine.

So here was an elite school for rich girls whose parents sent them away to be babysat by a priest who practiced corporal punishment. Given what I'd just overheard, Father Magnus had a past. Was he a predator? Like a pedo who preyed on girls in Catholic school uniforms?

I shuddered, scrubbing my hands over my hair. Jesus, my thoughts had taken a grisly turn.

I was just here for the bat.

Moving on silent feet, I zigzagged around the rows of desks. Where had the little stinker gone? There were no sounds, no movement, not a single sign of it.

Then my gaze snagged on a life-size statue of a woman in robes. The Virgin Mary? I couldn't see her face because it was covered by a trembling winged furball.

"There you are."

Clinging by feet and forelimbs, the tiny brown bat hugged the statue's head. I approached slowly, trying not to frighten it. A few paces away, my heart melted.

"Awww. You're just a pup. Look at you, with your tiny mouse ears and baby snout. You're lost, aren't you? Where's your mama?" I had no idea what to do, only that I needed to do *something*. Except... "You wouldn't, by chance, have rabies?"

If I had my phone, I would look up the symptoms. Without it, all I knew was that rabies was one hundred percent fatal.

"Just to be safe, maybe don't bite me, okay?"

The pup twisted its neck, fixing me with an alert, beady stare as it held on tight to the Virgin Mary's face.

"Don't worry. I'm not going to hurt you."

It was already hurt. A cut sliced across its little head, probably from its dive-bomber maneuvers in the hallway. It didn't look sick, but that didn't mean I should touch it, which made for a tricky rescue.

Just like the first room, bars hung on the outside of the windows. But the spaces in between were wide enough for a bat to fit through.

Shifting two steps to the closest window, I turned the latch and pushed the casement upward. It didn't budge. Another attempt, same result. Exerting all my strength, I shoved harder, again and again, and broke a fingernail.

"Fuck!" I threw myself at the glass, grunting, straining, and gritting my teeth. "You ancient, stubborn piece of shit! Why won't you fucking o—?"

"What are you doing?"

His sharp voice ran through me like a sword, puncturing my lungs. I lowered my arms, dropped my brow to the cool glass, and steadied my breaths.

Then I turned to face Father Magnus. "What does it look like I'm doing?"

"Attempting an escape."

"Ooh, good idea. I'll just use my bionic arms to bend the bars out of the way. *After* I break all my nails trying to open the damn window."

He stared at me like I was an idiot. If it were possible, that scowl looked even meaner than before. Spine-chilling. Malicious. Beneath the cloud of disapproval, his eyes tapered, and his expression creased with disgust. Pure, unconcealed abhorrence. As if the mere sight of me made him want to inflict bodily harm.

If he had any secrets, an attraction to young girls wasn't one of them. But I wasn't ruling out abuse. Or misogyny. From the way he continued to glare at me, he was giving off some serious homicidal vibes.

Maybe he just hated his life and didn't know how to be anything but a salty, miserable dick.

With perfectly shaped lips.

He ambled toward me, his gait slow and threatening. A thrum of unease beat in my veins as I sidestepped, blocking his line of sight to the bat.

Too late. He'd already spotted it.

"Don't hurt it." I held up my hands, warding him off. "It's just a pup. I'm just going to let it out through the window and—"

"You want to *save* it?" He pulled up short, his brows a heavy mantle of suspicion.

"Why wouldn't I?"

“Bats carry rabies. Did you touch it?”

“Not *all* bats, and no. No touching. No biting. No heavy petting. We don’t have that kind of relationship. It just needs some mosquitoes in its belly and a little more practice flying...” I withered beneath his flinty stare. “What?”

“Bats are roosting in the bell tower. They’re not pets. They’re *pests*. Especially when they make their way into the classrooms and rain terror on the students.”

“Does that involve screaming and tears?”

“Yes.”

“So what you’re saying is you have bats in the belfry, and it makes all the girls cry. That explains a lot.”

A muscle bounced in his jaw, and he lurched into motion, rounding the desks.

Oh fuck, I’d gone too far. My pulse quickened, and my muscles went taut. But I refused to move. He would have to go through me to get to the bat.

When he stepped within arm’s reach, I braced for impact...only to feel the heat of his body breeze past me and the bat.

I released a breath, turning to watch as he wriggled the latch on the window.

“The lock sticks.” He slid the casement open with ease.

The instant the air changed, the bat flew, darting straight toward my face.

A hand wrapped around my throat and yanked me back against a slab of marble. Hot marble, bunched with ridges and aggression. Holy sweet Jesus, he was hard. A hot-blooded, hard-bodied, immovable beast.

I choked on my raging heartbeat and lost all motor and brain function.

I’m going to die.

In a blink, he released me. My hands flew to my throat as he strolled to the window and closed it like nothing had happened.

Nope, no need to overreact. My blood pressure flirted with the red zone, and my lungs ran on empty. But the little brown bat was doing just fine.

Right outside the glass, it wrapped itself around one of the bars. If Father Magnus hadn’t pulled me from its trajectory, it would’ve been my face that the pup was hanging on to for dear life.

I took a moment to calm down. Once my breathing returned to normal, I joined him at the window. He didn't acknowledge me. His focus centered on the bat as if he were contemplating the best way to kill it.

Come on, pup. Fly away. Spread your wings and go!

She lifted her tiny nose and stared back at me.

Father Magnus reached for the window.

"Wait." I gripped the sill. "Just...give her a second. She's scared and still learning how to fly. Don't take this moment from her."

"Her? Are you an expert on bats?"

God, no. I was talking out of my ass. "Let her make mistakes. She'll learn from them."

"It made a deadly mistake the moment it breached the walls."

"Not if she was born inside." I wouldn't beg for her life, but I wasn't giving up, either. "What does the Bible say about bats?"

"It says not to eat them."

"Oh." I coughed in my hand. "I feel so much better knowing the most read book in the world provides such profound advice. Though I can't say I know anyone who would actually eat a bat. Except Ozzy Osbourne." I feigned a gulp. "Will he go to hell for that? Even if it was an accident?"

"No, he'll go to hell for all his other sins."

"Wow. That's dark." I chewed on my lip. "Look, I know you have a job to do with punishing bad girls and all. But I'll be straight with you. Heaven's not the right scene for me. I mean, if Ozzy can't make the guest list, how lit can the place be? Like who's going to be there? A bunch of uptight, rule-following overachievers with their side parts, cringey dance moves, and last-season jeans? Sounds like the moms of TikTok. *Hashtag OldTok*. Yawn."

"Grow up."

Make me. I didn't have to say it. He read it in my smile.

"You will." His arm moved in a blur.

Before I could register his intent, he smacked his fist against the windowpane, rattling the glass and sending the bat spiraling to certain death.

"No!" My heart cried out as I shoved open the window and searched the darkness. "What have you done?"

The ground lay beneath a blanket of shadows three stories below.
Nothing but endless, pitch-black abyss.

How could he be so cruel? The bat was outside, not hurting anyone.
And he was a priest. A man of God.

A devil in disguise.

Hatred flared in my blood, simmering through the deepest parts of me,
seething hotter, thicker by the second.

I listened for the sound of wings, but all I heard was the monster's
retreating footsteps like a death march in my head.

And his voice.

His heartless, unyielding command.

"Come with me."

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CHAPTER 4

MAGNUS

I STRODE INTO the hall without waiting for the girl. Her footsteps didn't follow, but they would. They all fell in line, eventually.

Predictable, uninspiring, entitled children. They were always difficult on the first day, thrashing against their new boundaries and resentful about leaving their friends and mansions.

And I had the impossible job of molding them into something better.

The top strata of society lived in a world of mirrored surfaces and disingenuous relationships where a person's value correlated to how much they could take, control, and hold over others.

Making spoiled rich kids smarter and stronger wasn't the best thing for society as a whole. What these students needed were lessons in kindness from a positive role model.

But I wasn't that guy. So I stuck with what I was good at.

Discipline.

Halfway down the corridor, I sensed her slipping out of the classroom behind me.

"Where's my mother?" She tried to sound confident, but her voice wobbled at the edges, confessing her distress.

Who would've thought the pampered Constantine princess had the capacity to care about something other than herself? Her reaction to the bat was a disarming presentation of her character. But she canceled it out with her snarky comebacks and passive-aggressive attempts to belittle me.

No student had ever been so bold.

As she trailed behind, waiting for my answer, her animosity clotted the air. A glance over my shoulder confirmed it.

An inferno consumed her huge expressive eyes, and her lips curled back, baring sharp kitten teeth. Pale blonde hair hung in tangles around her stiff arms, her tiny hands balled into white-knuckled fists at her sides.

Her furious stare didn't lower, never weakening, completely dialed in on the source of her outrage.

She despised me.

That was atypical, too.

All my students felt some form of trepidation in my presence. But none hated me. Quite the opposite. Too often, I found myself reprimanding unwanted flirtation or, worse, infatuation.

I suspected that wouldn't be a problem with Tinsley Constantine. But despite all that, she was the same as every other spoon-fed brat with a trust fund, personal driver, and closet full of designer shoes and emotional baggage.

I should tell her the truth about her mother, that the woman intended to leave without saying goodbye. But the words didn't come. Instead, I stopped at my classroom and gestured inside. "She's waiting."

Waiting, because I'd given her that order when I stepped out to grab her daughter. I needed to make something very clear to both of them before they parted ways.

As Tinsley approached, I didn't step back, forcing her to squeeze past me.

"Murderer," she spat under her breath and slipped into the room.

In the interest of moving this along, I let it slide. There would be plenty of time in the coming months to punish her mouth.

I followed her in and closed the door.

"What took so long?" Caroline strode toward me, purse in hand, looking all bent out of shape and long past ready to leave.

"Take a seat." I flicked a finger at the first row of desks. "Both of you."

"I'm surprised you're still here." Tinsley dropped onto a chair and crossed her arms. "Figured you would've sneaked away when you had the chance."

"I don't sneak—"

"Mrs. Constantine." I nodded at the seat behind her. "Sit."

She sucked in an indignant breath, and the dainty cords in her neck strained against her skin. Flawless skin. Slender bones. She would bruise so

beautifully in the wrong hands.

In another life, older women were my weakness. But not this one. Not this life and not this woman.

Caroline was, by definition, glamorous. Regal cheekbones. A ripe mouth slashed with scarlet. A body that boasted regular visits to the gym. And not a shimmering blonde hair out of place.

I found her deeply unappealing. She was arrogant and power-hungry with a code of ethics befitting Lucifer himself. From what I knew through my own investigation, the cold queen had no redeeming qualities.

She held my gaze in a silent standoff, one that lasted another second before she lowered onto the seat behind her. She was a smart woman. Smart enough to know I wasn't a man who backed down.

As for the daughter...

Tinsley slouched deeper in the chair, belligerently directing her gaze anywhere but in my direction.

"Miss Constantine." I stepped before her, steeling my voice. "Sit up straight."

Her eyes lifted. Heart-stopping eyes that expressed emotion with visceral clarity. They burned straight through me as she said, "Two words. One finger."

Caroline gasped.

I kicked the toe of Tinsley's shoe with enough force to send her shooting up in the chair.

"That"—I motioned at her ramrod position—"is the posture I expect in my classroom. I'll deal with your other transgressions later."

Frozen in shock, her lips formed a pouty *O*.

Her hair, the palest shade of gold, reached nearly to her waist, fading to the color of cultured pearls as if naturally whitened by the sun. Long lashes swept outward from extraordinary wraparound eyes that were wide, light blue, and unduly striking. Add to that her small, pointed nose and delicate bone structure and she had a distinct elven look. A purebred beauty with a face that unveiled magic whenever she was provoked.

In thirty years, she would be exquisite beyond compare. The kind of allure that elicited intense reactions from the beholder.

Most men would find her desirable now, but I was one of the unconventional few who had a strong aversion to teenagers. Even when I

was a teenager, I sought older women. An obsession that ultimately became my destruction.

I hadn't been *called* to be a priest. Nine years ago, I chose this life as my penance. Celibacy confined the darkness inside me, and placing myself in a boarding school kept my cravings in check.

The faculty was comprised of priests, retired professors, elderly widows, and a few devout married couples. I surrounded myself with zero temptations.

Best decision I'd ever made, and perhaps, the only noble thing I'd ever done.

I wasn't a kind priest. But I was an accomplished leader. Running this school allowed me to retain the one thing I needed above all else.

Control.

This small, sequestered corner of the world was my kingdom, and I knew how to deal with its wealthy, powerful families.

Like the one sitting before me.

"I agreed to your rules." I stood directly in front of Caroline, forcing her to look up at me. "Because they are *my* rules. Every stipulation you put forth is written in the school's handbook. You would know this had you bothered to read it."

"Don't you dare—"

"Read it. Acquaint yourself with how things are run here. I don't care what your last name is or how you do business in your world, but you will not come into mine and make threats again. This is my domain, and the decisions I make are in the best interest of the students. I will *not* cater to the demands of the Constantines. Not mother nor daughter nor any of the assistants, lawyers, bodyguards, or other minions you send my way." I clasped my hands behind me, relishing the stiffness in Caroline's shoulders. "If you have a problem with that, show yourself out and take your daughter with you."

They could stay or go. It made no difference to me. My class load was light this year. Either I would have a lot of free time on my hands or the bulk of my days would be allocated to Tinsley Constantine.

No question the girl would be a full-time job.

And no surprise she had something to say about it. "Are the bars on the windows in the best interest of your students? Do you provide straitjackets,

too, so we can't stab out our hearts in misery?"

I didn't acknowledge her, didn't so much as glance her way. I held Caroline's gaze, waiting for her decision.

"I was right about you." She gathered her purse and phone and stood, facing me toe-to-toe. "Hard and uncompromising. Exactly what my daughter needs."

Translation: I won't go easy on the girl.

She was right about that.

"Tinsley." Her tone announced her departure, cold and dismissive, as she strode to the door. "I expect a satisfactory report from Father Magnus."

There was no farewell. No glance back at the child she'd brought into the world. Just the rapid staccato of heels on polished boards fading down the hall.

The sound of tough love.

It wasn't a bad parenting approach and definitely had its place. But if tough love was all a child received, it didn't work.

I turned my attention to the girl, her posture stick-straight and head angled away from the door. I didn't need to see her eyes to know they were blinking back tears.

Sadness, anxiety, fear. In about three seconds, she was going to channel all that into anger and direct it at me.

Three.

Her breathing quickened.

Two.

She clenched her hands.

One.

"Send me home." She twisted to face me, her words rushing out. "I don't belong here. I'll never believe in your outdated religion or follow your stupid rules. You'll regret every second that I'm here. So tell her you changed your mind. Go before she leaves. Tell her I'm not a good fit for your school, and you don't want me here."

"No."

"Maybe I didn't make myself clear." She gnashed her teeth. "I'm going to fuck up every plan you have for me. Swear to God, my fuckups will be epic."

"That's okay. Your punishments will be just as epic as your fuckups."

“You...” Her chin jerked back. “Priests don’t curse.”

“How do you know? Have you ever met one?”

“No, but this can’t be... It’s not normal.” She shrunk back a little, her palms sliding over her thighs. Then she straightened, her gaze fixed across the room. “You, the bat, the bars on the windows... None of this feels right.”

It was time to educate her on a few things.

I sat on the edge of the desk beside her, resting an elbow on my thigh. “We’ve had a number of peregrine falcons venturing down from the mountains. They nest on the church and along the window ledges. It wasn’t a problem until the fledglings started flying into the glass and breaking their necks. After the third dead falcon, I had the bars installed. We haven’t seen a death since.”

Her blue stare lost its venom, and I knew, even though she would never admit it, that I’d found her soft spot.

She had a weakness for vulnerable things.

So do I.

“Bats are sexually dimorphic. Females are larger. Easy to identify.” I leaned in, hardening my expression. “Your *pup* was an adult male, and it didn’t fall to its death. Unless it had rabies. In that case, a quick death would’ve been merciful.”

I knew the damn thing had flown off, but I would check the area beneath the window to be sure.

“Six other priests live on campus.” I stood, holding her unblinking gaze. “When you meet them, you’ll have a point of reference against which I may be compared. Until then, refrain from making uneducated assumptions.” I headed toward the door. “Follow me.”

She obeyed without comment or attitude. A refreshing change. But it wouldn’t last.

I led her down the stairs and through the main building. On the ground floor, the din of voices announced a full dining hall before the crowd came into view.

Tomorrow marked the start of a new school year, and the girls were celebrating, reuniting with friends after summer break, and meeting the incoming freshmen.

Had things gone differently during her intake meeting, I would've allowed Tinsley to join in the festivities. Instead, I kept walking, expecting her to follow.

She lingered at the entrance, taking in the party. "What are they doing?"

"Eating, dancing, having fun. All the privileges you lost tonight." I rounded the next corner without slowing. "Keep up."

"Since when is *eating* a privilege?" She charged after me. "I'm starving."

"You should've considered that before you opened your mouth." I paused, throwing her words back at her. "I won't take this moment from you. When you make mistakes, you'll learn from them."

She huffed. "I'm not a bat—"

"I make no allowances for disrespect. Every ungrateful remark, eye roll, and gesture will be punished. Nod if you understand."

Her cheeks hollowed. She crossed her arms. Shifted her weight. Blew out a breath. Then she nodded.

"Good. Now stop dragging your feet."



CHAPTER 5

MAGNUS

DURING THE TEN-MINUTE walk to the dormitories, Tinsley kept pace with my longer strides, all the while pushing her bottom lip forward in an expression of discontent. Or maybe her lip naturally rested that way.

Pouty.

Sexy.

No, *Christ*. I snatched away the thought before it drew breath.

I couldn't think it, whether it was true or not. But there was something else appealing about her at the moment.

Her silence.

Sweet, glorious silence.

When she wasn't talking, she seemed older. More mature. With a lithe figure and self-assured gait, she carried herself with refinement and grace. Not in a deliberate way. No, she tried very hard to exude defiance and hostility. But when she let her guard down, her breeding shone through.

Obedience was second nature to her.

Submissive obedience.

That whisper of truth was harder to snuff out. It spoke directly to the parts of me I longed to forget.

"Were you telling the truth about the falcons?" she asked.

"I wouldn't lie to you. Not about that or anything else."

"Oh. Right. Because priests don't lie?"

"Because *I* don't lie. Left here."

She turned into the next hallway, depriving my view of her face. "Will I be able to see the falcons outside? Do the fledglings fly near the school?"

"Sometimes."

“Cool.” Her spine remained stiff, her tone terse. But the mention of the birds seemed to improve her mood by a small degree.

“We’re leaving the main building now.” I escorted her into a vacant corridor. “It houses the classrooms, offices, library, and dining hall. Up ahead is the residence hall. All students must be in their rooms for the night by nine. Lights out at ten. Otherwise, you’re free to roam within the walls of the campus.”

“When are we allowed outside the walls to roam the rest of the property?”

Sion Academy was one of two boarding schools in our small, self-contained village. Our sister school, St. John de Brebeuf, was an all-boys school run by Father Crisanto Cruz.

Unscalable walls encircled each campus. While aesthetically pleasing, they provided security against outside threats and prevented unauthorized interactions between the two schools. The church, athletic field, theater, and gymnasium sat at the center of the village between the two campuses, allowing us to share the costs of those facilities.

The sister school arrangement was a mutually beneficial one. It also didn’t hurt that Father Crisanto was my childhood best friend.

“There will be plenty of opportunities to explore the village,” I said. “But outside of the campus gates, students must be supervised at all times.”

“Heaven forbid an innocent virgin sees a boy.”

“There are regular social activities involving students from both schools as well as daily Mass.”

“What?” She stopped, her eyes bulging. “You go to church *every* day?”

“While school is in session, all students and faculty members attend Mass every morning at eight. Except Saturdays.”

“Um, yeah...” She made a face and continued walking. “Don’t sign me up for that.”

“*Every* student, Miss Constantine. As long as you’re a member of this school, you will follow the Catechism of the Catholic Church.”

“This just keeps getting better and better.”

“Ninety percent of *this* is how you react to it. Change your attitude.”

“And the other ten percent?”

“It’s happening whether you like it or not. That’s life.”

We entered the residence hall just as the door to the first room opened. Miriam stepped out and gave me a smile weathered with age.

“Good evening, Father Magnus.” She tucked a silver lock of hair behind her ear and took in my petulant charge. “You must be Tinsley.”

“Sure.” She shrugged.

“Tinsley.” I narrowed my eyes. “This is Miriam, the language arts teacher.”

“I’m also the dorm mother,” Miriam said.

“So basically, you’re here to make sure we don’t sneak out.” Tinsley arched a brow.

“No, I delegate that job. There’s a senior student assigned to each floor, tasked with supervising the residents and maintaining the safety and security of the dorm. We call them big sisters.”

“Mm. Sounds like a coveted job,” Tinsley said dryly, “for tattletales.”

Miriam inclined her head, giving no other reaction. She’d been doing this for a long time and experienced every manner of rebellion and rule breaking. Tinsley couldn’t faze the woman if she tried.

“I’m here to ensure the cleanliness of the dorms, administer medication, address individual needs, offer counseling, and otherwise support the activities of all the girls.” She tapped the door at her back. “My apartment is here. If you need anything at all, you know where to find me.”

“What I *need* is to go home.” Tinsley looked her dead in the eyes. “I don’t want to be here.”

“Give it a few weeks. You’ll change your mind.”

“Um, nooo,” she said in a singsongy voice. “I’m like one hundred percent certain that’s not going to happen.”

“If I’m wrong, we’ll talk about it. In the meantime, your luggage was sent to your room, along with everything you need for tomorrow.”

Miriam looked and sounded like a sweet old lady, but she ruled the dormitories with an iron fist. Tinsley would learn that soon enough.

“Have a good night, Miriam.” I motioned Tinsley toward the stairwell. “Let’s go.”

Silence greeted us on the second floor. The girls would be in the dining hall for another hour before checking into their rooms and settling in for the first day of school.

I didn't venture into this building often. I avoided it, to be honest. Too many teenage hormones and frilly pink things. Not to mention, I dreaded walking past an open door and seeing something that would put me in a compromising position.

"There are no cameras in the halls." I stopped at the second door. "No locks on the rooms."

"Where does the snitch sleep?" At my blank look, she clarified. "The big sister."

"Daisy is next to you." I nodded at the first dorm. "The bathroom is across the hall." I reached into the second room and flicked on the light. "This is you."

She craned her neck, peering into the spartan space. The twin bed, desk, and nightstand waited to be personalized. Most of the students went crazy decorating their rooms. But given the single small bag on the floor, she'd only brought the necessities.

"Is that your only luggage?" I asked.

"Apparently." She didn't move a muscle to step into the room as if doing so would seal her fate.

That ship had already sailed.

"The student handbook is on the desk. Read it before you go to sleep. In it you'll find campus maps and basic info like the dress code." From my position in the hall, I spotted her bedding and uniforms in the closet. "Mass begins at eight a.m. Be downstairs at seven forty-five sharp. You'll see where the girls are gathering to be escorted to the church."

She stared at the room, her gaze unfocused, unblinking. Shell-shocked.

Then she pulled in a breath and looked at me. "I'm sorry for being disrespectful."

I stared back, waiting for the catch.

"May I have my phone, please?" She fluttered her lashes.

"No." I flicked a finger, waving her into the room. "See that door? I want you on the other side of it until morning."

Her jaw set, her posture stiffening for a fight.

"That means *now*." I used a caustic tone, one that had been known to clear out a boardroom in under three seconds.

It had the same effect with Tinsley, her entire body springing into action before I roared the last syllable.

Gasping, she backed into the room with jerky steps and bumped into the desk. Visible tremors ran along her limbs. Her chin quivered, and she held herself tightly, an arm clutched around her midsection.

But she didn't crumple. Didn't sink to the floor like the others. Not this girl. She stood taller, slowly lowered her arm, and squared her shoulders.

The heave of her chest pulled her shirt taut, stretching the material across smallish breasts, pert little bumps, just enough tender flesh to crush between a finger and thumb.

I tore my gaze away and stared down at my hand, at my fingers rubbing against my thumb. Mimicking. Envisioning. Wanting that which I could *not* have. Like an addict in withdrawal.

My hands went into my pockets. My breathing remained steady. The muscles in my face never twitched. But beneath the facade, my sickness raged in a furnace of fire.

It wanted fear and pain, blood and welts, bruising, biting, choking, pounding, pounding, pounding...raw, feral, ruthless fucking.

I craved it.

Her fear scented the air, her breaths faltering and her pretty little elven face bereft of color. But she was strong. Resilient. She could bear it.

She would take it so beautifully.

Time to go.

I pulled the door closed, shutting her away before she saw my true form. Then I got the hell out of there.



CHAPTER 6

MAGNUS

SHOVING PAST THE main doors, I burst outside at a clipped pace. The darkness wrapped around me as I hooked a finger beneath my collar and tugged it away from my throat, pulling, yanking, trying to breathe.

What the hell had just happened?

I let a student get under my skin.

That was a first, but I had it under control. It'd taken me by surprise was all. No harm, no foul. Tinsley was oblivious, and I hadn't crossed any lines.

My only interest in her was on a nonphysical, nonsexual, academic level.

It wouldn't happen again.

I just needed to walk off the buzz circulating through my body.

"Hi, Father Magnus!"

A group of senior girls approached from the left, heading toward the building. I turned right without responding, and they went on their way, accustomed to my surly temperament.

I took the long way to the campus gates, trekking around the backside of the main building. As I passed beneath the turret connected to my classroom, I searched the ground for a dead bat. The light from my phone aided my hunt, an effort that proved pointless.

Just as I'd suspected, the bat had flown off.

My mind gravitated to images of fearful blue eyes, pale skin, and trembling hands, curled like claws ready to draw blood.

I shoved it down and focused on tomorrow's agenda—church, curriculum planning, and Tinsley's placement tests.

Gravel crunched beneath my shoes, and the nighttime air cooled my skin. Clean, fresh, pure mountain air. So unlike the stench of octane and

concrete in New York City. I missed the city, but I loved the tranquility here.

Veering off the path, I crossed the manicured lawn and followed the wall that bordered the campus. Constructed of stone to shoulder height, the wall didn't restrict the visibility of the village or the picturesque mountainscape beyond. Instead, it provided a sturdy foundation for the high-security fence that was erected on top of it. From a distance, the wires that ran between the black posts were transparent. Up close, one couldn't miss the voltage signs posted every few feet.

Touching the fence wouldn't kill a human, but a zap would knock a rebellious teenager off his or her feet. Every year, at least one imbecile tested it.

Nine years ago, Sion Academy was headed into bankruptcy. The primary reason was its failure to keep St. John's male students out of the girls' dorms. Teenage pregnancy and poor management had led to a detrimental decline in student enrollment.

When I bought the boarding school, I invested a substantial amount of my wealth into turning the place around. I added the security walls, replaced most of the faculty, created a highly competitive curriculum, quadrupled the tuition, and marketed the school to high-profile families.

Within two years, Sion had a waiting list a mile long.

The school's core values remained the same, focusing on the development of intellect, personhood, and spirituality. But I ran the enterprise like a cutthroat business, and in business, money talked.

So when Caroline Constantine offered a seven-digit endowment, she bypassed that waiting list.

I arrived at the gate—the only way in and out—and entered my code in the keypad. The lock buzzed, and I exited the campus.

With the nearest town miles away, most of the staff lived on the property in separate housing. A single paved road ran through the village with Sion Academy on one end and St. John de Brebeuf on the other.

A three-minute stroll along the quiet street brought me to my private rectory. Most of the other priests shared a house, but I required my own space.

The door creaked as I entered the one-story residence. A kitchenette and sitting area made up the front room. A short hallway led to a bedroom and

bathroom. A crucifix hung on the otherwise bare walls. Dark drapes on the windows. A threadbare couch. Wood-burning fireplace. Nothing more. Nothing less.

Modest.

Humble.

Some might say it was an inglorious step down from my penthouse in the Upper East Side. But that penthouse didn't define my worth. My actions did.

My life had been in deficit for years.

I emptied my pockets at the table and stared down at Tinsley's locked phone. I didn't need to access it. The report from my investigator had provided everything I needed to know about her.

The Constantines were the jewels of Bishop's Landing, the royalty of high society. But like most powerful families, they were involved in shady affairs, including a long-standing feud with the Morellis—another affluent family with an even dirtier underbelly.

When Tinsley's father died six years ago, it was rumored that the Morelli patriarch had ordered a hit on him. But that was never proved, and the death was ruled an accident.

There were no surprising revelations about Tinsley herself. She was the princess of the family—innocent, sweet, and primed for a marital union of Caroline's choosing. No doubt Caroline had been working that angle for years, positioning her daughter to marry into a family that strengthened her empire.

The thought made me sick. No one should be used that way, but it happened. Hell, it had been happening for centuries.

I stepped to the cupboard and removed a glass and a bottle of whiskey. As I started to pour, a knock sounded on the door.

"It's open." I grabbed a second glass.

"Thought you might want some company." Crisanto's lightly accented voice carried through the room.

"Bullshit. You're here to get juicy details on the Constantines."

"Indeed. Tell me everything."

I turned to pass him his drink, and as always, it was his smile that greeted me first. He had a great smile. Warm and genuine, it lit up his whole face.

He wore casual clothes tonight, trading his priest collar for a T-shirt and jeans. The white of his shirt accentuated his dark skin and black hair.

When he was ten, he moved to New York from the Philippines with his mother. I remembered the day he showed up at my Catholic grade school. Couldn't speak a lick of English. But he learned quickly, laughed easily, and shared my love for skateboarding.

We'd been best friends ever since. Inseparable until we graduated high school. Then he went to seminary to become a priest, and I took a very different path.

I carried my whiskey glass to the couch and drank deeply, savoring the smoky burn. "The meeting went as expected. Caroline threatened me. I threatened her, and now my hopes for an easy year are shattered."

"The last time you had an easy year, you were unbearable." Crisanto settled in beside me. "You were bored out of your mind. Grouchy. Whiny. Picking fights with the groundskeeper—"

"I don't whine."

"You don't like anything to be easy, Magnus. That's never been your style."

I reclined back, drinking, my mind swirling with everything I needed to do tomorrow.

"Is she as beautiful as the photos on the internet?" he asked.

"Caroline?"

"No, idiot." He rolled his eyes. "The daughter."

If another teacher asked me that, I wouldn't trust his intentions. But Crisanto was a priest first and cherished his living relationship with Jesus Christ above all else. Unlike me, he'd been called for a higher purpose, and he served with his whole heart. I'd never known a human being more honest and incorruptible than this guy.

Which was why I came here nine years ago, seeking his counsel.

He didn't tell me what I wanted to hear. He told me what I *needed*. Then he convinced me to stay. Not just to save Sion Academy, but to save myself.

"She's a brat." I removed my collar and loosened the top buttons on my shirt. "An uncooperative, disrespectful, sharp-tongued hellion."

"That's not what I asked."

"She's pretty for an eighteen-year-old."

With eyes that glowed like faerie fire when she was emotional. And her boldness? God help me, her feisty spirit made my blood run hot.

I was fascinated, and that fascination made me exceedingly uncomfortable.

“Crisanto...” I stared into my glass, swishing the amber contents around and around. “I had a relapse.”

“Okay.” He set his drink down and twisted on the couch to face me, instantly sliding into his priest role. “Is this a confession?”

“No. It was just a feeling. A thought.”

“The craving.”

That was what he called it. I called it a sickness. He was the only person alive who knew my struggle. He knew every ugly secret I carried.

“Yeah.”

“The mother triggered it?”

“Not this time.”

“The daughter, then.” He released a relieved breath.

“Your exhale is not reassuring. You put too much faith in me.”

“Attraction is human nature. We all experience it, and any priest who tells you otherwise is hiding something worse. We lead a lonely life. Going to bed every night alone. Growing old alone. It’s the sacrificial nature of our vocation. But I’ll be honest. I’ve been praying for the day that you sort out your preferences. Because let’s face it. You have terrible taste in women, my friend.” He shuddered dramatically.

“You’re an asshole.”

He laughed, loud and hearty, and grabbed his whiskey.

Only he would dare to find amusement in my flaws.

He’d been at my side since the beginning. While the other boys at our school were chasing after girls, he watched me chase after their mothers and teachers.

There were no traumatic events in my childhood. No inherited traits from my boring, law-abiding, white-collar parents. Nothing in my upbringing to pin this on.

My sexual predisposition was simply part of my nature.

“Listen.” Crisanto sobered. “You have more patience and determination than I ever will. You’ve been a godsend to this community. The money and

time you've put into the school is admirable. Selfless. Second to none. You're a good man, Magnus."

I grunted. "You know that's not true. I've never been a good man."

"I'm not talking about *then*. Sure, you're still as ruthless as ever. And downright scary when pushed. Maybe I don't agree with all your teaching methods, but when it comes to motivating the unmotivated, fear and guilt are effective tools."

"Spoken like a true Catholic." I held up my whiskey.

He clinked his glass with mine and drank, regarding me over the rim. "What's different about Miss Constantine?"

"She saved a bat."

"Do what now?"

I told him the story, sending him into another fit of laughter. Then we talked about his challenging schedule at St. John's, debated world events, and drank too much.

By the time he stumbled back to his rectory, I felt lighter. More levelheaded. Energized for the new school year.

I was ready to lay down the law for Tinsley Constantine.



CHAPTER 7

TINSLEY

I COULDN'T SLEEP.

It'd been hours since the clamor of laughter and footsteps had flooded the hallway outside my door. All had quieted down by ten p.m., but when the girls first arrived, I heard my last name mentioned more than once.

Yet no one had stopped to see if I was in my room. Not a single knock on my door.

If I were here of my own free will, I would've gone out there and introduced myself. I would've tried to make new friends.

But I wasn't, and I didn't. Fuck this place.

I rolled over in the narrow bed and could actually feel my hair frizzing and my face collecting wrinkles. How was anyone expected to sleep on this atrocious material?

I missed my silk pillowcases. I'd tried to pack them, but Justin—my mother's puppy dog and personal assistant—had tossed them back, claiming they weren't on the approved list. I'd tried to pack a lot of things as he stood over me with his disapproving, puppy eyes.

Too short.

Too see-through.

No thongs.

Too much skin.

Not appropriate.

Sends the wrong message.

He removed every garment I put in the bag. When my temper finally blew, I threw a bra at his face and told him to pack the bags himself.

The dickhead packed one bag. One. And he filled it with clothes I didn't even know I owned. Conservative, underwhelming garbage.

Didn't matter. I wouldn't be here for long. I'd spent the entire night planning my exit.

Getting caught with alcohol, drugs, or weapons in my possession would guarantee my expulsion. But I had no way to obtain those things.

Setting my room on fire was an option. But I didn't want anyone harmed in the making of my destiny.

If I had my phone, I could watch porn on max volume during one of my classes.

If I had my phone, I would call Keaton. He would listen to me and say all the right things. He would understand. But since I didn't have access to my brother, I read the rules in the handbook while thinking up ways to break them.

I would have to be deliberately disobedient. Disorderly. Creative. Brave. Bolder than ever. I would have to do things I would've never dared to do in Bishop's Landing.

Being bad wasn't in my nature. I couldn't fathom breaking things or stealing from someone. Hell, I'd never even smoked a cigarette.

But I was getting better at speaking my mind and sneaking around with boys. Since those were the very reasons I'd ended up here, maybe that was exactly how I would get thrown out.

Except the handbook had an entire chapter dedicated to the strict policies on male-female interactions. Electric fences surrounded each campus for fuck's sake.

Maybe there was a way around the walls.

I needed to befriend the troublemakers, the girls who had been here long enough to know the lay of the land and all its weak points. Sion Academy may be strait-laced and prissy, but there was a bad crowd in every school. It wouldn't be hard to find them.

Just before dawn, a flurry of footsteps pattered down the hall. It sounded like more than one person. Like a stampede. Only they were tiptoeing and making shushing sounds, trying to keep quiet as they rushed past my room.

I flipped over and glanced at the clock. And groaned. I'd only been asleep for twenty minutes, and the girls didn't need to be downstairs for another two hours.

What on earth were they doing up so early?

Curiosity pulled me from the bed. I opened the door, catching a glimpse of someone's backside as she raced to catch up. She vanished around the corner to the stairs, wearing a tiny tank top and thong underwear.

Son of a bitch. No thongs, my ass.

I clenched my hands and took off at a sprint, slipping past the closed door of the big sister's room.

At the stairwell's landing, I could go up or down. Muffled noise came from above, so I followed it, my pulse racing with nervous energy.

In any other situation, I would've felt under-dressed in a T-shirt and bikini underwear. But it was six in the morning, and I was chasing a girl wearing butt floss.

The stairs opened to the top level with an empty corridor identical to my floor, rooms on either side, and the air deafeningly quiet. I crept along the hallway, passing open doors and vacant dorms. Personal belongings filled each one, but every bed lay empty, the sheets in disarray.

Where was everyone?

Excited whispers drifted from the end of the corridor. I hurried toward the voices and stopped in the doorway of the last dorm.

A dozen girls plastered themselves to the two windows. With their backs to me, they elbowed and pushed, fighting to look outside. Some stood on the bed to see over the others.

There was more than one pair of thongs in the crowd. A lot of cheeky panties and bra-covered boobs. Big boobs. Curvy, womanly bodies.

Must be nice.

With my skinny bird legs and flat chest, I looked like a teenage boy compared to most of them. It was intimidating. But I was used to that feeling. I owned it.

The sun crested the mountains, illuminating the sky in pale pastels. I lingered on the threshold to the room, dying to know what could be so damn engrossing at the ass-crack of dawn.

"Look at him." A pretty redhead sighed. "It's not fair."

"He's actual, literal sex," another girl whispered. "Even his sweat is gorge."

"Those arms, though."

"Arms?" A brunette with endless curves pressed her brow to the glass. "Girrrrl, look at dat ass."

I sucked on my bottom lip, biting down on a smile.

The boys at St. John de Brebeuf must've been exercising in the athletic field. It was football season, and evidently, these girls had a favorite player. But how much could they see from this distance?

I inched closer, approaching their backs. Not one head turned toward me as I squeezed in on the end and peered around the edge of the window.

Oh.

My.

God.

That was no *boy*.

I clapped a hand over my mouth, muffling my gasp as I drank in the glory that was a half-naked Father Magnus.

Dressed in nothing but gray sweatpants, he stood beneath the window and stretched his arms overhead. The thin sweatpants hung low on his narrow hips, molding to the thick shape of his bulge and clinging precariously to the firm, round muscles of his backside.

That ass was no joke. I silently willed the waistband to give up its hold and fall already.

He clasped his hands behind his head and turned toward the sunrise, tilting his face heavenward as if soaking in the rays. His stance highlighted the definition along his spine, the dips and grooves of his carved torso, and the power in his legs.

Stunningly beautiful.

Dangerously delicious.

Sinfully pornographic.

Behind him, a cluster of outdoor fitness equipment scattered along the rubber jogging trail. The path wound across the campus grounds and led to the locked gate.

The girls obviously knew his schedule and set their alarms to watch him run that trail and stop at the equipment beneath the window. At six in the morning, he probably thought he had privacy.

Dummy.

Never underestimate the mind of a woman.

Gushing whispers continued around me. They hadn't noticed my presence, their eyes glued on the forbidden view.

“Thank God for his dedication to physical health.” The black girl beside me traced a heart on the steamed glass inches from her face.

“Tucker said he lifts weights with the football team after his morning runs. I’ve never wanted to be a boy so badly in my life. Can you imagine working out with that man?”

“Yes. I can and do imagine it. All. Day. Long.”

“You’re going to hell.”

“For him, I’ll go on my knees.”

“I swear on all that is holy, I would suck the Jesus out of his cock.”

“Same, girl. Same.”

These bitches weren’t prissy at all. I’d found the bad crowd.

A smile stretched my face. I was right there with them, agreeing and nodding with everything they said. From afar, when his condemning glare wasn’t aimed at me, he was the sexiest man alive.

But up close, with his heat and anger and intoxicating scent smothering my senses, he was terrifying.

He did a few more stretches on the strength bars, eliciting sighs from his audience. Then he jogged off toward the gate, his ass flexing through ground-covering strides.

“I don’t know what those V thingies are called,” someone said. “But I want to lather them in butter and rub my naked body along the grooves.”

“They’re called sex lines,” I murmured.

“What?” A dozen heads turned in my direction.

“The V-shaped cut in the abs. They’re sex lines.” I stepped back and leaned a shoulder against the wall, absorbing the weight of their stares. “The scientific name is transversus abdominis. It’s a sheet of muscle that wraps around the body and supports the spine. When you have a super-strong core and low body fat, you can see the muscle’s edges. Also known as the Adonis belt, named after Adonis, the legendary god of beauty.”

“Are you smart or something?” the redhead asked in a tone that suggested I was a response away from being labeled *uncool*.

“I remember things. Like all the lickable parts of the male anatomy.” I pulled in a breath. “So you, uh, watch him run every day?”

“Morning worship begins at six,” the girl in the back said. “His body is our temple, and we come to pray.”

A chorus of *Amens* erupted, followed by laughter.

The curvy brunette hopped down from the bed and approached, giving me a head-to-toe perusal. "You're Keaton Constantine's sister."

Here we go.

"I'm Tinsley. Just got here last night."

"I'm Nevada. I went to Pembroke with Keaton." She turned to her friends. "He was the rugby captain. King of the school. Talk about hot. Holy fuck, you guys, the guy is fire. He and I were like this." She held up her hand with her fingers crossed.

"Funny." I cocked my head. "He never mentioned you."

"I transferred here as a sophomore, and he's a year older, so..."

"Transferred? Were you expelled from Pembroke?"

"Maybe." A wicked glint lit her eyes.

"I'd love to hear that story." I smiled, encouraging her.

"That's old news." She waved it away. "I don't mess around with boys anymore. Got my sights on a man. A man in black."

"Father Magnus?"

"Of course. I have plans for that holy creature the next time I get him alone."

Was she crazy? I couldn't get the *unholy* sound of his roar out of my head. Had he never yelled at her like that? Or looked at her like he wanted to beat her black and blue?

"Doesn't he scare you?" I asked.

"Totally." She pinched her nipples and arched her spine, humming, "He scares me so hard."

Frustration tightened my shoulders. I wasn't going to get anywhere with this hussy.

"I only met him last night, and I thought..." How did I say this without sounding like a snowflake? "He's meaner than I expected."

"Oh, he's mean. But every time I look into those sexy blue eyes, I go all melty and do whatever he demands."

"So he hasn't punished you?" I scanned the room, scrutinizing the reaction of each girl. "Any of you?"

Some of them shrugged. Others nodded with pursed lips. None of them looked scared or abused.

"I'm Carrie, the big sister on this floor." The black girl raised a hand, gave a prim wave, and returned it to her cocked hip. "If you piss him off,

he'll make you do things, detention, extra work, shit like that. It's not all bad. Some of us even like it, you know, when we get one-on-one time with him."

Her smile made me relax. Maybe I'd overreacted to the whole thing last night.

"I don't know." A tall blonde stepped toward the door and paused. "Remember what happened to Jasmine last year?"

A wave of discomfort rippled through the room. Some of the girls drifted into the hall. Others stared at the floor.

Clueless, I tried to interpret their expressions. "What happened to Jasmine?"

"She stayed after class, took off her clothes, and straddled his lap. She told us she was going to do it." Carrie lifted a shoulder. "She was gone the next day. No one's seen or heard from her since."

"But she doesn't have all this." Nevada slid her hands along her voluptuous figure. "I'll succeed where Jasmine failed."

"You're going to get your ass expelled, bitch." Carrie laughed on her way out.

Expelled.

I didn't have the curves, confidence, or sex appeal to seduce a man like Father Magnus. But I didn't want to succeed. I wanted to get thrown out.

As I wandered back to my room, I turned the idea over in my head.

Not gonna lie. He still scared the bejesus out of me. But if his corrections were as bearable as the girls claimed, I could power through them to earn the one punishment that would send me home.



CHAPTER 8

MAGNUS

THE BUZZ OF eighty chattering girls filled the front lawn of Sion Academy. I stood at the entrance of the main building, invigorated by the energy in the air.

White shirts and plaid skirts gathered in four groups, representing each of the four grade levels. Each group of twenty students was assigned to a teacher, an escort, who would lead them off campus for the short walk to the church.

I glanced at my watch, and right on time, the groups began to file through the gate. Plaid uniforms bounced and twirled, wriggled and skipped, constantly moving. Teenage girls and their endless energy.

The trail of green plaid streamed through the gate and down the street until one group remained.

I checked my watch. 7:50.

The last group didn't move.

"Father Isaac?" I met his eyes over the crowd of students. "What's the holdup?"

The elderly priest adjusted his glasses and squinted at his phone. "I'm missing one."

"Who?" I made my way toward him, scanning a few of the faces in his group.

Seniors.

I knew who the no-show would be before he said, "Tinsley Constantine." He looked up at me. "I'll go get her."

Father Isaac was a brilliant music teacher, exceptionally attentive and good-natured. The students adored him.

Tinsley would eat him for breakfast.

“Wait here. I’ll deal with it.” I turned to the girl at my side. “Carrie. With me.”

I walked fast, cutting the ten-minute trek in half. Carrie tried to keep up, her shorter legs forced into a jog.

“Have you seen Miss Constantine this morning?” I hit the stairwell and took the steps two at a time.

“Yes,” she panted behind me. “She was with us when we left our rooms. She must’ve turned back.”

I glanced over my shoulder, marking her winded breaths and the sweat beading along her brow. “Add thirty minutes of cardio to your daily routine.”

“I have a full schedule this year.”

“Get up earlier.”

She blushed. “Yes, Father.”

The girl was an extraordinary vocalist in the church choir. Highly intelligent. Strong work ethic. Her mother was the first African American senator in New Hampshire, her father the state attorney general. A powerful political family, and my investigator had yet to uncover any corruption among them.

Carrie was mostly well behaved, but she needed to choose better friends. She spent too much time with Nevada Hildebrand, heiress to the multinational Hildebrand pharmaceutical corporation. Nevada was wild and desperate for attention. I gave her a month before she was suspended.

When I reached Tinsley’s dorm, I pounded on the closed door and stepped away with my back to the room. I wouldn’t put it past her to come out undressed.

She didn’t come out at all.

“Open it.” I nodded at Carrie, keeping my back to the door.

She obeyed and slipped into the room. Her footsteps halted. Then she whispered, “Girl, you’re in so much trouble.”

I pinched the bridge of my nose. “Is she decent?”

“Define *decent*.”

“Is she wearing her uniform?”

“Yes?”

Why did she answer that like a question?

I turned and found Tinsley sitting on the bed and shoving cookies into her mouth. She hugged a box of them to her chest and reached in to grab another handful.

"If you take one more bite, your punishment will double." I glared at her.

She glared back and crammed the cookies into her mouth. Crumbs tumbled down her untucked shirt and gathered on her skirt. A skirt that wasn't long enough to cover her thighs.

"Stand up and join me in the hall." I clasped my hands at my back with my feet braced apart.

She took in my stance and slowly rose.

Jesus. Most of the skirt had been sheared off. It was so short that only a strip of plaid peeked out from beneath her shirttails.

Rather than hiding the destruction, she held the box of cookies out to the side and struck a pose. "Rate the fit."

"The fit?"

"Old people," she huffed under her breath. "The outfit. Rate the outfit."

Carrie choked on a laugh and quickly blanked her face.

"I gave you an order, and every second you disobey is another strike."

"You're no fun." Tinsley tucked the cookies to her chest, munching on another handful as she marched into the hall.

"Carrie, grab the scissors off the desk and join us." I held out my hand to Tinsley. "Give me the food."

She pushed her lips out and stepped back, hugging the box tighter. "I haven't eaten since lunch. *Yesterday.*"

"Catholics fast at least one full hour before receiving the Holy Eucharist."

"I don't know what that means but...*phew.* Good thing I'm not Catholic." She ate another cookie and stared at my waiting hand.

I didn't move, didn't look away as I mentally added up her infractions.

Her breathing hastened, and she slowly moved the cookies toward me. I gripped the box, and she held on for a moment, tugging, testing me, before letting go.

Carrie appeared at my side. I took the scissors and gave her the cookies.

"Hold out your hand," I said to Tinsley.

Her eyes popped wide. "No way."

“The strikes are multiplying.” I kept my voice calm and my face expressionless. “Each one comes with a consequence. It’s going to be a very long day for you.”

“I won’t let you cut off my fingers. What kind of school is this?”

I lifted my gaze to her long, shimmery, pearl-colored hair.

“Not my hair!” She wheezed frantically and thrust out her arm. “If you draw blood, I’m suing.”

“The other hand.”

She growled and switched arms.

With a snap of the blades, I cut through the delicate diamond bracelet on her wrist and caught it as it fell.

“No!” Her jaw hung open, her breaths bursting out. “My brother gave me that! It’s a three-thousand-dollar tennis bracelet.”

“Now it’s worthless. Just like your uniform.” I tossed it toward the trash can in her room and handed the scissors to Carrie. “Which dorm did you steal the food and scissors from?”

Tinsley stared at her bare wrist, her eyes stark with rage.

“I have infinite patience, Miss Constantine. But right now...” I looked at my watch. “Twenty-one people are going to be late for Mass because of your selfishness.”

Her rebellion was expected, but she was pushing it too far, and she knew it.

“Last room on the right.” She pointed behind her.

“Return the stolen items,” I said to Carrie. “Quickly.”

As she raced off, I leaned in and put my mouth in the space beside Tinsley’s ear. She smelled like lemon drops and vanilla. And stolen cookies.

“I know what you’re doing, and it won’t work.” I breathed in her stillness, her helpless fear. “Mommy Dearest forked over a lot of money for you to be here. You’re stuck with me for a year.”

“The best way to motivate me is to tell me it can’t be done.” She turned her face toward mine, the sputter of her exhalations peppering my lips. “Save us both the trouble and send me home.”

Her mouth was too close. I could taste the sugar, the delicious sin that awaited on the other side of that narrow inch. It was just a twitch away. A short, compulsive motion.

Our gazes held, and in that sliver of impermissible nearness, I felt my teeth tearing into the poutine of her lips. I tasted her blood, heard her whimpers, and saw her beautiful pain.

The tread of footsteps ripped me from the reverie.

As Carrie hurried toward us, I straightened, and Tinsley released a held breath.

“Carrie.” I kept my voice smooth and unaffected. “Explain to Tinsley why Catholics practice fasting before Mass.”

“Physical hunger strengthens our focus and creates spiritual hunger for the Lord.”

“Thank you. You can go. Tell Father Isaac to head to the church. Tinsley and I will be a moment.”

“Okay.” She backed toward the stairwell, tossing me a coy smile. “It’s really good to see you again, Father Magnus. I look forward to your Advanced Calculus class this—”

“Mass started two minutes ago.”

“Right.” She spun and took off down the stairs.

Tinsley leaned against the doorframe of her room and slid her fingers along the placket of buttons between her breasts. “What are you going to do to me?”

“That’ll come later. It’ll be unpleasant, but try not to worry about it.”

“What do you mean?” Her fingers quivered, and she lowered her hand.

Delayed consequences had the best effect. The anticipation, the not knowing, was a consequence in and of itself. But it was nowhere near the punishment she would be receiving this afternoon.

A glance into her room confirmed she had four undamaged uniforms hanging in the closet.

“You have sixty seconds to follow the dress code and meet me in the stairwell.” I strode toward the exit.

“Are there any sharp objects along the way?” she asked my back. “So I can throw myself on one of them?”

“Fifty seconds.” I entered the stairwell and leaned back against the wall, seeking the coolness of the bricks.

As I lingered there, my thoughts tried to twist in a dangerous direction. Fifty seconds was too long to stand idle while surges of hot lust became reacquainted with my body.

My reaction to her made no sense. There was nothing even remotely attractive about the little imp.

The lie pricked my heart. Tinsley Constantine was inconceivably beautiful from every angle, unpredictable at every turn, and had a mouth on her that wouldn't quit. She challenged me, shocked me, and twisted me up. Even if she was just a child.

She's eighteen. Legal age of consent. Technically, an adult.

That meant Caroline's parental rights were nonexistent. Tinsley could leave Sion Academy, screw every male in the state of Maine, and there wasn't a damn thing her mother could do about it. Except cut her off. Caroline could and would take away Tinsley's trust fund, financial support, and the roof over her head.

Maybe her mother wouldn't disown her if she were expelled from Sion, but she was taking a huge risk trying to find out.

I refused to be part of it. She was my student, and it was my job to educate and discipline her. Anything else was an abuse of power.

At the sound of her approach, I realized I'd forgotten to check my watch. Had sixty seconds passed? Five minutes? We were already late. At this point, the only purpose in going to Mass was to teach her a lesson.

She couldn't manipulate her way around the rules. I was far better at this than she was.

When she reached the stairwell, I inspected her uniform. The shirt was tucked in, the buttons closed from throat to waist. Her knee-high socks were pulled up tight, her loafers the appropriate style and color. In the winter, they wore school-issued cardigans. But it wasn't necessary today.

"Kneel." I walked a circle around her, noting the tension in her shoulders.

She wanted to argue but did as commanded and lowered to her knees.

"The skirt touches the floor as required." I flicked a finger. "Stand."

As she rose, her eyes blazed with outrage. The intensity took me aback. This was more than annoyance about conforming to the rules.

"Get it off your chest." I crossed my arms. "But choose your words carefully."

"Okay, well, that thing you just did with the skirt? It's like so..." She made a sound of irritation. "Patriarchal."

"Go on."

“It’s needlessly demeaning. I mean, you can clearly see the length of my skirt without making me kneel for you. It’s an archaic act of shaming so characteristic of a system controlled by men. If I were a male student, I wouldn’t have to kneel during a wardrobe inspection. I wouldn’t even have to wear a skirt. It’s total bullsh—” She took a breath and calmed her voice. “It’s an outdated, sexist practice, one I strongly suggest you discontinue. You know, in the best interest of the students.”

I lowered my arms and stared at her, stunned. In the nine years I’d been running this school, not one girl had presented that compelling argument.

“You’re right.”

“I am?”

“Yes, Tinsley. You asserted your belief confidently, respectfully, and convincingly. You convinced *me*, which rarely happens. I’ll see to it that the practice is ceased by all staff members at Sion.”

“Just like that?”

“Just like that.” I cocked my head. “I’m impressed.”

“Thank you.”

“That doesn’t mean that shaming and humiliation won’t be used as forms of punishment.”

“Oh.” Her eyebrows knitted. “Maybe I can assert an argument for that.”

Doubtful. “You can try. Another time.”

I led her out of the residence hall, and ten minutes later, we stood before the towering arched doors of the church. A choir of voices drifted from within, marking the end of the second reading. The service was halfway over.

With my hand on the door, I started to pull it open and stopped, looking back at my charge. “Have you ever been inside of a church?”

“I once took an Anusara yoga class in the house of a well-known witch coven.”

“Okay.” I breathed in slowly. “That’s not the same thing at all.”

“It sure felt churchy with all the stars and crosses engraved everywhere. Though they might’ve been *inverted* crosses.” She shrugged.

“Your goal today is to listen and observe. Follow my lead and sit, kneel, and stand when I do.”

I escorted her inside and spotted Crisanto at the pulpit, reading the gospel. Students from both campuses filled the pews from the front row to

midway back. Boys on one side and girls on the other.

Dipping my fingers in the holy water, I made the sign of the cross. Then, to mitigate our disruption, I slipped into the last row with Tinsley at my side. No one noticed. At least, not right away.

As Crisanto moved on to the homily, one of the senior boys sitting a few pews before us glanced over his shoulder. He started to turn back and did a double take, his eyes locking on to Tinsley.

The little shit openly stared at her, stared harder, and continued to do so as his elbow rammed into the guy beside him. Within seconds, the entire row of senior boys was gawking at her.

I gave them the sternest look I had, but none of them caught it. They were spellbound by the Constantine princess. Maybe they recognized her from the press. But I knew it was more than that. The girl was a knockout. Stunning beyond anything these boys had ever encountered.

Out the corner of my eye, she held her palm out and blew them a kiss.

Some of them scrambled to catch it. None were listening to the sermon.

I angled toward her and growled in her ear. "This is your only warning. Do that again, and you'll earn another strike."

"Are these strikes given with a strap or a cane?" she whispered.

"Shut up and pay attention."

Five minutes later, she was asleep, her neck hanging at an awkward angle, bobbing her head.

I grabbed a missal from the book rack and dropped the heavy text onto her lap.

She jumped, her arm flying out and nailing me in the chest.

"Sorry," she mouthed.

Within minutes, her head bobbed again.

And so it went. Through what little of Mass she was actually conscious, she groaned between the kneeling and standing, yawned through the prayers, smiled and winked at the boys, and tested my patience. She did everything wrong.

But she would learn. By the end of the day, she would understand the meaning of a hard lesson.



CHAPTER 9

TINSLEY

MY HEAD POUNDED as I stared at the laptop, the screen growing blurry with each heavy blink. I snapped it closed. After three hours of test-taking, I could barely keep my eyes open.

I stood from the desk and extended my arms toward the domed ceiling, stretching in a yoga upward salute, trying to wake my muscles.

Father Magnus's classroom had been empty all morning, save for the man himself. For the past three hours, he sat in the row behind me, working on his laptop. He was so eerily quiet, so stock-still, I might've forgotten he was there. But that was impossible.

His presence overwhelmed the very air, smothering it with his dark masculinity and the echo of his promise.

It'll be unpleasant.

He was really playing up my impending punishment, drawing out the suspense and dread. It was working. I envisioned a physical beating with some kind of dungeon-like implement, one I would fight tooth and nail. I would do everything in my power to make him regret keeping me here.

But deep in my gut, I was scared.

Pulling in a breath, I turned to face him.

"You finished?" His low, rich timbre vibrated through me as he lifted his eyes from his work.

"Crushed it."

I'd considered *not* crushing it. If poor test scores meant more one-on-one time with Father Malicious, it would give me more opportunities to land a spot on his banned-from-Sion list.

But I couldn't do it. I didn't care if I was perceived as disobedient, entitled, or promiscuous. But I couldn't bear the thought of anyone thinking

I was dumb.

My pride could only take so many hits.

He looked at his watch. “You still have forty minutes left. Most students run out of time during these tests.”

“I don’t know what you want from me. I answered all the questions.”

“If you didn’t do your best—”

“Yeah, I know. More strikes. Geesh.”

“Head to the dining hall. After lunch, I expect you back in this room. I teach two classes in the afternoon. You’ll sit through those, and by tomorrow, I’ll have your test results and class schedule.” He returned his attention to his laptop. “Dismissed.”

As I treaded out of the classroom, his gaze burned a hole between my shoulder blades, and I knew. I just knew he was counting down the minutes to whatever punishment he had planned for me.

At the doorway, I peeked back, and sure enough, his eyes were waiting, watching, glowing with anticipation.

With a shiver, I bolted down the hall.

Down the stairs and around a few bends, I found the dining hall easily enough. Starving, I made a beeline for the serving line. If the food was anything like the gooey, homemade cinnamon roll I’d grabbed from here after Mass, I was in for a treat.

Around thirty students and teachers sat at round tables scattered throughout the room. Their conversations quieted when I entered, their eyes tracking my path to the food counters.

I hated that. It didn’t matter where I went or what I was doing. There were always spectators judging me, picking out my flaws, and looking for ways to use me for my family.

Tuning them out, I filled a plate with organic fruit, warm baked bread, and vibrant green salad with grilled chicken. Everything looked so fresh and high quality, made from the best ingredients. Given the outrageous tuition, it made sense that first-class meals would be included.

I grabbed a bottle of water and began the arduous task of finding a place to sit.

Every pair of eyes in the dining hall watched me waffle over where to go. Yet no one offered a seat at their table. Not even Nevada and her redheaded sidekick. They looked away as I approached. Whatever. I didn’t

want to be friends with them, either. I just wanted to eat my lunch without having to introduce myself to another group.

“What are you doing, Keaton’s sister?” Nevada asked as I took a seat across from her.

“Don’t be an asshole. You know my name.” I tucked into my salad.

“Everyone gets a nickname. That’s how this works.” She looked at something behind me and raised her voice. “Isn’t that right, Droopy Daisy?”

I twisted in the chair as the girl in question entered the dining hall. Her shoulders drooped. Her hair hung in stringy brown strands. But it was her disfigured face that had likely earned her the mean nickname.

Skin sagged from her eye sockets, pulling the outer corners of her eyelids downward as if there were no bones to hold the flesh of her cheeks in place. At first glance, I wondered if her face had been melted in a fire. But her misshapen mouth appeared to have no lower jaw or, at least, a severely underdeveloped one.

The deformity didn’t obscure her expression, though. If anything, her twisted features underscored the infuriation and hurt that burned in her eyes.

If I were a good person, I would lay into Nevada for being a nasty bitch and find a different table to finish my lunch. But I wasn’t. I couldn’t afford to make enemies with these girls. Not until I secured my exit out of here.

So I kept my disapproval to myself and inhaled my food.

“Droopy Daisy is the big sister on your floor.” Nevada nibbled on a carrot, studying me. “Watch your back. She’ll rat you out for using more than two squares of toilet paper.”

“Good to know.”

“I’m Alice.” The redhead leaned back and tapped her nails on the table. “You owe me a box of cookies.”

Shit. I hadn’t thought about who I might’ve stolen from this morning before Mass. But given the amount of food she had stashed in her room, she wasn’t hurting for cookies.

“I’ll pay you back.” I shrugged.

“Pay me back by introducing me to your brother Winston.”

Gross. “He’s twice your age.”

“Exactly. And he’s fucking gorgeous.”

“He has a girlfriend.”

“Tell him to visit you *without* the girlfriend. I’ll take care of the rest.”

She didn’t have a chance in hell with Winny. He was obsessed with his little plaything, Ash Elliott, and far too busy to drive to Maine. If anyone visited me, it would be Keaton.

I wasn’t about to share any of that with her. So I stood and grabbed the uneaten bread off my plate. “I have to get going. See you guys later.”

According to the schedule posted on the wall, I had thirty minutes to kill. Fresh air and sunlight drew me outside, and before I knew it, I was strolling off the paved path and through a thick copse of shade trees.

In about a month, Maine would be as cold as the North Pole. But today, the autumn air felt glorious, the canopy of leaves afire in hues of golds and reds. It made me crave cider and fuzzy blankets and *home*.

There were so many things I didn’t like about Bishop’s Landing, such as the pretentious parties and fake smiles. But I missed my brothers and sisters, the comfort in familiarity, and my freedom.

Here, I was imprisoned by a wall, an actual electric fence. The cage felt smaller and smaller by the hour, closing in and making it hard to breathe.

If I went along with this, if I accepted this school and finished the year here, what then?

My mother would offer up her virgin princess like a sacrifice to the wealthiest, most powerful family she could find, thereby transferring control over my life to yet another asshole.

If I didn’t take hold of my future now, I never would.

A dirt trail cut through the grove. I nibbled on the crusty bread and strolled along, lost in thought. Until movement caught my eye.

Something wriggled in the leaf litter. I held still, squinting, and spotted a narrow white face. No, two faces.

Two tiny gray fur balls, about five inches long, clung to a fallen branch. With black beady eyes, Mickey Mouse ears, and rat-like tails, they were the cutest opossums I’d ever seen.

“Awww! Are you littermates?” I searched the area for more and realized they were likely orphaned.

They were too young, too wobbly on their little toes. Opossums this small lived in their mother’s pouch. I didn’t know how they would survive the winter out here, let alone the next few days without food and shelter.

I knelt beside them, and *oh my heart*. They were so precious with their little pink noses and twitchy whiskers. They didn't seem afraid of me. In fact, their heads lifted from the branch, their snouts reaching toward my hand.

The bread.

"You're hungry." I looked around for a safe place to feed them.

A few feet away, the base of a huge tree offered all sorts of hiding spots. If I moved them there, I wouldn't have to worry about a peregrine falcon swooping down and eating them.

"I'll call you Jaden and Willow." Slowly lifting their branch, I dragged them to the tree.

The tangled aboveground root system formed a deep recess, perfect for sheltering their tiny bodies from predators and cold.

I made a soft bed out of leaves and added the bread. Then, using another stick, I transferred each opossum into the cavity. They instantly fell upon the bread, tearing off tiny bites.

Fruit or veggies might've been better, but I was fairly certain they would eat anything. In Bishop's Landing, our gardener complained about opossums scavenging through the garbage.

After dinner, I would bring them water and a variety of food. But for now, I lay down on my side, contentedly watching them eat.

Until I fell asleep.

It was a horrible accident. I hadn't even meant to close my eyes. But when I woke, I knew an hour or two had passed.

I was in deep fucking shit.

Within the shelter of tree roots, Jaden and Willow curled up beside the partially eaten bread. Sound asleep. Safe.

I left them there and raced back to the main building with dread gnawing the lining of my stomach. By the time I reached his classroom, I felt like I was going to be sick.

The door was shut, but according to the clock I'd passed in the hall, I'd missed both of his classes.

My heart thundered as I reached for the handle, my hand hovering, trembling over the latch.

I couldn't do it. Not like this. I couldn't go in there all scared and worn down and *guilty*. Not to mention, I needed to pee something fierce. My

bladder felt like it was going to pop.

Curling my fingers, I yanked my hand from the handle and slowly backed away.

Two seconds later, the door opened.

I held my breath as Carrie swept out. She veered in the opposite direction and slumped against the wall with her eyes closed. Her hands went to her heart, and she sighed with nauseating pleasure.

Meanwhile, I stood a few feet away, feeling woefully different about the man in that room. But she wasn't the one who had destroyed her uniform, violated the fasting rule, fell asleep in church, and missed his two classes.

I'm so dead.

Straightening, Carrie paced off down the corridor and vanished around the corner. She never even saw me standing here.

But *he* did.

Filling the gap in the doorway, he held his arms at his sides, his expression empty. Unreadable.

His razored gaze dragged over me, and though I was prepared for its sharp edges, a full-body tremor broke free. I locked my legs to keep them from wobbling. I didn't cringe, didn't show weakness.

I bit down on a tender part of my lip, the spot I'd been worrying since I left Bishop's Landing. My teeth scraped it, cutting it open and beading blood on my tongue.

He noticed, his focus zooming in, pupils dilating. His dark lashes lowered like shields over his emotions, and his fingers did that thing with his thumb, rubbing together, cryptic and forbidding.

Whatever was brewing in the interior regions of Father Magnus wasn't good.

His silent stillness made a ruthless meal out of my nerves until my goosebumps formed goosebumps, and the hairs on my nape jumped away from my skin.

His fingers stopped moving, and his deep blue eyes latched on to mine.

"Close the door behind you." He delivered the order with terrifying calmness and strode back into the room.

I had no choice but to follow.



CHAPTER 10

TINSLEY

FEAR DUMPED INTO my bloodstream, shaking my limbs. I closed the door with a resounding click and shrank ten sizes as Father Magnus pivoted, giving me the full force of his glare.

“I went for a walk outside during lunch.” I ran my clammy palms down my skirt. “I fell asleep in the grove. I swear, I didn’t mean to. It’s just... I couldn’t sleep last night and—”

“Shut up.” His harsh tone ricocheted through the classroom, making me gulp.

He sat on the edge of his desk without taking his eyes off me. Mine were glued to him. I didn’t know what he was thinking or what he intended to do, but I’d put myself in this situation. The least I could do was face him like an adult.

“I won’t rehash your violations.” He tapped his finger on the desk. *Tap. Tap. Tap.* His hand stilled. “In total, you accumulated eighty-seven minutes of punishment.”

“What? I didn’t have that many—”

“Quiet!”

My jaw ached as I held it rigidly shut, wanting more than anything to disappear. Was he going to beat me for eighty-seven minutes? Good fucking God, I wouldn’t survive that.

How many strikes could I withstand before passing out? No one had ever hit me before.

“Hear me loud and clear, Miss Constantine.” He pushed off the desk and stepped to the enormous crucifix on the wall. “You will serve your penance without complaint or sloppiness. Failure to do so will reset the clock and add more time on the end.”

“I need to use the restroom.”

“No.” He crooked a finger. “Come here.”

I held his gaze with each begrudging step. It wasn't easy. His eye-contact game was far superior to mine, his glare so much more arrogant and threatening. But I refused to give him the satisfaction of seeing me cower. I was a Constantine, and dammit, I would act like one. So I kept my eyes leveled on his and sauntered across the short distance.

“Stand here and face the wall.” He pointed at the spot beneath the morbid cross.

At no time did I want to give him my back. I didn't see a strap or cane in sight, but he wore a belt. And a frighteningly cruel scowl. He was going to hurt me.

If I didn't stand where he indicated, he would hurt me worse.

The position put my eyes on the horror show that hung on the wall. The wooden feet of Jesus were life-size, nailed together on a board, and painted as if dripping with blood.

Why would anyone think it was a good idea to put this in a classroom?

I flattened my palms on the brick and tried to measure my breathing as he approached my back. Each menacing step directed the staccato of my pulse. Pressing closer, the length of his body aligned with mine. He dwarfed my smaller frame, saturating my skin with his heat.

No part of him touched me. Except his breath. His hot, invasive exhales stroked my nape and curled around my throat.

Then a huge, unsympathetic hand rested beside mine on the wall as he moved his mouth to my ear. “Touch your lips to his feet.”

“Ew! What?” My gaze flew to the crucifix. “I'm not doing that!”

“Ninety minutes.”

“Oh my God, what is this? Do you have some kind of foot fetish?”

“Ninety-three minutes.”

“You can't be serious! How many mouths have touched this thing?” My breaths grew wild. “It's not sanitary.”

“Ninety-six minutes.” He drove his face millimeters from mine. “We can do this all night, Miss Constantine. But you *will* kiss his feet for the full duration of the time owed.”

He wasn't fucking around. He wasn't even crossing any lines. Instead of a physical beating, he wanted me to kiss a crucifix for ninety-six minutes.

Fuck me.

Was this better than bruises and welts? I truly didn't know. I couldn't fucking think straight. Not with him so goddamn close, breathing down my neck.

I lifted on my toes, straining against the wall, the heat of him all around me, smothering. No escape. His hard physique blanketed my back, caging me in without touching.

It felt wrong. Sinful. Forbidden. If he were anyone else, maybe my thoughts wouldn't have gone there. But there was something profoundly sexual about Father Magnus. Not just his virility and strikingly gorgeous features. It was in his bearing, the way he bossed me around, came at me from all directions, and watched me from inches away, breathing roughly, heatedly against my face. Like he wanted to bend me over his desk and fuck me raw.

I didn't want that. Not with him. But my pussy thought it was a splendid idea.

Losing my virginity was high on my to-do list. Giving it up to a priest, though? *This* priest? The notion was insane. Petrifying.

And brilliant.

If he rejected my advances, I would get expelled. If he were as corrupt as everyone else in the world and welcomed my advances, I would report his ass and shut down the whole damn school.

But there was an extremely urgent problem.

"My bladder. It hurts so bad. Please..." The aching plea in my voice reached a whimpering pitch, dialed all the way up to engage his sympathy, if he possessed such a thing. "Please, let me run to the bathroom—"

"If you utter one more word about it, I'll double the length of your punishment."

Iron sheathed in suede, that voice belonged to a man who bent for no one. His sculpted lips lured victims to the altar with the promise of heavenly salvation before condemning them to eternal hell.

Ninety-six minutes would feel like eternal damnation with my bladder screaming and my mouth pressed to the graven image of a crucified white guy.

"Before we start..." He shifted, releasing my back to lean his shoulder against the wall. The position moved his arresting blue eyes impossibly

closer. “Carrie just made me aware of an assembly of girls who gather before Mass to watch me run.”

Carrie had snitched? Because she was the big sister on the third floor? Had she told on herself, too? She’d been pressed up against the window with the rest of them, drooling over the half-naked priest.

“Why do you think someone would watch you run?” I arched a brow, trying to ignore the chiseled planes of his stunningly gorgeous face.

“I take that to mean you didn’t participate this morning.”

“Oh, no. I was creeping right along with your horny fan club.”

“I want the names of everyone in attendance.”

“Um, yeah. This girl”—I aimed a thumb at myself—“isn’t a snitch. But here’s some advice. Put a shirt on. Increase your carbs. Grow a potbelly. Because the washboard, eight-pack thing? That’ll just keep reeling them in. Maybe you haven’t noticed, but every female in this school has a lady boner for you.”

He attempted a stoic expression, but the intensity of his disgust shone through.

“They call it Morning Worship.” I stared at the wall before me, basking in his discomfort. “To think, when the lights go out, all those dutiful prayer hands are petting the kitty in your honor.”

“Enough.”

“Can’t blame a girl for tapping into her potential. Tapping and rubbing —”

“You’re up to ninety-nine minutes. Shall I add more?”

“I’m good.” I ground my teeth.

“Remove your shoes and socks.”

What? I didn’t dare voice the question. Every response added more time. But fucking hell, I didn’t want to endure this with cold feet on the hardwood floors. Not that I had a choice.

As I kicked away the shoes and socks, I assumed this was just another layer of torment.

Until he circled behind me. “Now your underwear.”

I stopped breathing.

Only a few people had ever told me to remove my panties, and they were guys I’d been actively trying to fuck. I didn’t know a lot about priests

and their rules, but this was reprehensible. It was too intimate, too pervy. It couldn't be anything else but sexual.

"Whatever you're thinking, stop." His body edged closer to my back, his breath lashing at my neck as he spoke in a deep, scalding voice. "I'm not interested in anything beneath your skirt."

The words stripped my skin, flaying me with venom, hurting with unmistakable abhorrence.

Prickles of humiliation washed over me, and I wished, God, I wished I hadn't flinched. Even now, my shoulders bunched around my ears with the sinking realization that I would never be curvy like Nevada or seductive like Carrie or alluring and classy like my mother. I was too small and flat-chested, too mouthy and sarcastic.

As I stood there, shamed to my core, I knew there was no stopping what came next. Not with the displeasure wafting off the priest at my back.

"Take. Them. Off." The uncompromising command in his voice tightened my chest.

Fuck off battered against my rib cage, begging to launch free.

"Say it, Miss Constantine." His footsteps scuffed the floor, his proximity taunting. "Use that sharp tongue and double your time."

I just wanted to get this over with.

Reaching beneath my skirt, I gripped my underwear and shoved. The texture of soft fabric slipped down my thighs and caught on my bare knees. I wriggled my legs. White panties fell around my ankles, and the man in my periphery didn't so much as twitch.

I quickly snatched the underwear from the floor. When I straightened, his face was waiting, hovering a breath away.

"Obedience is the burial of the will and the resurrection of humility. The words of Saint John Climacus." He nodded at the nearby desk. "Stack your things there. You have three seconds."

I doubted Saint John had women's underwear in mind when he talked about humility. But I kept that to myself and did as ordered.

When I returned to the crucifix, I was hyper-aware of my nudity beneath the skirt. But Father Magnus's only interest was my face.

He was waiting.

Waiting for me to kiss the statue's feet.

I flattened my hands on the wall. Behind my breastbone, my heart lunged into a fit of kicking and screaming. *Don't do it. Don't give in. Run! Run! Run!*

I harnessed the anger and glared upward at the effigy of a half-dead god wearing nothing but a towel around his waist. "You might get my mouth, creepy naked Jesus, but that's all I'll ever give you. While I'm forced to kiss your feet, I will curse you through every vile minute of it."

If this wasn't the Ninth Circle of Hell, I was surely headed there. I waited for Father No-Fun to whack me over the head with more minutes, but all he did was lower his brow to his hand and sigh.

Releasing my own sigh, I put my mouth on the antique toes and tried not to think about germs. The scent of musty wood invaded my nose, and I tried not to think about that, either.

He paced off toward his desk and returned to my line of sight with a Bible in hand. Pulling up a chair, he settled in, cracked open the book, and began reading.

Out loud.

No. Jesus, please, no.

He read story after story about old-timey people doing boring things. Lessons on humility laced each passage, but I didn't need that shit. My damn lips were attached to a sculpture. I'd removed my underwear in front of a priest. Exhaustion beat against me on all sides, and I couldn't stop bouncing because my bladder...

Oh fuck, don't think about it.

I stood as motionless as possible, perspiring. I didn't know there were sweat glands between my fingers, in my elbows, and under my barely there boobs. But I discovered them while listening to his sensual voice and trying not to pee down my legs.

He turned the page and lifted his head, his attention riveted on me.

Unbearable pressure squeezed inside me, burning, throbbing, threatening to burst. I clenched my thighs together, squirming with desperation, growing frantic by the second.

How many minutes had passed? Thirty? Forty? I wasn't going to make it.

My lips clung to the row of carved toes as I bobbed and twisted on restless legs. I felt him watching me. He knew exactly what I needed.

The time. Just tell me the time, you fucking bastard.

Without lifting my mouth from its post, I hummed urgently and pointed to my bare wrist.

He turned another page without taking his eyes off me.

I felt the seal breaking between my legs and knew I only had seconds before all the muscles down there gave out.

Please. I whimpered incoherently. He heard my goddamn call for help and did nothing.

Except turn another page.

For a fraction of a moment, I considered taking a doubled punishment and sprinting to the bathroom. But before my brain sent that message to my muscles, I lost the fight with my bladder.

The dam broke in a hot rush of wetness down my legs. Urine sprayed my bare feet and splashed on the wood floors, forming a radius of yellow splatter and errant droplets that reached his chair.

As the trickle continued, it was the most pleasurable, most mortifying sensation I'd ever experienced. A complete loss of control mixed with sublime relief and blistering embarrassment.

My cheeks caught fire. My joints locked up, and every muscle and organ in my body became paralyzed. I couldn't look him in the eye, but I saw him.

At the edge of my vision, he lowered his head, turned the page in his Bible, and resumed reading aloud.

I didn't hear a word from his lips. I heard nothing but the thrashing pulse in my ears. As the minutes passed, my entire world narrowed to the pool beneath my feet, the cooling urine along my legs, and the wooden toes against my mouth.

The blow to my pride cut deep. Deeper than a strap or a cane or any other corporal punishment he could've inflicted.

He'd planned this.

My eyes closed as the realization hit. The shoes, socks, underwear—all of it would've been ruined if I hadn't removed it. He'd counted on me pissing myself.

What a fucking prick.

I kept my eyes shut and my lips planted on Jesus, simmering in a puddle of shame and vitriol. Fatigue strained my muscles and fucked with my

balance. My shoulders and neck ached from craning to hold my mouth in place. But I knew I'd lasted the full ninety-nine minutes when I heard the Bible shut and the chair creak.

"You can step back." His voice came from behind me, making me shiver.

I didn't want to move or open my eyes. I was standing in my own piss, for Christ's sake. But my lips rejoiced in the freedom when I leaned away and worked my jaw.

My eyes opened, locking on the mess on the floor. A fresh wave of humiliation burned through me. And rage.

"What's next?" My voice shook, thick with resentment. "Are you going to rub my nose in it?"

"No."

"Because you wanted me to do this."

"I wanted you to learn a lesson." He stepped around me, giving the splatter a wide berth on his way to the closet.

"Do you humiliate all your students like this?"

"No." He removed a bucket, cleaning supplies, and paper towels and set it all beside the puddle.

"Right. So how many students would you say, on average, pee themselves in your classroom every year?" *Please, say all of them.*

"You're the first."

Well, fuck. That just made me feel like a thousand times worse. My gaze fell to my soggy feet, my eyes achy with tears.

His shoes appeared at the edge of my blurry vision, the shiny black leather stopping just outside of the mess. Then a knuckle touched my chin, lifting it until my eyes locked on to his.

"Saint John had it right. *If pride made demons out of angels, humility can make angels out of demons.*" His thumb ghosted along the curve of my bottom lip, his gaze following the movement. Then he withdrew his hand and strode toward the door. "I'll see you at Mass in the morning."



CHAPTER 11

TINSLEY

THE TOUCH FROM his thumb lingered.

It tingled along my lip as I wiped down my legs and scrubbed the floor. In the residence hall, the phantom sensation persisted as I showered and changed into jeans. In the dining hall, I caught myself touching my mouth and thinking about his damn thumb as I grabbed my dinner to go.

During my jaunts back and forth through the campus, I didn't see Father Magnus. I looked for him. Not because I wanted to see him. But I was thinking about him.

I couldn't stop thinking about the tender way he held my face and stroked my lip. For so many years, I'd fantasized about receiving affection like that—a caress, a longing look, an adoring kiss. I wanted to experience it so badly I could taste it.

But all I'd ever encountered was frantic fondling, sloppy kisses, and some interrupted blow jobs.

It wasn't healthy to mull over the way a priest's touch felt. It meant nothing to him, and if I didn't stop obsessing about it, I would turn into just another lusty member of his boarding school fan club.

It wasn't that I thought I was better than those girls, but I had a sense of self-respect. At least, I did until I pissed myself.

How could I ever look at him again? The humiliation was more than I could bear. But I didn't have to worry about that until tomorrow. For now, I focused on the food in my bag and the path leading me to the trees.

Overhead, the silhouette of a large falcon circled the property. I felt its eyes on me, following me into the grove.

I found Jaden and Willow where I'd left them, and a feeling of weightlessness fell over me. They'd eaten more of the bread and lifted their

curious noses at my approach.

“Hey, there.” I opened my bag and removed the tiny dipping bowl I’d stolen from the dining hall.

I also had several bottles of water, an assortment of fruit, vegetables, and nuts, and the remnants of my destroyed uniform. The heavy material should keep them warm in the coming weeks.

Storing the unopened bottles near the rear of their hollow, I set out the food and bowl of water and murmured to them as they ate.

They were the sweetest bundle of babies. Like teeny curious monkeys with wiggly noses and the cutest little hands. I could play with them all night and intended to do exactly that until the sound of footsteps encroached on my sanctuary.

I twisted, putting my back to the opossum hollow, and squinted up at the intruder.

Daisy stood a few paces away with a hand anchored on her cocked hip.

Fucking great. The last thing I needed was the resident tattletale turning me in for sneaking food to wild animals.

What would Father Magnus do with orphaned opossums?

It was safe to assume he wouldn’t love them and talk to them and tuck them in at night.

Angling her neck, Daisy leaned around me and directed her gaze at the wriggling babies. Then she scrunched up her nose.

She’d ditched her school uniform in exchange for rocker boots and black leggings. A loose-fitting tee and oversized, distressed cardigan draped her toned body beneath a cropped leather jacket, which was decorated with metal studs and patches. A rock-chic hat topped off the edgy, layered look.

I felt a pinch of envy for her badass style. But that didn’t mean I trusted her.

Why had she followed me? I hadn’t exactly been sociable since my arrival.

“Are you hard up for friends?” I asked.

“Because of my face?” Her disfigured lips formed a flat line.

“No, because you’re the big sister on our floor. That makes you the official snitch.” Her eyes hardened, and no amount of deformity could diminish her ferocity. If I put her to the test, I imagined she would kick my

bony ass. But I didn't want to fight the girl. I just wanted her to go away and leave my opossums alone.

"We're neighbors. My room is right next to yours." I gave her a tight smile. "I'm Tinsley."

"I know who you are. *Everyone* knows."

"Okay. Look, Daisy, I..." I stared up at her, searching for words that weren't steeped in sarcasm and brutal honesty.

How did I tell someone to leave me alone without sounding like a cunt?

"Just spit it out," she said. "Whatever you're going to ask about my face, just ask it."

"Um... No, thanks."

"What? Why not?"

"Well, I'm not interested in your face, if I'm being honest."

She huffed, incredulous. "You're interested in something because you got all quiet and uncomfortable with your words. And you're staring at my face, which I find quite insulting."

"I'm staring at *you* because I'm trying to determine if you're going to tell anyone about them." I motioned at the opossums.

"I'm not interested in your diseased rodents, if *I'm* being honest."

"You're actually being a bitch. And they're marsupials, not rodents."

"They eat garbage. So basically, the same thing."

"Basically, not the same. But hey, what does science know anyway?"

"You should be nice to me, Constantine. I might be the only friend you have here."

"Oh, is that what this is? You being my friend?"

"No, I haven't decided if I'm willing to take on that burden."

"Don't bother. I already made some friends."

"Nevada and Alice?" She threw her head back and laughed.

Truthfully, I didn't want to be associated with those mean-spirited hussies. But I didn't appreciate or understand Daisy's humor in the idea.

"What's so funny?" I glared at her.

"They're not your friends. They will never be friends with someone who looks like you." She pointed at my face.

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"I don't have the desire or the crayons to explain this to you."

"Maybe just try using your big-girl words."

“Fine.” She threw her hands in the air. “You’re prettier than them.”

Then she glowered with scornful derision as if pretty wasn’t how she would describe me at all.

I blinked, not following.

“Look at you.” She gestured and shook her head. “You’re like way-out-of-their-league, in-a-whole-other-universe prettier than every girl ever. The guys at St. John’s are already going crazy over you. Tucker Kensington, the captain of the football team—”

“Kensington? As in the global hotel chain?”

“Yeah. *Those* Kensingtons. When he asks you to the Winter Formal dance, which he will, every girl at Sion will hate you.”

“Except you?”

“Tucker is a total douchebag. I wouldn’t piss on him if he were on fire.”

Well, alrighty then. “What about Father Magnus?” Just saying his name sent a shiver through me.

“I mean, he’s a magnificent male specimen. But he’s devoutly married to God, more than twice my age, and also my teacher. That’s a triple veto. Way out of bounds.” She lifted a shoulder. “It’s unfortunate. He’s the only person here who seems to see *me* and not my face.” She narrowed her eyes. “You might be number two.”

“When I look at you, all I see is a self-righteous hypocrite, so...”

Her jaw unhinged.

I raised my brows. “You just judged me for the way I look.”

“No, I—”

“You literally said I won’t have any friends because of my face, all the while lamenting that no one sees past yours.”

She harrumphed and stepped back, looking all grumpy. “You’re different. I’ll give you that.”

“How so?”

“You’re smart, for one, which totally clashes with your appearance.”

“You’re doing it again.”

“You’re not what I expected.”

“Neither are you.”

“Let me guess.” She propped her hands on her hips. “You thought I’d be awkward and insecure.”

“No. I thought you’d be nice.”

She burst into laughter and sauntered away. “I’ll get back to you about our friendship. I need to pray on it.”

I couldn’t tell if she was serious or if her sense of humor was actually drier than my own. “I’ll be over here waiting on pins and needles.”

She better not tell anyone about Jaden and Willow. Swear to God, if anything happened to them, I would cut a bitch.

I remained in the grove for a couple more hours, eating the caprese sandwich I’d grabbed from the dining hall and enjoying the company of my fuzzy friends.

Nightfall brought a chill in the air that made me wish I’d worn a jacket. But as the opossums burrowed under the bedding I’d fashioned from my ruined skirt, they appeared to be plenty warm.

As nocturnal critters, they would eventually venture out into the dark. But not yet. Not until they were older and stronger. Maybe another month? I would do some research as soon as I had access to the internet.

I refilled the water bowl and left the rest of the food. Then I took the long way back to the dorm, hoping to see some of the bats.

My meandering stroll followed the outer perimeter, keeping to the wall and away from people. Not that there were crowds. It was too cold and too late at night. I probably only had a few minutes before the nine o’clock check-in.

While on this side of the property, I wanted to sneak a closer peek at the gate. The few times I’d passed through it, I’d been escorted by Father Magnus.

I turned the corner, bringing the exit into view and...

Speak of the devil.

A lone figure cut a formidable silhouette against the backdrop of the streetlights. He leaned against the gate, long legs crossed at the ankles, muscled arms at his sides, and his eyes...

They waited for me, tracking my movements, hunting me in the darkness. The instinct to run gripped my bones. But what if he chased me? What if I wanted that?

Under the weight of his steady gaze, I felt exposed, stripped down to my deepest vulnerabilities. He’d watched me pee all over the floor, and I wasn’t ready to accept that. The embarrassment was too fresh and raw.

I needed the night to rebuild my defenses against him. After a well-rested sleep, I would come back stronger, more confident, prepared to stand up for myself.

So I veered away, heading in the opposite direction. Without glancing back, I knew his gaze stayed with me to the building. I felt it blazing along my back.

His undivided attention should've scared the crap out of me, but instead, I found comfort in it. I wanted it, and that bothered me most of all.

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CHAPTER 12

MAGNUS

THE FOLLOWING DAY, I sat behind my desk and stared at Tinsley Constantine with new eyes.

She stood with her hands at her sides, shoulders back, and expression brimming with self-possession. Not a trace of the ashamed, teary-eyed girl I'd left in this room yesterday. Overnight, she'd regained her strength of will. With a few differences.

Her uniform met the dress code. She'd arrived on time for Mass this morning and sat through the service with little interruption. But I was under no illusion about her sudden compliance. I suspected, after a night of brooding anger and humiliation, she was simply picking her battles.

Or maybe I was the only one who spent the evening in turmoil.

I'd never ordered a student to remove her undergarments. Never even considered it. At the time, I'd told myself it served a practical purpose, knowing full well she would lose the fight with her bladder. I'd counted on it.

But when the tiny scrap of white cotton had slid down her legs, my entire body reacted. My thoughts turned inside out, and God help me, I hungered like I'd never hungered before. I ached for her humiliation so ravenously that when it finally arrived, it took all the concentrated restraint in the world not to fall upon her like a mindless, raging beast.

I had a choice. I could've fucked her. Right here in my classroom, I could've broken my vow and fucked her with piss on her legs, virgin blood on my dick, and her heavenly tears soaking the hand I would've held so tightly to her mouth.

She wouldn't have survived it.

A demanding whisper in the silence of my heart argued she was stronger than I knew, stronger than anyone realized. That whisper had lured me back to the campus later last night to discover just how strong she was and how loudly she could scream.

Then I saw her. Walking along the wall just before nine, she took my breath away. Her beauty was so otherworldly, so unrivaled and angelic, I wanted to protect her, not hurt her. I couldn't stomach the thought of poisoning her with my cancer and stripping her soul from her body. I wouldn't do it.

I made a choice.

I packed away every depraved, immoral thought into a deep compartment labeled, *Never open*. Then I spent the rest of the night praying the rosary and celebrating my abstinence with a few too many whiskeys.

Nine years ago, I'd successfully buried my sickness in the same way. Since then, I hadn't misstepped. I hadn't come apart at the seams. I never caved. My self-control was inviolable.

Tinsley wasn't in danger around me. Not yesterday. Not now. Not ever. She wasn't a temptation.

And so this morning, as I stared at her with new eyes, it had less to do with me and more to do with the paper on my desk.

Pressing a finger against it, I slid it across to her. Then I laced my hands on the wooden surface and watched her.

She bent forward, glanced at the page, and little lines of disappointment knitted across her brow, there and gone by the time she straightened.

"Explain this to me." I kept my tone light, conversational. "According to your enrollment paperwork, you've never taken a standardized test for university admissions. Why?"

"You would have to ask my mother." She shrugged.

Her blasé attitude set my teeth on edge.

"I'm asking *you*."

"If my mother has it her way, I'll never see the inside of a university. An educated woman doesn't make a good trophy wife in a loveless marriage with a man who's twice her age. It's best to keep me dumb, unambitious, and subservient."

"And if you had it your way?"

"I want to go home."

“How would that change your mother’s plans?”

“It changes everything. At home, I was well on my way to living my own life. I was exploring universities, experimenting with guys, figuring out who I am and what I want. That’s why she sent me here. To put a big fat stop on my voyage of self-discovery. She’s essentially locked me in a cage, secluded me from everyone and everything. I can’t even choose my own clothes.”

I couldn’t dispute any of that. Caroline held the reins of Tinsley’s life, which made the matter of the paper on my desk increasingly moot. But I wasn’t letting it go.

“The tests you took are proprietary assessment exams, created specifically for this school to place students on an appropriate individualized learning path.”

I was intimately familiar with the structure and intensity of the test questions because one, I used to own the corporation that designed the exams, and two, I’d taken the tests myself. Multiple times.

“In all the years I’ve been running this school and the hundreds of tests that have come across my desk...” I tapped the paper. “I’ve only seen test scores this high one time.”

My scores. But I kept that to myself.

She hadn’t cheated. I’d sat behind her the entire time, watching her fly through the exercises.

“Academic aptitude of your caliber doesn’t go unnoticed.” I pressed my fingertips together in a steeple against my mouth, thinking. “Your high school grades are average. You weren’t in any advanced classes. Have you not been applying yourself in school? Or has something else been holding you back?”

“I’m not smart, if that’s what you’re asking.” She strolled alongside the desk, letting her hand trail the surface’s edge. “I remember things. If I hear it or read it, I can recall it later. It’s just memorization. Nothing special.”

Her intelligence went way beyond memorization, and whoever had told her otherwise should have their tongue ripped out.

“The exam measured a range of cognitive abilities.” I studied her over the steeple of my hands. “That includes mathematical skills, spatial perception, and language. Your scores in science and logic are especially

impressive, which has more to do with problem-solving and less to do with memory.”

“Whatever. So are you going to put me in advanced classes or something?”

My initial concerns had been that she wouldn’t keep up in those classes. Now that I knew she was ahead of our curriculum and every student here, I had to adjust for that. “I teach Advanced Placement Calculus after lunch, followed by Econometrics and Statistics. You’ll take those classes and spend the mornings with me in individualized instruction and religious training.”

She seemed to perk up at that, and I could guess the reason. She thought I was her ticket out of here.

I spread out my elbows on the desk, leaning forward. “Spending every day with me does not open opportunities to sabotage your graduation from Sion. Furthermore, any feelings you may develop for me—be it contempt or desire—will be squashed. Our relationship will remain professional, and any efforts to defile that will be punished.”

“Will my clothes be removed for these punishments?” She fluttered her eyelashes, straight-faced.

“Depends on your on-going issue with urinary incontinence.”

“I do *not* have incontinence.” She made a scoffing sound. “I hadn’t gone to the bathroom since before church.”

“Find a solution for that, Miss Constantine. You’re far too old to be reminded to use the toilet.”

“That’s not...ugh!” She paced away, clawing her nails along her scalp and pulling at her hair.

I rubbed a hand across my mouth, wiping away my amusement. She was way too easy to rile, and I rather enjoyed it.

Now that I thought about it, I’d never been this eager to converse with a student. Her rapid-fire quips and witty rejoinders kept me sharp and thinking on my toes. Given her test scores, it was no wonder. It would undoubtedly be a long year of stimulating conversation and verbal sparring.

She pivoted back toward my desk, her gaze drawing a path from my lips to my collar before darting to my eyes. “How long have you been a priest?”

“I was ordained four years ago.”

“So you haven’t had sex in four years?”

“Nine. I entered seminary and discernment nine years ago.”

“Nine years without sex?” Her eyebrows crawled to her hairline. “In all that time, you haven’t slipped up even once? Haven’t given in to the baser needs of human nature?”

“Not once.”

This line of questioning was nothing new. It’d been asked by hundreds of curious students and parents before her. So when she voiced the next question, I was ready for it.

“Why did you become a priest? And don’t give me a canned response. I already know you were a self-made billionaire and New York’s most eligible bachelor.”

All common knowledge. She only needed to put my name in an internet browser to learn the highlights of my illustrious career. I had no secrets, save one, and that lay buried beyond anyone’s reach.

“Before I chose this path, I was a wealthy businessman. I was raised Catholic, went to Catholic school, and endowed this boarding school with a lot of money because I have a personal connection here.”

“What personal connection?”

“Father Crisanto has been my best friend since childhood.”

“So he suckered you into a life of celibacy?”

“Do I look suckered, Miss Constantine?”

“Good point.” She pursed her lips. “But you have had sex, right? You’re not a virgin?”

“I’m not a virgin. When I reached my thirties, I made a conscious decision to do more with my life, to *be* more.”

“And you thought, *Hey, why don’t I become a penniless, sexless, heartless teacher?*”

“I donated my wealth and my life to this school because I wanted to become a shepherd.”

“And we’re your sheep.” She slowly inhaled through her nose and chewed on the inside of her cheek.

The answers I gave were honest, with one crucial omission. The secret I would take to my grave.

“That’s very noble of you, Father Magnus. I suppose you’re a better human than me.” She planted her hands on the desk and leaned in. “But that doesn’t mean you’re better at making decisions regarding my life. What

becomes of me here, *this* year, impacts my entire future. Look at me.” She pointed at her face. “Look closely at my eyes, my expression. You’re staring at a woman who longs for one great passion, and always it lies beyond the next asshole.”

“If you’re calling me an asshole—”

“You’re the biggest one yet. But guess what?” She bared her teeth. “I want this more than you do.”

“You want what exactly? What is this one great passion?”

“Anything. Everything. Independence, self-discovery, romantic love, spiritual or professional fulfillment—whatever it is, it’s *mine*.” Her rasping breaths fell in a beguiling tumble of sounds, striking the air with tenacity. “The passion is in pursuing the life I want, and no one is going to take that from me.”

“Very well.” I gathered the papers on my desk and opened my laptop. “You can long for your one great passion while you’re on hands and knees scrubbing the floor of my classroom.”

“What? Why?”

“Zero tolerance, Miss Constantine.”

“Zero tolerance for what?” She gripped the edge of the desk. “Was it the asshole comment?”

“The comment, the attitude, the blatant disrespect.” I kept my gaze on the screen, dismissing her. “You know where to find the bucket and cleaning supplies.”

“Disrespect?” She laughed mockingly. “It’s called a backbone, and it’s pronounced, *Go fuck yourself*.” She spun away and stormed toward the door. “Scrub your own goddamn floors.”

I was out of the chair before the last part left her mouth. My longer strides beat her to the door, and as she reached for the latch, my hand was already on the wood, holding it closed.

Her breath caught audibly, and she slowly turned her neck. Her gaze landed on my legs and inched upward, sneaked a drive-by glance at my groin, and skated to my chest. The narrow gap between us forced her head to tip back, back, back, until a constellation of dainty, bewitching features filled my horizon.

The air buzzed with tension and animosity.

Then, with a twitch of her lashes, those blue eyes, both hot and fearful, locked on to mine. “Either send me home or spank me. I’m not scrubbing your floors.”

“Careful, Tinsley.” I fought every instinct that demanded I reach out and grab her by the throat. “You have no idea what you’re asking.”

Dragging her over my lap and welting her upturned ass didn’t begin to address what she deserved. Or what the sickness inside me craved.

As if reading my thoughts, she gulped, and the blood drained from her face.

“When you finish the floors in here, you’ll do the next room over and the one across from it, as well.”

A muscle leaped in her jaw. “I—”

“Think through what you’re about to say. There are six classrooms on this floor. There’s also a church and gymnasium with expansive wood flooring.”

“If I’m playing janitor all day, when will I learn?”

“Don’t worry about that, princess. I’ll read to you while you work.”

She groaned miserably. A sound that left me feeling deliciously winded as she marched off to the supply closet.

This tiny elven minx was going to be the death of me.



CHAPTER 13

MAGNUS

SCRUBBING FLOORS SET the foundation for Tinsley's daily lessons at Sion Academy.

Over the next four weeks, she spent more time learning while on her hands and knees than sitting at a desk. As she crawled along with a soapy sponge, I walked beside her, delivering lectures on physics, comparative government and politics, Latin literature, and Catholicism.

She hadn't lied about her memory. When she heard something, she could recall it later, almost verbatim. Every test she aced proved she was absorbing my lessons.

The one thing she failed to learn, however, was obedience.

She'd had a few tardies and curfew violations, but the bulk of her misconduct began and ended with her mouth.

She was a vulgar, loquacious wiseass, too smart for her own good, and lived every moment as if her only mission was to annoy me. No one had ever dared to talk to me the way she did, and no punishment seemed harsh enough to deter her.

After four weeks of social isolation, withheld meals, psychological humiliation, and manual labor, I knew what she needed.

Physical suffering.

Bodily pain.

She needed my belt across her ass, over and over and over.

In the years I'd taught here, I'd only used a strap and cane on three occasions. Those had been extreme cases, where the students were so wild and unmanageable that a physical beating hadn't even fazed them. It hadn't affected me, either. I had no physical interest in the girls, and in the end, all three were expelled.

Expulsion was what Tinsley wanted. Therefore, it was the one thing I wouldn't give her.

That left scrubbing floors.

Or corporal punishment.

Slapping.

Spanking.

Flogging.

Choking.

I couldn't. I shouldn't, for ten thousand reasons all amounting to one.

I want it.

I wanted to put my hands on her so badly, and if I did, if I physically punished her, it would be irrefutably, uncontrollably, gloriously sexual for me.

I'd only touched her one time. Four weeks ago, I'd let my thumb brush her lip. That single, featherlight touch had unfurled a surge of twisted, desperate cravings from the darkest corner of my mind. Since then, I'd kept my hands to myself and forced my black thoughts into nonexistence.

But if I touched her again, if I introduced her to my favorite pastime, it was all over.

As it was, watching her crawl across the floor on her knees teased the hell out of my sadistic nature. The flagrant sexual symbolism in the act wasn't lost on her, either. She called me out on it every time, asserting that no student should kneel for her teacher because it was *perverted and sexist and played into the fantasies of predators*.

It was a wasted argument. If she kept her disrespectful mouth shut, she wouldn't be on her knees. Period. The choice was hers.

I checked my watch and paced through the classroom, grinding my teeth.

She was late again.

Closing my eyes, I prayed the Hail Mary to calm my temper. As I finished and began the prayer again, the sound of sprinting footfalls broke out in the hall.

Shoes squeaked against wood as Tinsley tore around the corner and burst into my classroom in a fit of wheezing, spluttering breaths.

"I'm here!" She bent at the waist, a hand in the air and the other on her knee, choking. "Good thing I'm fast."

“You’re late,” I snarled, torn between kicking her out and giving her something substantial to choke on.

“Oh, come on.” She glanced at the clock on the wall. “Only two minutes late. Are you seriously going to be a vagina about it?”

“A vagina?”

“The fleshy pink canoe between a woman’s legs.” She panted, trying to catch her breath. “I know it’s been a while since you paddled one, but surely you remember what it is.”

“I do remember. Quite fondly.”

“Yeah?” She grinned, raising her eyebrows.

“Which is why I’m confounded to hear you use that part of the female body as a derogatory term. Given your infernal feminist tongue-lashings, I would expect you to use the word *vagina* as a compliment rather than associate it with weakness.”

Her mouth hung open, and she made a strangling noise.

“You’re so right.” She smacked a hand against her forehead and groaned. “I’m an idiot. I wasn’t thinking and... Gah! There’s no excuse for it. What I said was offensive and ignorant, and I’m sorry.” She straightened her spine and met my eyes, looking so irresistibly, gorgeously shamefaced. “I’ll kiss the Jesus or scrub the floors or whatever you decide. No resistance. I’m a total shithead.”

One of the things I’d come to adore about Tinsley Constantine was the ease in which she could be so genuinely humble and wryly deflating of herself. Rarely did she care about other people’s perceptions of her, but for whatever reason, she didn’t want *me* to believe she was superficial or weak-minded.

She had no idea how far removed she was from those traits, and that only made her more beautiful, more desirable, harder to go unnoticed. She was unlike any eighteen-year-old I’d ever met.

None of that changed the fact that she was my student, half my age, and completely, irrevocably outside my preferences.

Yet she had enough sex appeal to hold my attention for eternity.

Shut it down, Magnus.

“You’ve been gone for forty-five minutes.” I prowled a circuit around her. “Breakfast ended five minutes ago.”

I knew where she sneaked off to every day. I wanted her to admit it.

She touched her chin to her shoulder, regarding me innocently. “I had to pee.”

I laughed. “That’s the direction you want to go with this?”

“No. I mean, I did have to pee, and I took care of that.”

“Good to know you’ve learned one lesson in four weeks.” I paused before her. “But that’s not why you’re late.”

Her blue eyes lifted to mine, sparking with fire and worry. She didn’t trust me with her secret, and why would she? I had no compassion.

For a spoiled rich girl, she was selflessly devout about protecting vulnerable, unlikable animals. I didn’t understand it and didn’t give her an inch. No assurance whatsoever as I glared at her, making her squirm.

Ruthless, down to the marrow of my despicable soul.

“Magnus...” Her voice pleaded. She used my first name. Her hand reached for my chest.

My brain didn’t know which deviation to rebuke first.

As bold as she was with her tongue, she’d never been brave enough to touch me. Even now, as her fingers made a slow, jerky climb toward my shirt, she trembled with uncertainty.

I caught her wrist before she made contact, my hand closing mercilessly around delicate bones. She whimpered but didn’t try to pull away. Instead, she drifted closer with her whole body, her gaze never wavering from my face. Hypnotic. Stirring. Intoxicating.

My fingers tightened around her arm, preventing her from reaching. But she might as well have put her hand on me anyway. I felt her everywhere, digging in with her nails and sharp kitten teeth while cutting me at the knees with only a look and a plea.

“Please, don’t make me regret telling you this.” She wrapped her free hand around mine on her wrist and leaned in. “I’m feeding baby opossums. This isn’t like the bat. I know they’re joeys. Or they were. They’re nearly ready to survive on their own. They just need a couple more days to bulk up for the winter. Please, Father Magnus.” She bent over our hands, lowering her brow to my chest. “Please, don’t hurt them.”

My muscles ached, contracting and stalling, excruciatingly rigid with the effort to hold her back. Except it wasn’t her. It was *me* I was holding back.

I pulled away and gripped the doorframe behind me until the edge jabbed into my palm. "I'm not going to hurt them."

I can't promise the same for you.

"Really?" She narrowed her eyes, but hope glowed through the slits.

"There are no rules in the student handbook about feeding wild animals."

"No, but I thought—"

"Let's go pay them a visit."

"Now?" Her arms dropped, hanging dormant at her sides.

I needed out of this suffocating room. Turning on my heel, I strode into the hallway and didn't stop until I arrived in the grove behind the main building.

She ran a few paces behind and slowed as she caught up.

"You know where they live." Her fists went to her hips, and her bottom lip pushed out like an offering. "How long have you known about them?"

"Since day one. You eat every meal out here, even when it's raining."

"So what did you do?" She lowered to her knees and crawled toward the twisted root system of a large tree. "You came out here to investigate and found the cutest little—? Oh, hey there." She dipped low to the ground, ass up, with the skirt flipped above her thighs.

The wind must've caught the hem. I should've told her to fix it. The command was there, scraping across my tongue, but it didn't emerge.

My welts would glow like fire on her flawless, porcelain skin. My hands would leave a ring of blue around her delicate throat. My cock would stretch and tear and split her tiny pussy in half.

I ripped my stare away before I did something irreparable.

"I'm sorry to wake you." She made a shushing sound at the critters. "But since you're both up, I have someone here to meet you."

"That's not necessary."

"Don't be rude." She rose to her feet and held out her arm, drawing my attention to the fuzzy gray marsupials clinging to her cardigan.

"You shouldn't handle them." I rested my fingers in my pockets, fighting an inner battle with my overheated body.

"They're less of a health risk than nearly every other animal in the wild. And they're clean." She grinned at the one on her shoulder. "Aren't you,

Willow? Always grooming yourself.” Her arresting smile shifted to me. “She thinks she’s a cat.”

“Handling them makes them less fearful of humans. When they leave here—”

“I know. I’ve tried to keep them off me. But they’re climbers, and since I bring them food every day, they think I’m their mom.” She sighed. “They’ve never been afraid of me.”

For four weeks, I’d watched her retreat into this grove while weekend visitors came and went. Every student had received at least one visitor since the start of the school year. Most students had visitors every weekend.

Not one person had come to see Tinsley.

As we walked back to the classroom, she prattled on about the opossums, sharing stories as if they were her closest friends.

She was lonely.

If I looked beneath her misbehavior and sass, I would see just how deep her loneliness ran.

She was miserable.

Maybe that misery began long before she moved to Maine. What had she really left behind in Bishop’s Landing? Shallow friendships? A cold mansion? A world where she went unnoticed, unappreciated, and unloved?

She’d stopped asking for her phone two weeks ago.

“They keep me company.” She followed me into the classroom, still talking about the opossums. “It’ll probably sound dumb to you, but they’re all I have here. I’ll be devastated when they move on. But I’ll also be proud and blissfully happy. I only want the best for them.” She smiled to herself. “Animals are better than people.”

“How so?”

“They don’t judge. They don’t hate. If humans had hearts like opossums, what a beautiful world this would be.”

If people had hearts like Tinsley Constantine, my faith in humanity would be renewed.

For the next few hours, I led her through her lessons. She took some exams, went to lunch, and sat through my afternoon classes. Then she finished her day with the punishment she’d earned for being late this morning.

Scrubbing floors wasn't teaching her a damn thing. But I made no allowances. If she broke a rule, she paid the penalty. I was nothing if not consistent.

Thirty minutes into her punishment, she'd worked herself into the far corner. She also had that skirt inched up around her waist again, and this time, I didn't look away.

Bent over on her knees, she gave me a direct view of her heart-shaped bottom in white cotton. The high-cut underwear followed the curves of toned, youthful thighs. The swath of thin material between her legs clung to her flesh, carving an explicit, mouthwatering valley from one virgin hole to the other.

I shifted in the chair behind my desk as heat rushed below my belt and tightened between my legs.

That damn skirt hadn't bunched around her waist on its own. I now suspected it hadn't been the breeze that exposed her this morning, either.

She was playing with danger, taunting the beast, enticing something she couldn't handle. Whatever this was, whatever her intentions, I would have to reprimand her.

But I was hard as a rock, burning up, unraveling from the inside out. My sacred control was slipping. I couldn't walk over there. I couldn't go to her with my dick standing up and hunger pounding in my veins.

So I forced my gaze to my laptop and worked through tomorrow's lesson plans. By the time she stored the supplies in the closet, I had the composure and presence of mind to deal with her.

"I finished the floor." She snatched a pen from my desk and twirled it. "What now?"

"Now we address your attention-seeking behavior."

The pen stopped spinning.

"Beyond the thrill-seeking element, exposing yourself to your teacher is a wanton, pathetic attempt to get noticed." I sent a dark look across the desk. "It's a cry for attention."

Unflinching, she met my glare. "A cry for attention?"

"It's a misdialed way of expressing insecurity, jealousy, and loneliness."

"Okay." She carefully set down the pen and rolled her shoulders. "So that's one way to look at it."

“If there’s another way...” I flicked a hand, motioning. “Go ahead. The floor is yours.”

“All right.” She stepped around the desk, one foot before the other, until she stood at my side within arm’s reach. “Your position suggests that *attention* is inherently bad for you, that it’s a sinful or gluttonous thing to crave, like adultery or drugs. But isn’t the need for attention essential to being human? What is marriage without the attention of a spouse? What is priesthood without the attention of his flock? What is a child without the attention of her parents?” She looked away, blinked, and returned to me. “Isn’t the gift of attention one of the most selfless and impactful things we can give one another?”

She stood taller, regarding me with eyes of searching blue.

Intelligent eyes.

Beautiful mind.

Every day with her was a wild ride of tight turns, steep slopes, and unpredictable adjustments. I’d never been so mentally and physically aroused in my life.

“Yes.” My voice rasped, and I cleared my throat. “But do you understand that attention isn’t the same as affection?”

“I know that.”

“And showing your backside to your teacher is a quest for negative attention.”

“Negative?” She pressed her fist to the desk. “Because the image of my body is negative? Or is it my panties that you find negative? You’ve already seen them before. Because you demanded I remove them, I might add. So what exactly do you find negative beneath my skirt?”

“Do *not* twist my words, Miss Constantine.” My voice cracked like a whip, making her take a step back. “When you misbehave for the sole purpose of seeking attention, the punishment becomes a reward. That’s negative attention, which I will not give. So I’m letting you off with this warning. I do *not* want to see your underwear again.”

I twisted away, turning my attention to the laptop.

She lingered for a moment, her breathing fast and shallow. Then she ambled to the door.

At the threshold, she paused and glanced over her shoulder. “You were right about one thing. I *am* lonely, Father Magnus.”

As she slipped into the hall, I felt a deep, uncomfortable pang pull through my gut and burrow all the way down to my bones. I didn't have a name for it. I had no idea what it was. All I knew was that I needed it gone.

I needed her to come back.

"Tinsley." I listened to the sounds of her steps slow, halt, and retrace her path.

When she reappeared in the doorway, my relief was immediate, the warmth in my chest absolute.

"One more thing." I reached into my desk drawer and removed her phone from the charger. "What's your number?"

Her eyebrows pinched together as she approached, rattling off the digits. I entered the number into my phone and sent a text to hers.

"The Winter Formal is coming up." I handed over her device. "Perhaps one of your siblings will bring you a dress."

"Thank you." Her brows pulled in even tighter. "Did you just send me a message?"

"Yes. Have you spoken to Miriam about your feelings of loneliness?"

"No. God." She made a horrified face. "I don't know her, and I don't need a counselor."

I figured she'd say that. "You can text me, anytime, for any reason."

"I appreciate that." She stared down at her phone, and a slow, mischievous smile bowed her lips as she met my eyes. "But don't you worry your pretty little head about me, Father Magnanimous. Whenever I feel like giving in, I remember I have a lot of assholes to disappoint."

No question she was referring to me. Her mother, too. And perhaps the family she was expected to marry into.

As I watched her sashay out of the room with her head held high, one thing was certain.

Tinsley was going to take over the reins of her life, even if that meant walking away without a penny from her family.

I would be rooting for her, even if I were one of the assholes standing in her way.



CHAPTER 14

TINSLEY

“**Y**OU DON’T SEEM happy, Tins.”

“I am now.” I buried my face in Keaton’s chest and wrapped my arms around his broad shoulders. “I missed you.”

“Let’s talk about that.” My brother took my hand and led me farther away from the main building.

It had been five days since Magnus returned my phone. I’d texted Keaton immediately, just to check in and explain why I hadn’t responded to his messages and missed calls.

Now that he’d graduated high school, he was super busy bouncing between England and France, kicking ass in his new life with his new girlfriend. Way too busy to deal with my trivial problems. I hadn’t asked him to come to Maine.

I should’ve known he would show up the very next weekend.

The cold air nipped at my cheeks as I joined him on a bench in the courtyard, away from the other families. Every girl within eyeshot was staring. Of course, they were. Keaton exuded the Constantine swagger that came naturally to all the men in my family.

He was the youngest of my three brothers, only nineteen, but he had the same musculature and athleticism, arrogance and assertiveness, basically everything one would look for in a handsome alpha male.

And all the girls were looking. Except Nevada Hildebrand. I hadn’t seen her since she got suspended, but the rumor was she would be back at school this weekend.

“When you weren’t answering your phone, I called Mother.” Keaton hooked his arm around me, keeping me warm.

“Let me guess. She told you I was fine and not to bother me.”

“Yes.” His eyes glowed with guilt. “I shouldn’t have listened to her.”

“Keaton, I’m fine.” I leaned my head against his shoulder. “Just trying to adjust, that’s all.”

“Please, tell me that’s not one of your teachers.”

I followed his gaze across the courtyard and found the steel blue eyes of my nemesis staring back.

“Yeah.” I pressed my middle finger against my lips and smiled sweetly at the moody priest. “That’s Father Magnus Falke. My *only* teacher.”

Keaton was off the bench before I could stop him.

“Wait.” I ran after him, tugging on his coat. “What are you doing?”

“I don’t like the way he’s staring at you.” He yanked his arm free. “I’m just gonna have a chat with him.”

That was a terrible idea. My brother was cocky, overprotective, and mouthier than I was.

“Just remember.” I jogged to stay at his side. “When you leave today, I have to stay here and deal with the fallout. He doesn’t respond well to threats or disrespect, so please, just...play nice?”

We ran out of distance before he could respond.

“Keaton Constantine.” He moved right up into Magnus’s face and grabbed my hand, hauling me against his side. “I’m Tinsley’s brother.”

“I see the resemblance.” Magnus didn’t move. Not a flicker of surprise or irritation.

They stood neck and neck, same heights, similar builds, equal intensity in their eye contact.

“We may look alike.” Keaton squeezed my hand, preventing me from pulling away. “But I know you see a lot more when you look at her. A beautiful young thing in a Catholic schoolgirl uniform. I’m guessing you’ve never seen a girl as pretty as her come through here.”

“Keaton.” With a growl, I yanked on my hand. “Stop.”

He tightened his grip. “Just remember who her family is, who her brothers are. If you touch one hair on her head—”

“No threats, Keaton.” I shoved at his rigid, immovable frame and turned to Magnus. “I told him not to threaten you.”

“That’s okay. Maybe his warning will be more creative and stimulating than your mother’s.” Magnus tilted his head, regarding my brother with chilling indifference. “You were saying?”

Keaton's eyes pulsed with the churn of his thoughts. I saw his surprise in learning that our mother had come to my defense. Then I saw his realization as he made the correct assumption about her motivation.

I don't want a scandal. It's that simple.

"Caroline's reasons for intimidation are her own." He adjusted his grip on my hand, entwining our fingers. "But I'm here for one thing only. My sister. She's my whole world, and I will always be in her corner."

My heart thudded, and I dropped my chin to my chest, hiding the wobbly smile that tugged at my lips. God, I loved him.

He leaned past me, bending his mouth to Magnus's ear. While I couldn't see his expression, I heard the malice in his whisper.

"You might be fooling everyone else with that collar around your throat. But I saw the way you looked at her, priest, and I don't like it. If you hurt her, I will come for you."

Shit. My breath left me as he pulled my hand. I moved my feet, trying to keep up with his sudden pivot and ground-erasing strides, only because I wanted my shoulder to remain in its socket.

Typical Constantine. He'd said his piece and got the last word. I was about to open my mouth and lay into him when Magnus's voice boomed at our backs.

"You underestimate her."

Keaton pulled up short and spun, taking me with him.

"If anyone tries to hurt her," Magnus said, his stony eyes fixed on my brother, "it won't be you who strikes back in her defense."

"Then who—?" His jaw hardened, and his head made a slow rotation in my direction.

As it dawned on him that Magnus meant *me*, that I was the one who would strike back, his entire bearing softened.

"She needs you in her corner." Magnus held his arms behind him, his gorgeous face void of emotion. "But she doesn't need you to fight her fights. Your sister has more ferocity than you and me combined."

A flutter erupted in my chest, and my stomach did this dippy, bouncy thing that felt a lot like vertigo.

"At least he's not an idiot," Keaton muttered. Then he raised his voice, addressing Magnus. "She's not only fierce. She has a genius IQ. If that doesn't intimidate you, then you're already an improvement over her other

teachers.” He canted his head, indicating the direction he wanted me to walk. “Let’s go.”

“I don’t intimidate him.” I ambled along beside him, smiling at his pensive expression. “Mother couldn’t even do that. He’s dauntless.”

“Do you like that guy?”

Now probably wasn’t the time to tell him that Magnus had taken a pair of scissors to the tennis bracelet Keaton had given me.

“Not really,” I said. “He’s strict, demanding, and has the emotional sensitivity of a coffin. But he can be reasonable sometimes. And he’s right, you know. I’m pretty awesome at standing up for myself.”

“I know, Tins. But I hate the idea of you being here, in the middle of goddamn Maine, standing up for yourself *alone*.”

“I’m not alone. You’re a phone call away.”

“Always.”

There was a big fat omission between being alone and being lonely. But for the first time in my life, I wasn’t going to burden my brother with my problems.

I wasn’t going to tell him how much I hated it here or how I intended to get expelled. He would only worry and interfere, and like Magnus said, I needed to fight my own fights.

“So tell me about this Winter Formal.” He winked at a group of sophomore girls he passed, making them giggle and blush. “Who’s the boy you’re going with?”

“The *boy* is only a few months younger than you.”

“I hate him already.”

“He’s a Kensington.”

He stopped, and a muscle feathered across his jaw. “Tucker Kensington?”

“Yep. He asked me to the dance after church a couple of weeks ago. I gave him my number, and he’s been sending me dick pics. Pretty sure I’m going to get laid on the night of the dance.”

“I’m going to kill him.” His face turned a murderous shade of red.

“No, you’re not.”

“Tinsley.” Eyes blazing, he scanned our surroundings as if willing Tucker to appear so he could commence with the homicide.

“Do you want me to be a virgin my entire life?”

“I want to not think about it.”

“If you’re willing to commit murder over my hymen, we’re going to talk about it.”

From the edge of the courtyard, I watched Magnus as he greeted the families. One of the mothers, a pretty older woman, offered her hand and a coquettish grin. He gripped her fingers and gave her a look that likely soaked her panties.

As if he could sense me, his gaze found mine across the distance. His eyes—so deep and cold and weighed down with secrets—were an assault on my senses.

“When will you see Tucker again?” Keaton asked, pulling my attention back.

“Every interaction is supervised. You’re not going to kill him because I was joking about the dick pics. Also, he doesn’t actually get to take me to the dance. We have to meet there, and if his hand so much as slides from my shoulder to my waist, it’ll be ripped from his arm, probably by the priest who is currently staring daggers at us.”

“Good.”

“Good? Is this what you want for me? To be cloistered like a nun during my last year of high school?”

“No.” He closed his eyes and lowered his head. After a slow exhale, he looked at me with so much love it made my chest swell. “I don’t want you to get hurt.”

“Have some faith in me. Trust me to make choices that are right for me and the life I want.”

“I do.”

“Prove it. Accept the fact that I’m going to have sex, and maybe I’ll get my heart broken. But I’ll survive it. You know why? Because I’m a fucking Constantine.”

“Yeah, you are.” A wolfish grin split his face. “I feel sorry for the bastards you leave in the dust.” His head tipped as he studied me for a moment. “I brought you something.”

“Please, tell me it’s a silk pillowcase.”

“Maybe.” His eyes glimmered. “Actually, my car is packed with shit. I figured you hadn’t brought much with you for your dorm, so Iris and I did a

little shopping. She picked out all the clothes, including a dress for your dance. And yes, I bought you a silk pillowcase.”

“Keaton...” My eyes burned, blurring his face. “You didn’t have to—”

“I wish I could do more.”

“You being here... It’s more than I could’ve ever hoped. Where’s Iris so I can thank her?”

“She stopped in to visit her parents at Pembroke. You’ll see her over Christmas.”

There were only two ways that would happen—if Magnus gave my mother a satisfactory report or if I got expelled. I was failing both of those options fantastically.

“Hey.” I bumped my shoulder against his arm, smiling. “Do you want to meet Jaden and Willow?”

“The opossums?”

“Of course, the opossums.”

Keaton spent a full ten hours with me before being chased off campus by the curfew police. It was the best day I’d had in a very long time.

He had to fly back to England tomorrow, and I wouldn’t see him again until Christmas. Hopefully.

I needed to up my power of seduction, but I was working with an impenetrable brick wall. Magnus was impossible to crack, his resolve made entirely from iron. If he had a sex drive, it was buried beneath steel plates.

But every suit of armor had a chink. I was equal parts determined and terrified to find it.

That night, as I put away my new clothes, a knock sounded on my door. I opened it to find Nevada standing on the other side.

“I heard your brother was here today.” She strolled in without invitation. “Everyone’s talking about him.”

I didn’t give a fuck about their girly crushes. “I’m busy, Nevada. What do you want?”

“Aren’t you going to welcome me back? It’s the least you can do after getting me suspended.”

“Uh...” I wrinkled my nose. “You got the wrong girl.”

“I know you told Father Magnus about Morning Worship.”

“Wrong again.” I snatched a shirt off the bed and draped it on a hanger.

“He ran that path for years. Then you showed up. The morning you caught us watching him was the last time he ran. Because you fucking told him!”

I could tell her the truth, that it was Carrie who ratted them out, but...

“I’m not a snitch.” I grabbed another shirt. “Tucker said Father Magnus runs with the football team now. Maybe he just wanted to change up his routine.”

“Yeah, don’t even get me started on Tucker. He was dating Alice, you know. But you came in and fucked that up, too.”

“I’m not loving the accusatory tone you’re taking with me. I didn’t tell anyone about Morning Worship, and I’m not out to steal Alice’s boyfriend. I didn’t even know they were dating—”

“You told Father Magnus I had pills in my nightstand.”

“What?”

“Don’t play dumb. I know you saw them when you were pilfering through our rooms and stealing Alice’s cookies.” She thrust a finger at my face. “You got me suspended for two weeks!”

“You’re so far wrong it’s like you’re trying to point fingers through your asshole. Just stop.”

“You’ve been spending a lot of time with Father Magnus.”

“Yeah. He’s my teacher.”

“You know what happens to a teacher and his student when they get caught messing around together?”

“Well, since you told me *you have plans for that holy creature the next time you get him alone*, I’m guessing you know the answer to that question.”

“He’ll go to prison, and you’ll forever be labeled a *priest’s whore*. Can you imagine the tabloids?”

“Cool story.” I stepped to the doorway and waved her through it. “Have a nice night, Nevada. Somewhere else.”

“I won’t forget this, Keaton’s sister.” She marched into the hall, tossing a scowl over her shoulder. “Karma’s coming for you.”



CHAPTER 15

TINSLEY

A WEEK LATER, I sat in the third row of Magnus's classroom, listening as his deep baritone oozed sex into the statistical analysis of economic relationships.

Not sure when I started thinking of him as Magnus instead of *Father* Magnus. I only knew that it was crucial in helping me separate the man from the authority figure, mentally speaking.

Separating the man from his job in the literal sense was a whole other story.

There were fifteen girls in this econometrics class, including me. As he bent down to grab the paper he dropped, all of them stared at his ass, including me.

Chiseled perfection. There was no other way to describe those taut gluteus muscles. As a matter of fact, chiseled perfection could be used to describe all of Magnus Falke. Except his personality. For that, I would lose the perfection and just go with chiseled.

Or squared.

Old-fashioned and lame.

But also mysterious.

He was an enigma to me, and that made him dangerously intriguing. I wanted his secrets. I longed to know what corralled him into priesthood and prevented him from returning to his former sexual self.

My internet searches yielded nothing but praise for his past achievements. Self-made billionaire? One hundred percent. He'd gotten rich by flipping businesses. In essence, he bought flailing corporations, fixed them up, and made an astronomical profit when he sold them.

By day, he was the king of the corporate world. By night, he was New York's most eligible bachelor.

There were very few photos of him as if someone diligently erased them from the internet. But the ones I'd found showed him wearing suits and tuxedos, attending extravagant parties, each taken with a different woman on his arm. Always older ladies, closer to my mother's age. All perfectly built and strikingly beautiful. Fashion models. Beauty queens. Celebrities.

Looking at those pictures made my stomach turn. He could and did have any woman he wanted, and I hated that for reasons I refused to examine.

Even now, dressed in his priestly black on black, he was an effigy of desire and temptation. Shadowed jawline, wicked mean mouth, brown hair falling over his forehead as he crouched to the floor. Then he straightened, turning. His lashes lifted to half-mast, and his piercing blue eyes landed directly on me.

Bedroom eyes.

I imagined they looked just like that, sensual and heated, when he was in the throes of orgasm.

Now that I had his rapt attention, I slid my finger between my lips and slowly sucked from tip to knuckle. As I withdrew it, I painted the wetness from my mouth along my slack bottom lip, rolling my tongue a little and—

"Class dismissed." He clipped out the words, never taking his eyes off my lips.

I smiled.

He scowled.

"We still have ten minutes." Carrie, so desperate to be the teacher's pet, didn't move from her chair.

"Get out!" His roar rattled the windows and cleared the room in under three seconds.

I might've peed a little, but I forced myself to remain seated. Forced my gaze to stay with his.

Something had changed since the night he returned my phone. I'd deliberately shown him my underwear, and just like that, he'd stopped punishing me with labor that put me on my knees.

No more floor scrubbing.

All week, I'd argued through his lessons, spat obscene words at his face, and engaged in my usual ornery way. But each infraction was met with

forced prayers and Bible study.

Boring.

My sore knees were happy about the reprieve from scrubbing, but sitting in this classroom reading passages of scripture wasn't doing him or me any favors. It only inspired me to be naughtier.

Theoretically, I represented everything he should avoid. My age, his vow, our student-teacher relationship—so many obstacles. I was forbidden, prohibited by state and church, taboo in every sense of the word.

Not to mention that the Constantines, one of the most powerful families in the country, had threatened him more than once.

I had to separate him from all that, physically, emotionally, and mentally, so that he could become engrossed with me. I needed to be too seductive to resist.

Last month, I would've never believed I could do it. But during Keaton's visit—oh man, my brother would die if he knew this—his reaction to the way Magnus looked at me gave me perspective. Very little sneaked past Keaton. He knew how to read people, and if he suspected Magnus was having inappropriate thoughts about me, he was onto something.

It made me feel desirable.

So today, my forty-first day at Sion Academy, I came to class prepared to play dirty.

The door shut behind the last student, leaving Magnus and me and the crackling tension in the air.

"Here." He pressed a finger to the desk in the front row, indicating I was to move to that spot without question or delay.

I took my time. Stretched my arms. Gathered my books. Rolled my hips. Tried to exude seduction in a fugly, green plaid skirt that hung like a sack and clashed with my complexion. But hey, I had to work with what I had.

When I finally lowered into the chair before him, I returned my finger to my lip, stroking the wet flesh.

His hand slammed down on the desk, making me jump. Then his face moved in. Dark brows, firm lips, unwavering glare. Furious. Terrifying.

Panic spiked, but I leaned forward to meet him head-on, heedless of the warnings emitting from his stiff posture.

I wanted this too badly.

I wanted to go home, and at the same time, I wanted to grab his collar, rip it from his throat, yell at him to fly apart and give me everything he hid from the world. I wanted the man who roared behind those eyes, not the priest who imprisoned him.

“What are you doing?” His voice abraded with unconcealed rage and untold secrets.

“All that sexy talk about economic regression models was getting under my skin. The sounds you make with numbers and formulas raise my temperature and lower my inhibitions.” I slid a hand over my skirt, between my legs, and tried not to blush. “You make me wet, Father Magnus.”

“You’re playing with fire.”

“You’re about as fiery as an iceberg. I think what you mean to say is...” I directed my eyes at his groin. “I’m playing with the South Pole?”

“Not a chance in hell.” He released a chilling laugh, the sound pelting my skin like splinters of ice. “The fact that you think I would stray for you, that I would break my promise to God for an overindulged, ungrateful heathen...” He shook his head, disgust carved in his features. “You’re just like all the others, and here’s a spoiler. None of them succeed. I will not sin for you. I will not violate my vows for you. *Never.*”

Pain flared in my chest. It consumed. It dragged me under a dark tide.

“Sending me home is sinless,” I said quietly. “Add that to your vows.”

He stepped away, snagged a Bible from the rack, and *thunk*. It dropped on my lap.

“Pick up where you left off last night.” Acid stained his voice as he stalked to his desk.

The school day was officially over. While the main building emptied of all students and teachers, this was where I remained every single afternoon.

Because I didn’t know when to keep my mouth shut.

He seemed content to endure these daily punishments with me. Sitting in his chair, he’d already plunged into his work on the laptop. This would go on for the rest of the evening. Him, typing away. Me, reading the New Testament out loud.

Except I couldn’t do it again. Not another night. Not another second.

“I don’t hear you reading.” His eyes remained on the laptop.

“I only read this stuff because I don’t have a choice. But you can’t force your faith on me. These are your beliefs, not mine.”

“I still don’t hear you reading.”

Last night, I ended on the Gospel of Mark, but I wouldn’t be picking up there as he wanted. Instead, I opened the Bible to Ezekiel 23:20.

Blanking my face, I read aloud. *“There she lusted after her lovers, whose genitals were like those of donkeys and whose emission was like that of horses.”*

“Wrong passage.”

“This is *your* book. Besides, I don’t think this part’s so wrong. Genitals like donkeys? Emissions like horses? Sounds poetic to me. Evocative.” I met his unfriendly eyes. “Why can’t you be more like Ezekiel? He was a dirty little prophet.”

“Turn to the Gospel of Mark.”

“Okay, hang on. This one’s disturbing.” I sensed him rising to his feet and approaching as I quickly flipped to Deuteronomy 22:20. *“If, however, the charge is true and no proof of the young woman’s virginity can be found, she shall be brought to the door of her father’s house and there the men of her town shall stone her to death.”* I closed the book and stared at the ominous black cover. “It’s stories like this that make it difficult for modern, liberated women to read the Bible.”

I felt him above me like an overcast sky. Rotating thunderclouds. Static in the air. A looming storm about to fuck up my world.

Slowly tipping my head up, I watched with fascinated horror as his chest expanded and his hands furred into fists. What was that expression? His lips formed a smile, but it wasn’t a smile at all. It was skin-deep and scary.

What lay beneath was a man breaking his restraints.

Stiffly, he turned and prowled toward the door as if it were either that or wrap his hands around my throat.

I wanted his hands.

Didn’t I?

Watching him walk away filled me with uncertainty. There was something off about him. He held himself differently, his composure impossibly colder, less human.

My mind raced as he reached for the closed door.

Then, in a tone as black as Satan’s abyss, he said, “You foolish girl, all you had to do was read the correct passage.”

My hackles bristled. “Here’s a passage for you, straight from the Gospel of Tinsley. *Thou shalt fuck off.*”

He stood there for a moment with his back to me, one hand on the door handle, the other shifting in front of him, near his groin. Adjusting himself?

I held my breath.

He locked the door.

Click.

A teeny sound, one that exploded into a swarm of bees inside me.

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CHAPTER 16

TINSLEY

BREATHING WASN'T AN option. All the air in the classroom had fled.

Magnus removed the phone from his pocket, tapped the screen, and moments later, church music strummed in my ears. Loudly.

I didn't know the name of the song, but I heard it every morning during Mass—the slow chime of bells, haunting flute, and hypnotic thrum of a harp.

In church, it sounded peaceful.

In this room, with him, it rang of pain and damnation.

Paralyzed, I didn't take my eyes off him as he walked toward me in a slow, menacing manner.

I suppressed the need to swallow and jutted my chin higher.

For six weeks, I'd poked and pushed and drove the beast to the edge. I wanted to watch him unravel so completely he would have no other option than to send me home. I was here for the ruination. Mine. His. No matter how badly it hurt.

This could've been so much easier. He could've gotten rid of me on day one, but his arrogance stood in the way. Now, we would both pay the price.

He set down the phone, the ghostly music pealing around us. He didn't try to speak over it. Instead, his hand shot to my hair, fingers closing around the roots, and with a force of aggression that emptied my lungs, he swung me out of the chair.

My hips slammed into the desk as he threw me face down across the surface. The rough treatment should've panicked me, but I loved the feel of his iron grip, the heat of his legs against my backside, and his single-minded focus on teaching me a lesson.

I wanted his lessons in sin.

Stars danced across my vision as he shoved me harder against the desk. Then he was on me, his whiskered jaw scratching my cheek, his heavy frame folding around my back, tucking me against him as he panted in my ear.

“I tried to protect you.” He curled his fingers around my throat and scraped his teeth against my jaw. “I tried, and now, it’s too late. I won’t be able to stop. Not with you.”

Every thought, every snarky retort, died with my breath. The collar of his fingers around my throat squeezed harder, sending my nails across the desk, scratching, breaking, my entire body fighting for sips of oxygen.

“I’m not a liar, Tinsley.” He lowered his free hand to the front of my thighs and gathered my uniform in his fist, dragging the hem up my legs. “But I lied to you once. I’m interested in *everything* beneath your skirt. Every hole. Every drop of blood. Don’t make a sound.”

Holy sweet Lord Jesus. He was going to fuck me. For once, I would do every damn thing he told me to do. I wouldn’t make a sound.

At my nod, he released my throat. Then his weight was gone, taking all the heat with him.

Turning my head, I clutched my neck and angled my chin upward to gulp air into my lungs. Standing behind me, he wasn’t looking at my face. His eyes were fixed on my ass.

He lifted my skirt.

The material flipped over my back, and goosebumps stampeded across my skin. *Bare skin.*

No panties.

Yeah, I’d come prepared.

His outrage was immediate.

“You’ve been like this all day?” His voice roared, his expression thunder, booming, deafening in his anger.

“You said you didn’t want to see my underwear again.”

So I’d stopped wearing them, holding out with wicked hope that he would get an eyeful the next time I scrubbed the floor. Well, he was getting an eyeful now, and it produced a quivery, satisfying rush of warmth between my legs.

He was right. I craved his attention. Good or bad, positive or negative, platonic or sexual, I was crying for it.

His heated gaze gave it to me, never leaving my exposed backside as his hands fell to his belt. In a swift movement, the leather strap pulled free and dangled from his fist. Then...

Crack!

I lay there, suspended in that split second of shock between the strike in my ears and the pain it would bring. With my neck craned, I watched in frozen silence as he reared back the belt and swung again.

The second blow landed just as the fire from the first erupted. It spread outward, radiating across my buttocks and stabbing deeply and with precision directly into my bones.

Mouth dry, muscles locked, I gasped without sound.

Then he beat the unholy hell out of me.

The instrumental church music played on. His strikes kept time with the toll of the bells, and his labored breaths built in crescendo with the flute.

I couldn't breathe at all. My teeth sank into the insides of my cheeks, and the metallic taste of blood wet my tongue. The urge to reach back and protect my burning butt was enormous. Instead, I clutched the edge of the desk and focused on him.

The unfazably frigid priest was gone, and in his place was a feral, ravenous, vengeful god hell-bent on punishing my ass. He grunted through every hit, his teeth clenched and bared, and the sounds of his breathing so heavy and fast he drowned out the music.

I'd never heard or seen a man so worked up. And I was the source of that. The fuel for his fire. I was freeing him.

It did something to me. Called to me. Shook me like an awakening.

As the shock from the pain subsided, my mind began to calm. My limbs loosened, and I relaxed into the belt that rained down on my flesh.

Trickles of liquid heat pooled between my legs, opening the muscles and rippling through me in heavy pulses of need. I adjusted my hips, positioning my clit against the edge of the desk. With each driving blow from the strap, I let my body rock, grinding that bundle of nerves against the hard surface.

As the music climbed, his strikes came harder and faster, and everything increased in intensity—my hunger, my trembling, my pleasure. I rose to the precipice, reaching.

Until the belt hit the floor.

A heartbeat later, he was on me, stretched over my back and hauling my pussy away from the desk, denying me that friction.

“You will *not* come.” He ruthlessly kicked my feet apart as if he didn’t so much as want my thighs clenching the spot where I ached.

His cock lay along the crevice of my buttocks, rock-hard and miles long, straining behind his zipper. He felt huge, monstrous, throbbing to get inside me.

I wriggled my ass.

He fisted my hair and yanked my head to his shoulder with such viciousness I thought my neck might break. His teeth pressed against my cheek, his lips pulling back and his breaths lashing like an inferno blowing through the gates of hell.

His muscles were coiled, his entire body flexing against me. Or away from me. He was fighting demons.

“Leave.” His hand tightened in my hair, at odds with his hoarse command. “You must go.”

Trapped beneath him, I didn’t have many options. Leaving wasn’t one of them.

I angled my neck, struggling against his hold so I could see his face. When I finally turned enough, when I met his stark gaze, my heart stopped.

A blood vessel throbbed in his brow. Guilt etched his beautiful features. And the pain in his eyes...it devastated me. It wrenched open the door to my soul and stuffed every useless corner with self-loathing and regret.

Magnus was never going to expel me.

And he never wanted to want this.

When it came down to it, after he fucked me, what was I going to do? Would I actually report him? Get him fired? Arrested? Or, the most likely scenario, murdered by my family?

The song ended, and silence assailed, magnifying the harshness of our breaths.

I glanced at the door. It was locked, but I knew from experience that if someone pressed their ear against it, they would hear our conversation.

“Magnus.” I twisted beneath him, swiveling my hips to sit on the edge of the desk.

The action cost me, dragging unbearable pain through my abused backside.

With his legs imprisoning mine, he loosened his grip on my hair but didn't back away. Instead, he pressed in, his chest heaving, our foreheads touching. He smelled like man and God and war.

The war was still waging. Clashing and burning behind his eyes. I'd sensed his internal struggle so many times before and pressed on with my selfish agenda anyway.

I was the biggest asshole of all.

As part of my religious training over the past six weeks, I'd received the sacraments of Baptism and Confession. I'd fought the whole process in my usual way, going so far as refusing to sit in that creepy dark closet and talk about my sins.

But right now, I felt guilty. I was sick to the pit of my soul with guilt.

It was time to confess.

With a shaky hand, I reached up and rested my fingers against his steely jaw. "Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned. This is my first confession."

His breath left him.

"I tried to seduce a priest." I licked my lips, inches from his. "It was selfish. Vindictive. I want to go home and thought only of my needs, not once considering what would become of him if I succeeded."

"Is there anything else?" His voice dipped, gruffly sexy and thick with desire.

"I cuss every day and masturbate every night."

"Tinsley..." He groaned.

"I shouldn't have said that last part, even if it's true." I sighed against his mouth, savoring his heat, his delicious dark scent. "I have a lot of sins, Father. I'm sorry for some of them."

"Only some?"

"Not gonna lie."

"You rarely do." The hand in my hair went slack, his fingers sliding downward to linger along my jawline, caressing. "You're the most honest person I know. Except for maybe Crisanto."

"That's sad."

"Not for me. For your penance, pray an Act of Contrition."

"Okay." I swallowed my pride and held his gaze. "*O my God, I am heartily sorry for having offended you...*"

I regurgitated the prayer from memory in a tone that lacked my typical mockery.

If I could recite every prayer like this—with his hand on my face and his mouth close enough to kiss—I would do it without complaint. So I said the words slowly, drawing it out, never wanting it to end.

He closed his eyes, listening with a serene expression, but the tension didn't leave his rigid body. He didn't release me, didn't move away. He held me as if he were never letting go.

I finished the prayer.

He opened his eyes. "God the Father of mercies, I absolve you from your sins, in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit."

I made the sign of the cross as he said the words. "Amen."

"Go in peace." He dropped his fists to the desk on either side of my hips.

"Thank you, Father."

"Go," he whispered.

"Magnus?" Uncertain, I sat motionless in the cage of his arms. His command said one thing, but his body language implied that if I twitched a muscle, he would be on me.

"This isn't over. I can't... I won't be able to stop this."

"What if—?"

"Go!"

At the bellow of his voice, my words shrank into the back of my throat, my limbs already springing into action.

I had to push him with all my strength because he wasn't moving. The effort gave me a sliver of space between the desk and the brick wall of his body to make my escape.

I didn't look back until I was through the door and in the hallway.

He stood where I'd left him, leaning forward with his fists on the desk, arms straight, head down, and chin pressed to his chest. But his eyes were on me, glowing like blue flames beneath the veil of his lashes.

I hesitated.

"Go, Tinsley." Nothing moved but his lips, his voice low and guttural.
"Run."

I ran. Through the building, down the stairs, and straight to the grove, I didn't stop until I reached the opossums' hollow.

Jade and Willow weren't there, but that had become more common in the past few days. They were venturing out and scavenging for their meals, returning only to sleep during the day.

My mind raced a mile a minute as I stood there catching my breath. Surrounded by the privacy of trees, I let my hand wander to my backside. The touch stung, making me hiss.

Twisting at the waist, I hiked up the skirt and inspected the damage. For as brutally as he'd whipped me, I'd expected lacerations and blood. But I didn't see an open cut. No broken skin. No bleeding.

He'd welted me. Reddened my skin. It would hurt like a bitch to sit, but the marks would fade within a week.

He knew what he was doing. He knew, and he'd tried to protect me from it. From *him*.

His mastery with a strap hadn't been learned with students at Sion Academy. No, he'd done this before. Like *before* before.

High school students didn't arouse him. Inflicting pain did. I had a sneaking suspicion that rough sex was very much a part of his past and shaped the mystery that he was today.

I was captivated, enthralled, turned on like I'd never been before. But seducing him was no longer an option. I didn't ever want to see that pained, guilt-ridden look on his face again.

I needed another plan because, dammit, I wasn't going to marry the family of my mother's choosing. Maybe I wouldn't get married at all.

My mother had groomed Keaton the same way, pushing him into a relationship with Clara Blair. A Blair and Constantine marriage would've made my powerful mother all the more powerful. But Keaton had put a stop to that.

If he could do it, maybe I could, too. It gave me hope.

The evening was warm for November in Maine. I pulled my cardigan around me and curled up on the ground to wait for Jaden and Willow to return. It took me a long time to find a comfortable position without aggravating my welts.

Each flaring bite of pain made me think of him. And smile.

I rested my head on my folded arms, and within minutes, I fell asleep.

The sky rumbled, jolting me awake. Wind gusted through trees, cooling the air and spitting droplets of rain. The approaching storm had darkened the sky, but so had the late hour. It was past curfew.

It wasn't the first time I'd fallen asleep out here and missed check-in. Oh, well.

I looked around for Jaden and Willow and felt a deep ache of disappointment. They hadn't returned. What if they'd left for good? Without a goodbye? I couldn't bear it.

On the way back to the residence hall, I winced through each step and resisted the urge to rub my butt. At the top of the stairs to my dorm, Daisy was waiting.

"I'm going to report you this time." She crossed her arms, blocking my path.

"Good for you." I shouldered past her.

"This is your last strike. He'll suspend you this time."

"Don't care."

A suspension would send me home for a few days. I would have to deal with the wrath of my mother, but it would be worth it just to see my siblings, sleep in my own bed, and spend the morning somewhere that wasn't church.

But I wouldn't get a suspension. Magnus was onto me and would never give me what I wanted.

I slipped into my dorm, and my attention instantly went to the shoebox on my bed. "Who's been in my room?"

"No one," Daisy shouted from her room.

This box didn't magically appear on its own. I approached it cautiously, marking the worn edges and faded labels. It was an old box. Probably not a gift.

I set my phone on the desk and bent down, flipping off the lid.

For a moment, I didn't understand. My brain took snapshots, trying to piece the images together. Gray, crust, wet, toes, blood, pink tails, Mickey Mouse ears.

My chest burned.

Opossums.

Mangled.

My heart raced.

Jaden and Willow.

Dead.

My throat caught fire.

“No.” I stumbled. Couldn’t feel my feet. “No, no, no, no!”

That couldn’t be them. It couldn’t. Why would anyone do that? Why were they in a box? Why were they *here*?

A scream rose from my chest and hit the air with all the mortal terror in my body.

“Who did this?” I screamed until my voice bled, and I started hyperventilating. “Who...fucking...did this?”

I grabbed the box and stormed into the hallway. Heads poked out of doorways, their faces smeary and distorted through my tears.

“You’re waking the entire floor,” Daisy whisper-shouted behind me. “Go back to your room.”

“Fuck you.” I shrieked and swung a finger toward all the girls in the hall. “Whoever did this...swear to God, I will find you. You’re so fucking dead.”

I hated their eyes on me. I hated their lack of sorrow and compassion. They didn’t understand. None of these people understood how fucking much this hurt.

Snapping the lid onto the box, I hugged it to my chest and charged toward the stairs.

“Tinsley.” Daisy held a phone to her ear and a hand outstretched, palm out, as if to stop me from leaving.

A torrent of sobs piled up in my throat as I ducked beneath her arm and ran down the stairs.

Miriam waited on the ground floor. Whether she was trying to stop me or talk to me, I didn’t wait to find out. I kept running, needing to be outside, away from this godforsaken place.

The agony was all-consuming, pouring from my eyes, my nose, my goddamn heart. I clutched the box tighter to my chest.

My fuzzy little babies.

Oh God, why? Why them?

When I burst through the doors, it was raining, falling in heavy, angry sheets. I wrapped my cardigan around the box, trying to protect it as I bolted into the storm.

I didn't know where I was going. I didn't look around, didn't slow, didn't think. My feet splashed through the puddles. My hair stuck to my face, and I just ran.

Straight to the gate.

To him.

I needed Magnus.

He would fix this. Somehow, he would make it better.

Lightning lit up the sky. Thunder crashed. The ice-cold downpour seeped through my clothes and drenched my skin. My teeth chattered violently, and my loafers filled with water, slipping off my heels as I tore through the night.

A streetlamp rose above the arched gate, illuminating the only way out of this nightmare. When I reached the hinged barrier, I realized I'd left my phone behind.

My heart sank, but I couldn't feel it. I didn't have the emotional capacity for more pain. I was cold, soaked to the bone, and overwrought with grief.

It was the grief that pulled me to the ground.

Hugging the box to my chest, I collapsed to my knees, dropped my head to the gate, and cried.

When the pound of footsteps erupted, I had no intention of moving from this spot. The sound arrived fast, sprinting, but it wasn't behind me. It came from the other side of the gate.

A single long-legged stride.

I felt the charge in the air, the intensity of his presence, before I lifted my head.

Dark jeans, light blue shirt, dark scruff on a squared jaw.

No collar.

I almost didn't recognize him. Until I reached the final destination and fell into the mercurial eyes of the most beautiful man I'd ever seen.

Drenched from head to toe, he stood like an undefeatable force in the raging, whipping rain.

He'd come for me.

"Magnus." I held up the box, my voice like sandpaper. "I need you."

He opened the gate.

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CHAPTER 17

MAGNUS

EVERYTHING INSIDE ME heated at the familiarity of my name on Tinsley's lips.

She looked like a broken angel, kneeling in the brutal storm, hair like gold gossamer around her ethereal face, and shattered blue eyes staring up at me, so trusting, so needful, so goddamn beautiful.

Nine years ago, I would have dragged her into the shadows and fucked her like this—drenched, shivering, heartbroken, ass reddened with my marks, uniform shoved up and twisted about her waist, face smashed into the mud, and my cock a hard lesson that some things should never be coaxed out of hiding.

I was no longer that monster. But I knew, in the sick workings of my mind, that I couldn't be trusted. Not with Tinsley. Never again.

"Someone killed Jaden and Willow." Her chin quivered, and she locked her jaw tight, anger leaking into her voice. "Someone killed them! You can punish me for breaking curfew. Do whatever you want to me. But please, Magnus. Please, help me."

I'd received calls from both Daisy and Miriam explaining the situation. Someone had left the dead opossums in a shoebox on Tinsley's bed. When I found that someone, there would be hell to pay. But right now, I needed to get her out of the rain.

My gaze lifted to the residence hall at a distance behind her. Dark windows, lights out, the students would've been sent back to their beds. I couldn't send Tinsley back in there like this. She'd run for a reason. She'd asked for my help, and by that, she meant comfort.

She needed me to console her.

I wasn't the right person for that job, but I would figure it out because, dammit, I didn't want anyone else holding her.

"Let's go." I reached for the shoebox.

With a snarl, she yanked it against her chest and curled her shoulders around it, refusing to let go.

"All right." I crouched, hooked my arms beneath her back and legs, and lifted her featherlight weight, cradling her against me.

As I turned and carried her toward the center of the village, she burrowed closer and buried her face in my neck. It felt astonishingly, horribly right.

"Why would someone kill them?" She wept quietly. "I don't understand."

There were depraved people in the world. I knew that too well. I was one of them. But I would've never believed any of my students were capable of killing an animal. Some of the girls could be ruthless, but this was psychopathic behavior.

"Evil is inexplicable." I bowed my head over hers, trying to shield her from the rain. "But it won't go unpunished. Not in this life or the next."

I took her to the closest building to protect her from the elements. Perhaps it was the one place I could protect her from me.

With the key from my pocket, I unlocked the towering arched doors of the church and carried her inside.

The familiar scent of incense and candle wax perfumed the air. A single aisle ran down the center, separating twenty rows of wooden pews on either side. I flicked on the dimmest light, illuminating the fourteen floor-to-ceiling stained glass windows, each illustrating one of the Stations of the Cross.

Straight ahead, at the end of the aisle, stood the altar.

I could lock the doors, spread her over that marble slab, and fuck her until she forgot all about the opossums. The simmering heat in my blood demanded it.

But there was also guilt, thick and cold, congealing in my stomach.

This was a church. I never allowed my depraved thoughts to desecrate these walls. She was safe from me here.

I carried her to the first row and lowered into the pew. We were soaked from the rain, quivering uncontrollably, and dripping water all over the

place. As I shifted to set her beside me, her arm stiffened around my back, wordlessly demanding I not let go.

“Tinsley.” I held her on my lap and gripped the soggy cardboard. “Give me the box.”

“No.” Her head shook rapidly, her gaze waterlogged and devastated. “I can’t.”

“You can.” I injected steel in my voice. “Do as you’re told.”

Her fingers sprung open, releasing the shoebox, and a sob tore from her throat.

“Good girl.” I set it aside and pulled her against my chest.

She was so small, her lissome limbs curled into a ball on my lap, her head tucked beneath my chin. We needed towels, dry clothes, but that would require going back out in the rain.

So I gave her my body heat and removed the phone from my pocket. After sending off a few quick texts, I set the device aside. Then, under the guise of keeping her warm, I gave into the urge to touch her.

Slowly, agonizingly, I circled my palm across the silky wet skin of her thigh, torturing myself. If I wandered a few inches higher, I would reach heaven.

She’d gifted me a clear, unhampered view of her glistening slit this afternoon. With her bare ass perched in the air and the belt she’d so naughtily earned leaving stripes of angry red flesh, I applauded myself for not impaling her from end to end.

But I wasn’t a saint. In fact, I was still reeling from the hungry, violent sensations that had thrashed through every nerve in my body. She’d left my classroom, but not my mind. Not for a single moment. And now, with her irresistible backside pressed against my swelling cock, I felt sex-crazed and out of control.

I wanted to see her welts. I wanted to feel them, bite them, and add more.

So rather than offering up prayers for her emotional pain, I offered up my hand beneath her skirt and fantasized about spreading her wide and spearing her virgin holes. She would beg me to stop, which would only make me fuck her harder, more viciously, until she begged me to make her come. If she took it like a good girl, I would—

“Magnus?” She shifted, deliberately pressing down on my erection as she squinted at me, her lips a grim slash of accusation. “You’re not thinking about my opossums.”

This gorgeous woman. Always calling me out on my shit. Even when she was grief-stricken.

“No.” With a groan, I gripped her hips and dragged her against my hardness. “I’m a wretched man.”

“The worst.” She dashed a hand against her wet cheek, her eyes swimming with pain.

I stilled, and my toes flexed in my wet sneakers. I needed her off my lap so I could comfort her appropriately.

“Oh, Magnus.” A sob escaped her. “It hurts so much.”

She shivered in her wet clothes, watching me with hurt in her eyes. Making my chest implode. Christ Almighty, I would cut off both my arms if it would take her pain away.

“What do you need, Tinsley?” I touched my thumb to her cheek and traced the path of her tears. “Tell me.”

“I need...” Her throat worked as she bravely tried to contain her emotion. “Oh God, this is hard for me to admit.”

She was a magnetic force, the pull to her unstoppable.

My entire being drifted closer, my hands to the back of her head, my lips to her quivering jaw. “Trust me.”

“I—”

“Trust me.”

“What I really need is...” She released a tremulous sigh, rested a palm on my chest, and met my gaze. “You. The way you are in this moment. I feel like it’s okay to be sad with you, like I can let down my guard in your arms.”

Every intake of oxygen carried the scent of lemon from her skin. It scrambled all reasonable thought, leaving me unbalanced and aching for the one thing I couldn’t have.

It was dangerous enough to crave the things I did. But to crave them with Tinsley? I couldn’t.

She shouldn’t ever let her guard down with me. Especially not with those tears tracking down her face.

Need shimmered through me, possessing me like a seductive demon. My lips gravitated to her cheek, sipping the salty moisture, tasting her grief, and offering the only comfort I knew how to give.

My mouth didn't usually deliver pleasure, but I knew how to kiss a woman into mindlessness.

Angling my head, I grazed my breath across her cheekbone. Ran my tongue over the curve of her earlobe. Nipped along her graceful jaw. Lingered at the corner of her full pouty lips.

"Whimper for me." My command hovered on that almost-kiss, dancing from my tongue to hers.

She swallowed, whimpered, and parted her lips a hair's breadth from mine.

Exhales chasing inhaleds, we breathed together, suspended in the space between a kiss and not-kiss. I only needed to ease a millimeter closer, and I could take her, devour her, and never let her come up for air.

Her huge eyes watched me, her body canting, trying to claim my mouth.

I gripped her hair, stalling her movements. Reminding her I was the one in control.

She lifted her hand from my chest. With her mouth so close, I shut my eyes, willing her to touch me again, even the slightest, most innocent contact. I ached for it. But none came, and when I opened my eyes, she was staring at the shoebox.

"Will you bury them?" Her gaze flitted to mine, seeking.

"Yeah." I couldn't picture myself doing such a thing, but for her, I would do anything. "Yes."

"Thank you." She cupped my face, her expression overflowing with gratefulness.

As she leaned toward me again, I caught her throat in a warning grip, warding her off. Fighting with myself.

"Tinsley." I grasped the last threads of my sanity. "We can't."

"I know."

The door opened, and we flew apart.

She tumbled into the pew as I stood, turning toward the entrance. I knew we were going to have company. I'd texted the groundskeeper when I carried Tinsley in here.

Then I'd lost all my brain cells.

Felix lumbered in, wearing a heavy raincoat and carrying a duffel bag.

He was one of those old men who lived in denim overalls and jumped at the chance to help anyone in need. He was the first person I'd hired nine years ago.

Over the past six weeks, he'd kept an eye on Tinsley and her wild companions, watching the opossums for signs of rabies and other diseases.

In my text, I'd given him a heads-up on the shoebox and asked that he collect it and bring blankets or towels.

"Father Magnus," he said in greeting and gave Tinsley a soft smile. "Miss Constantine." He set the bag down beside the front row and lifted the lid on the box, peeking inside. "Oh, dear. This must've been an awful thing to find. I'm sorry for that."

Nodding jerkily, she pressed a hand to her mouth and looked away.

"Here's the thing, Miss Constantine." Felix unzipped the duffel and removed a wooden box. "I found these out in the rain near the north wall."

He lifted a hinged door on the top, and two white faces instantly popped out.

My chin jerked back.

She gasped and flew off the pew as the young opossums scurried from the box. Swooping them up in her arms, she laughed, a gloriously musical sound that coursed warmth through my chest.

The opossums climbed to her shoulders and clung from her wet hair, leaving no doubt that these were the critters she called Jaden and Willow.

A shocking amount of relief settled over me as I met Felix's cloudy eyes.

"I have a theory, Father." He handed over the duffel bag and grabbed the shoebox, tucking it under his arm. "But you're not going to like it."

"I'm listening." I removed a blanket from the bag and draped it over Tinsley's shoulders.

Her gaze stayed with the opossums, but I knew she was listening, too.

"There's been a lot of roadkill between here and the neighboring towns. Lots of opossums." He stared at his wet boots and grimaced. "Seeing how it's Monday and the students had visitors over the weekend, it's an easy assumption that someone collected what's in this shoebox and brought it onto the campus. Looks to me like these"—he tapped the shoebox—"were hit by a car."

“I know who put it in my room.” Tinsley growled in her throat. Hot-tempered without being vindictive. Soft and fierce and elfish. Enchanting.

“We’ll talk about it when I do a full investigation.” I turned to Felix. “You found her opossums near the north wall?”

“Yeah. They’re trying to get out but don’t know how to breach the electric fence. Opossums are travelers, never sticking around the same place too long. I know you’ve grown attached, Miss Constantine, but we can’t keep them here.”

“I know.” She gently stroked the creatures, smiling.

I’d never seen her demeanor in such a state of calm serenity. I didn’t want to chance another death with those animals and watch her go through what she’d suffered tonight.

“Do you think they’d be safe in Cypress Lake State Park?” I asked Felix.

“That’s where I would take them. It’s far enough away from the main roads. They’ll head into the mountains.”

“Thanks for your help, Felix.”

He wished us goodnight and left the church with the shoebox.

I met Tinsley’s eyes. “You up for a drive?”

She returned a look of surprise.

I’d never taken a student off the property. Her mother expressly forbade it, and the rulebook stated that no student could leave without approval.

Since I was that approval and Caroline had put her in my charge, all else was moot.

“Yes.” She grinned mischievously. “I’d love that.”



CHAPTER 18

MAGNUS

BY THE TIME we stepped outside, the storm had moved on, leaving a frigid chill in the air that would work well to clear my head.

Carrying the blankets, I led Tinsley to my car. An old base-model sedan. No options. The lowest of the low. Nothing like the luxury cars I'd owned in New York.

The tin box was perfect for me.

She didn't spare it a glance as she slid into the front seat. The opossums absorbed her full attention.

During the drive, she petted and played with their ears and tails. I left her to it, knowing these were her final moments with them.

Twenty minutes later, I parked along the gravel path that led to the entrance of the state park.

"Ready?" I twisted in the dark to face her.

She stared down at the animals on her lap. Her chest lifted with a heavy inhale, but she didn't cry. Instead, she nodded, and a tiny smile twitched at the corner of her mouth.

Wrapped in blankets and escorted by the moonlight, we stepped onto the path in our soggy shoes and icy clothes. My breath formed puffs of white vapor, and my fingers were so cold they'd gone numb. But I was at ease. Unburdened. Peaceful.

This deep, genuine sense of happiness was new to me. I couldn't remember ever feeling so content.

It had everything to do with her.

In the space of six weeks, she'd become a coveted presence. I eagerly awaited every word from her mouth. Looked forward to seeing the ferocity

in her eyes. Counted down the seconds until she punched back with another witty retort.

As she lowered the opossums to the ground and coaxed them into the woods, I realized this was the side of her I cherished the most.

With her guard down and her soft underbelly exposed, she was an angel beyond her astral form. Her power came from her inner grace and compassion. When she wasn't trying to raise hell in my classroom, she was innately, wholly, profoundly pure of heart.

Where I was a cold and empty house of bones, she was a vast meadow aglow with lemon-scented blooms and honeybees.

She was everything I wasn't.

I'd never been so taken with a woman, and it unnerved the hell out of me. She was smart and strong and willful enough to pierce my exterior. Hell, she was the only woman who might understand me and accept me for who I was.

I feared that for her.

I meant what I'd told her. I wouldn't be able to stop this. But to protect her from me, I was going to damn well fucking try.

As the opossums set off into the darkness, she stood beside me, watching them fade away. She blew a kiss, a little wave, and tilting her face to the night sky, she released a joyous laugh.

A much better send-off than a shoebox and burial mound.

I gave her the time she needed, standing silently at her side and absorbing her beauty in my periphery. We hugged the blankets around our shoulders, our arms brushing, hers shaking with the cold. Without thought, I pulled her against me, chest to chest, enveloping her in fleece and body heat.

She rested her cheek against me and sighed. My body hardened. Our hips pulled together. Her soft, pearl-colored hair tickled my throat. I wasn't wearing my collar.

This was a bad idea.

She snaked her arms under the blankets and wound them around my back. "Confession time."

"We already did that today."

"This isn't a sin. It's more of an admission."

"I don't want to hear it."

“Too bad. I know who left the carnage in my room, and when you punish her...” She made a groaning sound. “This is hard for me to say.”

I bit back a smile, knowing what would come out of her mouth.

“I don’t want you to whip her.” She stared up at me through her lashes. “Or spank her or look under her skirt or—”

“Tinsley—”

“—touch her in any way. Mostly, I don’t want you to be with her the way you were with me today.” She propped her chin on my chest, her gaze never leaving mine. “I have no right to ask this of you, and hearing it out loud sounds so petty and inappropriately jealous. I swear, Magnus, I’m not going to make any more moves on you. Except for maybe hugs.” She tightened her arms around me. “This is nice. But I’m not going to come to class without underwear or try to sleep with you or anything like that again.”

I waited for the relief to hit, but it didn’t come. “Does this mean you’ll behave in my classroom? No more backtalk or disrespect?”

“What?” She reared her head back, snorting. “Let’s not go crazy here. I’m still going to make your life a living hell.”

Impossible. Every second with her was unexpected and challenging and pure bliss.

“I won’t give up on my one great passion.” She shifted her weight, inadvertently rubbing against the fly of my jeans. “But while I’m removing you as part of my plot against my mother, I don’t want...” Her lips parted as she searched my face. “Damn, why do you have to be so exasperatingly gorgeous?”

I had that very thought about her every second of every day.

“What I’m trying to say...” She blinked and sucked in a breath, abdomen tight. “Nevada has a massive hard-on for you, and I don’t want you to reward what she did to me tonight by lifting her skirt and—”

“Shut up,” I murmured, watching her plump lips roll in and push out, wrestling with her silence. “I’ve only ever taken a strap to three students, and in all three cases, I felt nothing. No anger, no frustration, no interest outside of a professional capacity.”

Her eyes flickered as she absorbed my words. “You felt anger with me.”

“I feel *everything* with you.”

Dear God, I couldn't suppress this fixation, couldn't pretend my attraction to her didn't weaken my promise to God when, at soul level, I wanted this heavenly creature with every filthy breath in my body.

The moonlight lit up her hair in unearthly hues of glimmering white. Her beauty was elegantly delicate and airy in a way that seemed too perfect for this world.

But it was her perceptive, intelligent gaze that reached into my carefully constructed existence and shredded my control. I couldn't remember my name when she looked at me like this. Like she saw me—the man, the sinner, the murderer—and accepted what she saw.

My lips separated on all the words that wouldn't come.

We can't.

You're my student.

I'm twice your age.

You're a Constantine.

I'm a priest.

I'll hurt you.

I'll kill you.

All the reasons, all the logic and truth and sanity, slipped through my fingers as she lifted on her toes and stared at my mouth. There was nothing but the rapid thud of my heart, the timorous tumble of her breaths, and the temptation of her forbidden lips.

My hand went to her neck, fingers curling, restraining. I dipped my head, weightless, gasping for air and finding none. Until her sweet exhalation misted over my lips, teasing me with the taste of sin.

The scrape of my shoes kicked up gravel. My heart hammered. The blanket fell from my shoulders, and there, in the cloak of night, I stole a forbidden kiss from an angel.

I didn't just kiss her. I consumed her, possessed her—or she possessed me, this tiny elven goddess, meeting the lashes of my tongue, lick for lick, in a frantic, voracious rhythm that made my balls draw up tight and perspiration bead across my skin.

Nine years.

I hadn't touched a woman, smelled, tasted, or kissed a woman in nine years. The heat from her lips was staggering, the honeyed flavor of her tongue more sinful than I could've ever fathomed.

The sweetest heaven.

My heaven, my salvation—neither of which I deserved.

The lemony scent of her sank into my lungs as I took and took, and she had no choice but to be taken. She was my charge after all. Mine to instruct. Mine to discipline.

Mine.

I kissed her with all the pent-up hunger of the last six weeks. She echoed my intensity, stroking my lips and tongue with eager, impish caresses as though my mouth held what she most needed to exist. I wanted to give it to her, and I did. With a palm on one of her bottom cheeks, I squeezed the firm curve of it, punishing her sensitized welts.

Her moan shuddered through the night. Her kiss shuddered through me, and my brain stopped functioning. We could've been the last humans in the world, for all I felt was her.

Just her, the woman who made me so painfully hard, and the cocoon of darkness that was our freedom from the outside world.

I ground my cock against her, telling her with my body what I should never again demand with words. I wanted her innocence, her pleasure, her pain. I wanted her completely, no matter how wrong.

"Magnus." My name was a plea, her voice pitched with lust and longing.

It only heightened the ache. I ached with the pressure of hard heat. Ached with the knowledge that I only needed to lower my zipper and thrust beneath her skirt.

The thought made me frantic, and I kissed her harder, deeper, needing more, more, more.

I tore my mouth away and spun her around. The blankets tripped up her legs, and she stumbled. I didn't help her. I shoved her. To her knees, onto her chest, I followed her down to the tangled pile of fleece.

I couldn't stop my hands from sliding up the backs of her thighs. Couldn't stop my fingers from pinching and twisting the welts on her hot little ass.

A scream rippled out of her, spurring me to fall upon her and ride her, grinding, dry humping as my fingers fumbled with my zipper. Mindless, feral, I wanted inside her with every drop of my blood. And hers. I wanted to make her bleed.

Her neck turned, bringing her gaze over her shoulder, her eyes bright with female awareness. Her hair dragged through the mud, her face and hands coated with it.

Everything inside me stilled.

This was wrong.

She shouldn't be held down like this. Not in the mud. Not in the cold. And never ever with me.

"No," I whispered. Then louder. "No."

I shoved away from her, driving myself back across the wet earth while battling every desire to claim her.

"What are you doing?" She pushed up, wincing as she rolled to her butt. "Why did you stop?"

"I'm hurting you."

"No, you're not."

"I will."

"You won't." Breath burst from her lungs on a loud guffaw. "I won't allow it."

I sprung to my feet, roaring, "I was seconds from taking your virginity in the mud like a fucking animal!"

"Because I was giving it to you!" She stood, too, her knuckles whitening around fists at her sides. "If you want it, it's yours. I'd much rather get rid of it with you than with Tucker Kensington or some other fumbling boy."

"I'm not fucking you. Not now. Not ever." Pounded by fury, I paced, circled a tree, returned to her side, and exploded. "So help me God, if you so much as give Tucker your mouth, I'll bloody your damn hide so completely you won't be able to sit for a month. Do I make myself clear?"

"Oh, Miss girl. Is that supposed to be a threat?"

Miss girl? Did she think I was joking around? That this was a laughing matter?

"No one touches you!" My voice thundered with my rage, scaring off whatever was in the trees.

She stumbled back.

I stayed with her, shoving my face in hers. "Do I make myself clear?"

Her eyes squeezed shut. Then she spun away without another word.

Only once she was in the car did I release the breath in my lungs. My head fell back on my shoulders, and I let my arms sink to my sides. I didn't move until my heart slowed, until my blood cooled, until I couldn't feel my face or hands in the cold.

Then I gathered the blankets and drove her back to the school.

When the campus came into view on the horizon, she broke the silence. "You scare me, Magnus."

"Smartest thing you've said all night."

"You don't scare me in a serial-killer way."

"That's a relief," I said dryly.

"It's a thrilling kind of fear. Like the way those fake haunted houses ramp up my pulse, dump adrenaline into my system, and make me feel alive. I know the things that jump out at me aren't going to kill me. But man, do they crank up my heart rate. Just like you." She looked out the window and mumbled, "I like that pushing, pulling, jumpy, scary feeling. I want it in a relationship. It keeps the blood pumping."

"You're too young to know what you want."

"Don't do that." Her glare cut to me. "Did you know what you wanted when you were eighteen?"

"Yes." I knew and pursued and took in every way possible.

"Then don't be a dick about my age."

I pulled up in front of the campus gate and stepped out of the car. She joined me as I removed my phone and typed a text to Miriam. I didn't want Tinsley dealing with any questioning tonight. It was nearing midnight, and she needed sleep.

When I unlocked the gate, she stepped to the other side and shut it. Her fingers curled around the bars, and her fathomless blue eyes peered through the space between her hands.

"You can make me go to church, but I'll never share in the mystery of your faith," she said quietly. "You can order me not to kiss Tucker, but I'm going to have sex, whether you like it or not. And you can tell me I should be afraid of you, but I'm not. Not in the way you want." She released the bars and walked backward. "I won't kiss you again. I don't want to be that person, the one you resent. If you break your vows, you should do it for yourself, not for anyone else." She inclined her head. "Goodnight, Magnus."

With a gentle smile, she turned and headed to the residence hall.

I watched her until she vanished inside the building, aching for her.

She was unlike anyone I'd ever known. As if her breathtaking, otherworldly allure wasn't enough, she was mature beyond her years and more intelligent than all the women I'd been with combined.

I should've never tasted her lips, but I couldn't bring myself to regret it.

That divine, unparalleled, life-changing kiss was the only one I would ever have.

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CHAPTER 19

TINSLEY

THE NEXT AFTERNOON, I sat on the bench in the hallway outside of Magnus's classroom, cringing as his angry bellow rattled the door.

For once, I wasn't on the receiving end of his wrath. To be honest, I was shocked to learn *who* had ended up earning his punishment.

After Nevada's blatant threats, I knew in my gut she was the one who'd left the shoebox on my bed last night. But Magnus was thorough and had spent the morning questioning each and every girl.

Within minutes in the interrogation chair, Alice had squealed and confessed her desire to inflict retribution on me. Tucker had broken up with her, and somehow, that was my fault. I didn't even know they were a thing when he asked me to the Winter Formal.

Nothing was going on between him and me. He texted me sometimes, but it wasn't overly flirtatious. I couldn't imagine he felt any sort of connection between us. I sure didn't.

But that didn't help Alice. She'd lost her shit, and just as Felix had guessed, she'd asked her older sister to collect the roadkill and bring it to her over the weekend.

My concerns about *how* Alice would be punished were vanquished the moment her parents showed up. They packed up her dorm, and as soon as Magnus finished his verbal lashing, they would be taking her home.

Magnus had expelled her.

I felt a sick sense of jealousy that she got to leave. It didn't seem fair.

But I was also relieved. I didn't want to sleep down the hall from someone who used dead animals as threats. It was too The-Godfather's-severed-horse-head for my comfort.

The door opened, and Magnus poked his head out. “We’re ready for you.”

I’d been beckoned here, waiting. For what, I didn’t know. I just wanted to put this whole nightmare behind me.

Following him into the classroom, I instantly spotted the redhead in the front row. Tears drenched Alice’s pale face. Her chin tucked to her chest, and her fingers clamped tightly on her lap.

An older man and woman, presumably her parents, stood off to the side, regarding me with wary expressions.

“Alice.” Magnus folded his hands behind him, his legs braced in the stance that so eloquently showcased his power.

Looking at him was a raw and delicious torment. Addictive, painful, and constant.

Alice rose to her feet and reluctantly dragged her gaze to mine.

“Hi, Tinsley. I, uh...” Her breath shook as she stole a peek at Magnus and returned to me. “My spiteful behavior and bilious treatment of you is unforgivable. I’m sorry for hurting you, and I will be thinking only of your pain during my one hundred hours of community service.”

Wow. That was...something. Delivered in an unchanging pitch with adult verbiage, it reeked of Magnus’s coaching.

Even if she didn’t mean a word of it, I appreciated the information. In addition to being expelled, it sounded like Magnus had given her a hellacious penance for her confession. One hundred hours of community service? Dear Lord, he was a sadist.

He stepped to his desk and perched on the edge, his head down and eyes up, never taking his attention off me.

Alice’s mother ushered her out, offering me an apologetic smile as she passed. When they were down the hall and out of hearing range, Alice’s father approached.

“Miss Constantine.” He ran a hand over his bald head in agitation, his gaze on the floor. “One thing must be understood. I would never go against your mother. Caroline Constantine is a woman of great respect. *I* respect her and understand she must put her daughters before mine. So if she decides to seek retribution—”

“Save it. I’m not telling her about this, and neither is Father Magnus.”

“You’re not?” The man looked up, eyes wide and hopeful. Then he twisted, taking in Magnus’s unreadable, unresponsive expression.

“I won’t. He won’t. There’s no reason to involve her.” I sighed. “Just... go.”

“Thank you.” The man left, shutting the door behind him.

“I hate when people do that.” I rested my hands on my hips. “My family can be arrogant and overbearing, but we’re not the damn mafia.”

“Sure about that?”

Not really. Maybe we were similar to an organized crime family. But we were super respectable and admired. And way more discreet about bloodshed.

To be honest, I didn’t know half the shit my family dabbled in. Like most of my siblings, I was sheltered from the details. Only my brothers, Winny and Perry, worked in the family business. When I asked about it, I was fed lies. Any and all criminal dealings were hidden behind smoke and mirrors. And money. A lot of fucking money. My family owned half of New York City.

“We’re not Italian, so...” I blinked once.

His face showed no emotion. A face his god had gone to great effort designing and sculpting. “You’re free to go for the day.”

“Oh.” I glanced at the door. “No punishments. No opossums. What ever shall I do?”

He tilted his head, studying me, his gaze enigmatic.

“What?” I returned stare for stare.

“Have you given any thought to applying for colleges?”

“Yes. No.”

“Explain.”

“I’ve given a lot of thought to what I want to do, and it doesn’t require a college education.”

“I’m listening.”

“I want to run an animal rescue.” My stomach tightened as I braced for a negative reaction.

He pushed his lips out, thinking. Then he nodded. “I can see that.”

“Really?”

“Yes, but I suggest you earn a degree in business so you can operate it efficiently.”

“I would hire someone to do that.”

“Okay. What about the actual care of the animals? The health care and maintenance?”

“I would hire people for that, too.”

“Then what would *you* do?”

“I would play with the animals, of course.”

“Of course.” He narrowed his eyes, judging.

He thought I was spoiled and entitled, and he would be right.

“Annnd...” I jogged my shoulders playfully, grinning. “I would fund it.”

“With your trust fund?”

“Yes, that. And with my amazing passion. A project, business, charity, movie, piece of art—none of that takes shape unless it’s backed by someone who’s deeply passionate about it. It’s that investment of passion that drives the success of any business. Am I right?”

“Yes.” A smile pulled at his mouth and lit up his stunning eyes. “You’re absolutely right, Miss Constantine.”

“I know. I’m also really good at remembering things. Maybe I’ll read all the books on how to run a successful business. Or maybe you’ll teach me since you used to be, like, the king of the corporate world?”

“You investigated me.” His face blanked.

“Just a few searches on the internet. If anyone knows how to dominate a business, it’s you.”

Tension rippled through his frame, and his finger traced the edge of the desk, back and forth, back and forth.

We stared at each other for several platonic seconds. Then the air shifted, morphed, simmered into a hot minute of hungry intimacy. I grew warm and itchy beneath my uniform, and he gave no indication of looking away.

Damn him and his assertive eye contact.

“So give that some thought, and I’m going to, uh...” I thrust a thumb over my shoulder and sidestepped toward the door. “I’m gonna go.”

He slowly straightened and stepped with me, stalking, watching with that look in his eyes that I’d become achingly familiar with. He was thinking about our kiss. We both were.

My mouth had been sucked, bitten, and licked by dozens of guys. But what I experienced last night with Magnus? That was my first kiss. A real, toe-curling, heart-aching, ruin-me-for-all-others kiss.

“Magnus,” I whispered past a dry throat and picked up my pace, reaching for the door. “We’re not doing this.”

“How does your ass feel?”

Those words coming from that mouth shouldn’t be allowed.

Technically, it wasn’t allowed by the church. But Magnus didn’t have a problem with language as long as it wasn’t used in a disrespectful manner.

“Not answering that.” I gripped the door handle.

The staccato of his footfalls spiked my pulse. I opened the door, staggering back to widen it. An escape that didn’t happen because he was already there, an arm locked around my waist, pulling me back, and a palm against the door, shutting it.

“Think through this.” I slammed my eyes closed at the solid heat of his chest against my back.

“I do.” He skimmed a hand down my arm. “Every time I see you and every second you’re not in my sight.” His fingers molded around my hips, yanking me tight to his groin. “I never stop thinking through this.”

If I reached back, I would touch him. Touch him and explore him and participate in this fleeting fantasy. A dangerous fantasy that wouldn’t end well. Not for him.

Somewhere between a painful spanking and a pleasurable kiss, I’d come to care about what happened to Father Magnus Falke. I didn’t want to be the reason for his fall from grace. But if he continued down this path with me, I wasn’t sure I would be able to resist him.

Against my back, his chest shuddered with a heated breath. Then his fingers, the featherlight pads, ghosted along the backs of my thighs where the hem of my skirt met bare skin.

Against my better judgment, I angled my neck to steal a glimpse over my shoulder.

Good God in heaven, he was an erotic vision. A lock of brown hair hung over his brow, his sensual eyes half-shut, hunger glinting in the blue, all signs of holiness out the door.

His touch was barely a caress. But as those fingers circled my thighs from behind and glided up the valley between, each point of contact was a

flickering flame that burned so hot it scorched.

A throaty groan fell from his lips, so delicious and wicked I felt it between my legs.

He dropped to his haunches behind me.

Oh God. I pressed my hands against the door, prepared to hold it shut if someone tried to enter. I could lock it. Just reach down and turn the lock. But that would be an unmistakable invitation to whatever this was.

I wouldn't encourage him. At the same time, I couldn't bring myself to object.

Until he reached beneath my skirt and fisted the fragile lace of my underwear.

My hand flew back and gripped his muscled forearm. "Do not, for the love of *Kiki De Montparnasse*, rip those."

"*Kiki De* what?"

"They're three-hundred-dollar panties. My brother bought them for me and—No, wait. That sounds..." I made a face, rapidly shaking my head. "Ew! My brother's girlfriend got them. He probably didn't know they were in the bag. Just don't tear them."

"I won't."

"I see it in your eyes."

"What do you see?" Without taking his gaze off my face, he tucked my skirt up in the waistband, pulled the lace underwear upward like a thong, and exposed my welted cheeks to the air.

"That evil look on your face." My breath quickened. "It makes a liar out of the collar at your throat."

He ducked his head and sank his teeth into the flesh of my buttocks.

"Fuck!" I clapped a hand over my mouth, trying to muffle the sound.

He bit me again, scraping vicious fangs along my abused skin. I rose on my toes, seeking reprieve, but at no time did I push him away or say no. I couldn't. I wouldn't.

With my underwear gathered along my crack, he had full access to my welts. I glued the front of my body to the door and endured the intensity of his mouth as he nipped, sucked, bit, and licked my wounds.

The licking was more than I could bear as his hot, wet, sacrilegious tongue learned every inch of my flesh from hip to thigh. When he wandered

beneath the lace that lay between my cheeks, I clenched, whimpering. He didn't press.

Instead, he slid the blade of his nose down my crevice, his breaths heating my skin as he crept lower, lower, and *Mother of Fuck*.

"What are you doing?" I trembled, heart racing.

He inhaled. Deeply.

Smelling me.

With his hands gripping my thighs and his nose buried between my legs, he was fucking smelling me through the crotch of my panties.

I should've stopped him. I should've done anything except stand here and throb and grow ridiculously, shamelessly wet.

It was the hottest thing I'd ever experienced.

He slowly rose, letting his fingertips climb my legs from calves to knees to thighs. When he reached my rear, he gave the welts another squeeze as if he couldn't help himself.

I swallowed a gulp. "You're a sadist."

"Does putting a label on it make you feel better?"

"You can get help for the condition."

"I did get help. I came here, became a priest, and abstained for nine years." He straightened my underwear and skirt, his movements efficient and gentle. "Then you came along."

"I'm sorry." My chest constricted. "Send me home."

"Never." He leaned his weight against me and brushed my hair off my shoulder, exposing my throat. "If you leave, I'll haul you back."

"What? You'll come for me?"

"Yes. Then you'll *come* for me."

His breath visited my neck, announcing his intent. He kissed the dips and curves there, soft and languorous, and palmed my ass, rough and aggressive. Claiming me. Scrambling my brain.

"Magnus—"

He grabbed my throat, hard enough to spin up my pulse, and brushed his lips against my ear.

"Be a good girl this afternoon." A dark, dominating whisper.

Then he released me, opened the door, and walked back to his desk.



CHAPTER 20

TINSLEY

MY AFTERNOON PLANS were decided when Daisy ran into me in the hall.

“You’re going to football practice with me.” She gripped my arm and dragged me toward the elderly priest waiting outside.

I let it happen because I had nothing better to do. Besides, it would be nice to step outside the campus walls.

Father Isaac smiled and waved when he saw us.

I gave him a chin lift and turned to Daisy. “I didn’t realize they made helmets big enough for your fat head.”

Of course, I knew she was going to watch football practice, not participate in it.

“You’re lucky you’re my best friend.” She slung a bag over her shoulder and followed the priest to the gate.

“Oh?” I walked along beside her. “So now I’m worthy of your friendship?”

“I guess.” She lifted a noncommittal shoulder.

“Is this you feeling sorry for me because of what Alice did last night?”

“No. This is me feeling sorry for you because you have no friends.” Her tone was so cold I wanted to punch her.

Then she laughed, her eyes dancing playfully, and I couldn’t help but laugh with her.

When we reached the football field, we found a quiet spot in the bleachers. She didn’t waste any time pulling out notebooks and camera equipment.

“Yearbook,” she said when she caught me staring.

I knew she was on the yearbook committee, and now it made sense that she wanted to come to a practice. Since Sion Academy didn’t have a

football team, St. John de Brebeuf represented both of our schools.

As she set off to interview coaches and players, I was content to watch the boys run through their drills. There were plenty of studs on the team. Cute ones. Beefy ones. A lot of them stared and winked at me from across the field. But my interest in their kind had changed over the past six weeks.

Maybe I should call my mother and tell her that her decision to send me to an all-girls Catholic school had cured my curiosity with boys. I was no longer interested in giving blow jobs to college guys who worked at *Burger King*. Now I only wanted to spread my legs for men twice my age who bit and spanked and wore clerical collars.

No, I couldn't tell her that. Not unless I wanted her murderous Irish henchman, Ronan, to show up. I bet Magnus could hold his own in a fistfight. But against an assassin aiming a gun? I didn't want to find out.

I wished I could go back to hating the volatile priest. Then I wouldn't care about this shit. But now it worried me. If my family found out that he'd touched me? That he'd buried his nose between my legs and smelled me? I couldn't think about what would happen to him without making myself sick.

Trapping my tongue between my molars, I bit down and used the pain to distract me from my thoughts.

On the field, the St. John's players waved and showboated, trying to get my attention. Father Isaac lingered off to the side, talking to Father Crisanto while keeping his old eyes on Daisy and me.

After practice, Daisy chased down a few of the key players for interviews. It wasn't long before the star quarterback plopped down beside me, reeking of sweat and cut grass.

"Hey, Tinsley." Tucker flashed me a smile, though it looked a little tight at the corners. "You look beautiful as always."

"Thanks." No smile from me.

He was an all-American boy—a playboy if the rumors were true—accustomed to getting who and what he wanted. If he wanted me, he would have to work for it.

Blond hair, brown eyes, with an explosion of muscles along his six-foot-three frame, he was conventionally handsome. Six weeks ago, I would've thrown myself at him.

Now I was struggling to do anything but yawn.

“Are you hanging out with Droopy Daisy now?” He slung an arm across my back.

I shoved it off. “Don’t call her that.”

“Why not? That’s her name. I mean, look at her face.” He shuddered dramatically. “I wonder if that’s the result of having been repeatedly dropped on her head when she was a baby. She seems to have some level of mental retardation for the same reason.”

“What the fuck?” I jerked away from him, appalled. “I don’t know whose rectum you crawled out of, but you should’ve been flushed. Ugh. You’re disgusting. Huge turnoff.”

I stood to leave.

“Tinsley, wait.” He touched my wrist, his eyes imploring. “I’m sorry. I didn’t know she was your friend.”

“Does it matter?” I dropped to the bench and shoved my face in his. “She’s a person, and you’re suffering from delusions of adequacy. Also, I prefer a battle of wits, which you appear to be unarmed for, so fuck off.”

“Jesus.” His eyes widened, and he licked his lips. “You’re fucking hot when you’re worked up.”

My vision turned red. “I’m done.”

When I stood this time, he was ready. His hand caught my arm, holding me to the bench.

“Let go,” I growled.

“Hear me out. Please?”

I glanced over at Father Isaac, who pushed up his glasses, his eyes squinting in my direction. He couldn’t see Tucker’s hand on my bicep.

“You have five seconds,” I said through my teeth and yanked my arm free.

“Okay, you’re right. I’m a jerk. I shouldn’t have said that about her. If I took the time to get to know her, I’m sure I’d find out just how great she is.”

“Prove it.”

“What?”

“The Winter Formal is in four weeks. You want me to dance with you? Prove to me you’re not a disgusting human.”

“I’m not—”

“Daisy will be the judge of that. You have four weeks to convince her. If she doesn’t think you’re a total dirtbag by the time the Winter Formal rolls around, I’ll dance with you.”

He groaned and scrubbed a hand over his head. “How am I supposed to do that? She despises me.”

For good reason.

She’d finished her interviews and was heading our way.

“Here she comes.” I scooted away from him. “Compliment her when she gets here.”

“What am I supposed to say?” His eyes bugged.

“I’m sure you’ll think of something.” I lowered my voice. “It better be good, Tucker. And *honest*.”

Daisy climbed up the steps and crouched to pack up her bag, ignoring both of us.

“Hey, Daisy.” He scuffed his shoe against the concrete. “I like your hair today, especially the way it curls around your, uh...neck.”

Her eyebrows pulled in, and her hand went to the brown waves, sweeping them forward, toward her chin. She never pulled her hair back. Not on purpose. I saw beneath the strands once, when the wind caught them. She didn’t have ears. Not much of them, anyway. They were more like little puckers of skin low along her underdeveloped jawline. I imagined she was self-conscious about it, even though she would never admit it.

When her gaze cut to me, I quirked up a brow and shrugged.

Her eyes turned to slits. She lifted her bag and paced off. “Eat a dick, Tucker.”

A smile struggled on my face as he huffed, looking all offended. But he didn’t say a word in return.

That was a start. Maybe he was trainable after all.

“You have four weeks.” I patted his head and left him sitting there with his mouth hanging open.



CHAPTER 21

TINSLEY

MY GOLD HIGH heels wobbled, knocking my knees. Restless energy buzzed in my stomach, and my pulse thumped with the music blaring from inside the gymnasium.

I hadn't gone in yet. But given the din of chatter and dancing, the Winter Formal was in full swing.

"Are you staring at my ass?" Daisy strode ahead of me in a sparkling pink dress that did amazing things to her figure.

"You wish." I paused in the dim entryway of the gym, totally staring at her ass. And her shoes.

She wore heels so high I thought for sure she'd break her neck. But she pulled it off, shaking her hot little shimmy.

Father Crisanto approached from the side door and motioned me over.

"I'll catch up." I tugged on her hair.

"Whatever." She flicked a hand over her shoulder and headed toward the gym to make her grand entrance.

Flashing lights spilled out of the double doors as glimmering gowns and black suits poured in. And somewhere amid the throng of fancily dressed students, Magnus would be waiting.

It had been four weeks since he kissed me in the forest on that cold, stormy night. He hadn't kissed me since. But he wanted to. I watched him wrestle with it every day with every breath.

We both fought against that ceaseless pull. It was fucking exhausting.

"You look truly enchanting, Tinsley." Father Crisanto smiled like a man whose heart was filled with sunshine.

I *felt* enchanting in this dress. The delicate gold lace and organza stopped just above my knees. With an A-line silhouette, illusion neckline,

and satin belt with a bow knot, the gown was both princessy and sexy. I owed Keaton and Iris big-time.

“Thank you, Father.” I grinned. “You don’t look too bad yourself.”

“Oh, pshaw!” He waved it away.

He looked the same as he always did—black shirt, black pants, white collar, contagious grin.

Over the past month, I spent most of my downtime with Tucker and Daisy, mingling after church, attending football practices, and helping with the decorations for the Winter Formal. Spending more time with Tucker meant I saw more of Father Crisanto.

“I don’t want to keep you from the party.” He nodded toward the gym. “It’s just... I don’t ever get the opportunity to talk with you alone. So if you could spare a few minutes?”

I was always with Daisy, Tucker, or Magnus. Never alone. I didn’t want to miss this chance to chat with Magnus’s best friend. Crisanto knew things. I knew things. This conversation was long overdue.

“Sure.” I pointed at the hallway that led away from the side door. “It’s probably quieter over there.”

As we strolled in that direction, he asked conversationally, “How was your Thanksgiving?”

“It was good. I didn’t get to go home because I haven’t exactly been on my best behavior.”

“Yes, I heard you have some...colorful language.”

“I doubt that’s how he described it.”

“No.” He laughed, shaking his head.

“I didn’t spend Thanksgiving alone, though. Vivian and Perry, two of my siblings, surprised me with a visit.”

Vivian was my oldest sister. Unmarried and single, she possessed such ferocious confidence and beauty I imagined she intimidated the hell out of any man who looked at her.

Perry was my middle brother. Also single. Maybe that was why the two of them made the drive to see me. They didn’t have significant others to drag them away, and the holidays at home weren’t the same without our father.

Since he’d died, my mother put all her energy into strengthening the family holdings. What she should’ve been doing was focusing on her actual

family and keeping us all together.

I was so grateful to see Viv and Perry. They'd taken me to a charming bed-and-breakfast a few towns over. We had a quiet weekend together, and best of all, it got me away from the dark, addictive presence that haunted me at Sion Academy.

"That's wonderful to hear." Crisanto paused when we reached the privacy of the hallway. "How is everything going with Father Magnus?"

"May I cut straight to the point?"

"He said you were direct." He grinned.

"To a fault, I think." I tilted my head. "He confesses to you? Every day?"

"Yes."

"And you want to know if he's confessing everything? Or if there are things happening that he's not telling you? Is that what this is?"

"No, Tinsley. I trust him, perhaps more than he trusts himself. I hear his confessions, and I know he's fighting a force inside himself. He's constantly at war with it. But he's stronger than his demons."

Guilt pinched my insides. "I haven't made it any easier on him."

"That's not—"

"At the beginning of the year, I was on a straight path through hell and was willing to take him down with me. I don't know what I'm doing anymore, but I can promise this. I care about him. I'm not going to hurt him. I'm not going to let my family hurt him."

"And if he hurts you? Or angers you? What if you decide you want a relationship that he's unable to give? Will you go to your family then?"

"No. Absolutely not. Look, I know you're his best friend, and you're talking to me in that capacity, looking out for him. But I'm not a threat to him."

Magnus had told me he confessed to Crisanto regularly. I was about to test the legitimacy of that.

"He kissed me a month ago. I kissed him back." I watched for surprise in the Filipino priest's eyes and found none. "Since then, he's put his hands beneath my skirt, over my underwear four times, and I welcomed it. I wanted more."

After the day he trapped me against the door and buried his nose between my legs, he'd done the same thing three more times. His fingers

never breached the crotch of my underwear. He never exposed himself, and he never touched my breasts or pussy—under or over my clothes. Much to my despair.

He was fighting this thing between us and winning. I did my part by not encouraging it.

I hated the resistance. It made me restless and crazy. The unanswered sexual tension between us was so heavy and unwieldy it drove me out of my skin. But like I'd told him, I didn't want him to resent me when all this was over.

"You're his student," Crisanto said quietly.

"And he's a priest. That's why our attraction hasn't moved past that kiss. But if it ever does, remember this." I smoothed my hands down my dress and stood taller. "I'm a legal adult. What he and I do together is between him and me. I know he's not a gentle man, and I love that about him. He won't hurt me. Not without my permission. I believe the word that might give you peace is *consensual*. That's all it will ever be with us."

"You're..." He set a fist to his mouth and cleared his throat. "You're a very smart, mature young lady."

"I'm learning, and believe it or not, he's helping me with that."

"He's a good teacher." He smiled thoughtfully. "I think you're helping him with that, too."

"Do you feel better about our relationship?"

"I feel like an accomplice to something that hasn't happened."

Yet.

I heard the unspoken word. He didn't believe we would leave it at a kiss. Maybe he was right. But it wasn't for him to worry about.

I'd spent the past three months vacillating between hating the priest and craving the man, and through it all, my sexual attraction hadn't wavered. Every day with him grew harder, tenser, more strained. At the same time, I cherished every moment we spent together.

"I won't steal any more of your time." Crisanto gestured for me to head back toward the gym. "If you ever need to talk, I'm here."

"Thank you."

"Go on." His easy smile returned. "Have a great time."

With the hope to do just that, I pushed back my shoulders and strode to the gymnasium.

The Winter Formal was the most anticipated event of the year. Every student at Sion Academy and St. John de Brebeuf lived for this dance. The basketball courts had been converted into a dance floor. Tables of food and punch lined the back wall. A DJ blasted dance music through the speakers, and paper decorations hung from the rafters, most of which I had designed.

In Bishop's Landing, I attended masquerade balls and black-tie events every other weekend. I hated them. I hated the pretentious finger food and the fake smiles and my mother hovering at my elbow, watching my every move, making sure I didn't embarrass her.

Being forced to attend those balls was a lot like being forced to attend Sion Academy. All of it served her agenda to control me and use me as a pawn.

But this dance would be different. My mother wasn't involved, and there was someone I desperately, achingly wanted to see here.

With excitement thrumming in my blood, I stepped through the doors, and my entire being homed in on him. Through the flickering lights, beyond the crowds of dancers, he stood like a sentinel on the far side of the gym.

Dressed in all black with a square of white at his throat, he appraised me with sublime intensity and attention to detail. His earnest stare didn't miss an inch as it raked me from head to toe and back again.

The dance music swirled around me. Students paused and turned their heads. But all that existed was him.

My breath sped up, heat and hunger tangling. I wanted to run to him. I ached to feel his lips again, taste his tongue, hear his throaty groans, and writhe beneath his capable hands.

I wanted to strip that man and fuck him like the good Lord intended. By the smoldering look in his eyes, he was thinking the same about me.

"Lord have mercy, you two couldn't be more obvious." Crisanto's whisper came over my shoulder, and his finger jabbed into my spine. "Pull your eyes away from him and go find Daisy."

I blinked, breaking the trance. That was when I noticed my surroundings, the onlookers. Everyone was watching me stare at my teacher.

Shit.



CHAPTER 22

TINSLEY

WHERE WAS DAISY?

I started walking, my head swinging left to right, my attention on everything and everyone except the person who called to the deepest parts of my soul.

As Magnus's gaze burned the side of my face, I avoided looking in his direction and zeroed in on my friend.

She stood alone at the edge of the dance floor. No one talked to her or acknowledged her presence. Every student who passed gave her a wide berth as if she were a leper.

High schoolers could be so fucking mean, but over the past three months, I'd discovered that Sion girls were the cruelest. Especially Nevada Hildebrand.

I stayed away from that bitch. After she wrongfully accused me of ratting her out, she stopped talking to me. Good riddance.

Since I wasn't a snitch, I never told anyone about her threat. But I hadn't forgotten it.

A familiar song pounded through the speakers. I caught the beat and danced my way to Daisy.

"Why aren't you out on the dance floor, showing them how it's done?" I rocked my hips, shimmying a circle around her stiff posture.

"They aren't ready for my superstar moves."

"They'll never be ready. You just gotta rip off the Band-Aid and give it to them."

I'd spent an hour curling her hair, and it was starting to go limp. I reached up, fluffing and arranging the pretty ringlets around her face.

"Quit it." She knocked my hands away, putting a stop to that.

But I didn't miss the twitch in her lips. She secretly loved when I fussed over her.

"When are you going to ask me what's wrong with my face?" She folded her arms across her chest.

Not this again.

I sighed. "Never."

"Why not?"

"Because there's nothing wrong with your face. This is the problem." I gripped her arms and dragged them down to her sides. "See? Less defensive. More approachable." I stepped back and drank in the beautiful sight of her. "Holy shit, you're hot. I kinda wish I was gay right now."

"You're so annoying." Her throat worked, and she averted her face. But she couldn't hide the affection in her voice. "Go away."

"Oh no. You're stuck with me." I poked her in the ribs. "Best friends, remember?"

That earned me a smile.

Her eyes flicked over my shoulder, and her lips flattened. "Incoming."

I turned and found Tucker Kensington sauntering toward us. His gaze lingered on me, giving my dress and heels an unabashed perusal.

Over the past few weeks, he'd started to grow on me. For a cocky, immature, self-centered trust fund kid, he had a couple of strengths, such as his skill with a football and his ability to roll with Daisy's punches.

He'd put a lot of effort into winning over my prickly friend, and the best part? His attempts were sincere. He seemed to actually enjoy riling her up with compliments.

I still didn't know why he gravitated toward me the way he did. I wasn't particularly nice to him and never gave him an opening to kiss me or touch me sexually. If I was reading him right, he wanted out of the friend zone but wasn't aggressive enough to make that happen. Seemed weird considering the ease in which he flirted with every other girl at Sion.

He was the most handsome, most sought-after boy at St. John's. He was also the wealthiest. His family had more money than God.

Standing before me, he wore a tailored tuxedo and a panty-melting smile. Every girl on the dance floor gawked at him and glared at me. Daisy had been right about this whole thing. Tucker had asked me to this dance, and all the girls hated me.

As if I cared.

“Damn.” He released a low whistle, giving me another once-over. “You’re killing me, Tinsley. Breathtaking.”

“Thank you.” I inclined my head.

He didn’t need any prompting before he turned to Daisy and pressed a palm over his heart. “Two beauties in such close proximity. I’m a lucky man.”

I expected him to immediately drag me onto the dance floor and claim the thing he’d valiantly worked for over the past four weeks. But he surprised me again.

“May I have this dance, pretty lady?” He held out his hand to Daisy, making my chest flutter.

“Should I tell him?” She glanced at me.

“That’s up to you.”

“Tucker.” She stared at his waiting hand. “I know about Tinsley’s ultimatum. She told me when we left football practice that day. You don’t have to be nice to me anymore.”

I’d confessed to her immediately because I didn’t want her to get hurt if the whole thing went south. I also wanted her stamp of approval on my train-Tucker-to-be-a-decent-person project.

“Okay, well...” He shot me an angry glare and returned to her. “If it’s all right with you, may I still have that dance?”

He kept his hand outstretched, and I delighted in the happy shock that registered on her face.

Tucker might’ve been a judgmental prick, but once he’d charmed his way past Daisy’s protective walls, he’d discovered the same thing I had. She was smart, hilarious, and pretty freaking fun to be around.

As he pulled her into his arms and twirled her across the dance floor, he cast a few sullen scowls my way. Yeah, he wasn’t thrilled with my duplicity. I’d made him spend four weeks wooing a girl he never would’ve wooed, and she knew the whole time why he was doing it.

That was a lot of work just to win a dance with me. But this was about more than a dance. He’d made some sort of claim on me. I sensed it every time I was around the other guys from St. John’s.

None of them hit on me. None of them asked me out. And as I stood here, watching boys in tuxedos lead girls in glittery gowns on and off the

dance floor, not one of them invited me to dance. Not a single pair of eyes turned my way.

That was Tucker's doing. I was certain of it. Without telling me, he'd taken me off the market and declared me as *his*.

But the joke was on him. I was already taken.

My thoughts, my breaths, every beat of my damn heart belonged to someone else. And all of it jumped to life as his unmistakable heat and power greeted my back.

"You're ravishing, Miss Constantine." His purr caressed my ear, making me shiver. In the next breath, he appeared beside me, still as stone and his gaze directed across the dance floor as his chiseled lips mouthed, *Drop-dead gorgeous*.

An intense feeling of affection, warm and wrapped in possessiveness, settled into my midsection. Then he gave me his eyes, the caress of his hungry stare, searing my skin and deeper, strangling my air like a closed fist.

Heat swept through me, surging between my legs. In mute fascination, I watched his gaze discover my nipples beneath the thin organza and travel lower, tracing the lines of my body and devouring every swath of exposed skin.

Then he lifted my hand with professional grace, bowed his head, and rested his hot mouth upon my fingers. The feel of his lips sent my heart into the decorated rafters. But it was the wicked glint in his eyes that stole my soul.

The man he'd pretended to be for the past nine years was a lie.

He was danger. Sin encaged in muscle and bone. A demon wearing the face of a god, the collar of a priest, and the belt of Adonis.

"May I cut in?" Tucker stood beside Magnus, reaching for my hand still held in Magnus's grip.

Magnus took his time releasing me and straightening to his full height.

On the dance floor, Daisy swayed in the arms of another St. John's boy—Kevin, the guitarist in the church band—with a contented grin on her face. *Good for her*.

I smiled and turned to Tucker. "Yes. I'll dance with you."

He'd earned it after all.

Displeasure radiated off Magnus. “Keep your hands above her waist, Kensington.”

“I know the rules.” Tucker led me away from the glaring priest.

His hands slid around my back. His body heat pressed in, and I felt uncomfortably trapped.

I pushed the sensation aside and pretended I couldn’t feel Magnus’s gaze. “I hope you’ll continue to be nice to Daisy.”

“She’s all right.” Tucker pulled me closer, bringing his mouth to my temple. “I much prefer you.”

“Why?” My hands lay inert on his muscled shoulders, the scent of his cologne all wrong in my nose. “Why did you tell all the guys at St. John’s to stay away from me?”

“Because you’re mine, Tinsley.”

“What?” I pushed against him.

He was stronger, his arms around my back holding me against him. “You need to hear what I have to say.”

Out of the corner of my eye, Nevada sidled up to Magnus, whispering in his ear and rubbing her huge boobs against his arm. My blood pressure spiked.

“I’ve had a lot of confusing, conflicting feelings about this.” Tucker led me through the slow dance, scrutinizing me too closely. “I wasn’t happy about this arrangement at first. I was with Alice before. I mean, she and I... our relationship was hush-hush, because my parents didn’t approve of her family. But I really liked her. I might’ve even loved her.”

“Why are you telling me this? What arrangement?”

“Do you know why your mother enrolled you at Sion Academy? Why she chose that boarding school for you?”

My stomach hardened, and my feet stopped moving as realization crept up my spine.

“She wanted to put you closer to me.” He gave my waist an assertive nudge. “Keep moving. I earned this dance.”

He was a Kensington. Of course, my mother had targeted him.

It was all too real, happening too fast. My stomach cramped, and dizziness invaded.

“You’re being forced into a relationship with me,” I said numbly.

“I was. At first, I was outraged. Like I said, Alice and I had to end things because of this.”

“When? How long have you known?”

“It was dropped on me the night before the first day of school.”

“The night I arrived here. Then Alice left dead opossums on my bed. Did you know about that?”

“Yeah.” He lifted a shoulder, not a trace of compassion in his eyes. “She’s heartbroken.”

“You don’t look heartbroken. Do our parents even know one another?”

“Our mothers have been brunching together for years. They’ve negotiated an agreement, Tinsley. A Kensington-Constantine merger.”

“No.” I pulled my arms away, causing him to only hug me tighter. “I’m not marrying you.”

“Neither of us have a choice. They already modified our trust funds. We don’t get a dime unless we tie the knot.”

I didn’t even feel the cold grip of shock at this point. I’d known my whole life this was coming. I’d been mouthy and disrespectful and free with my blow jobs because I’d been trying to fucking escape this fate.

If I cut ties and walked away from my family, my inheritance, where would that leave Tucker? Would he lose his trust fund? Did I care?

“I’m sorry.” I didn’t know what else to say.

“I’m not. You’re beautiful. Prettiest girl I’ve ever seen. A little pushy and independent, but I can fix that once we’re married.”

“Excuse me?” Heat boiled in my cheeks.

“Oh my God!” Someone made a strangled sound behind me.

“Ew!”

“Is that what I think it is?”

“It’s everywhere!”

Voices and horrified gasps erupted on all sides. Tucker released me as if he’d been burned. He stumbled back, his eyes wide and fixed on my feet.

That was when I felt it. The hot, wet drops on my ankles. More on my toes in the strappy heels.

The commotion around me intensified, and ringing thrashed in my ears as I looked down.

Blood.

It ran down my legs. Stained the gold organza around my thighs.
Dripped over my shoes. Pooled on the floor between my feet.

Oh God, it was heavy.

Heavy menstruation.

Heavy emotion.

Too great to lift or carry or move.

I wanted the floor to open up and swallow me whole.

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CHAPTER 23

TINSLEY

MORTIFICATION SANK INTO my muscles and feasted upon my backbone. I couldn't breathe, couldn't react. The sounds in my ears pulsed like muffled gunfire.

My gaze lifted and found Tucker staring back.

His friends clung to his arms, seemingly holding him upright as they pointed at me and laughed, spewing jokes about shark week. Tucker didn't laugh. He didn't shove them off. He just looked at me with wide-eyed horror. And embarrassment.

I humiliated him. Totally cramped his style. I bet he was regretting that Kensington-Constantine merger right about now.

Fuck him.

With his teeth bared, he whirled, flinging away his friends, and stormed off.

He fucking left.

"Let's go, Tins." Daisy gripped my hand.

Frozen in shock, I kept my feet planted. If I moved, I would leave a trail of shame so gruesome it would turn the gymnasium into a crime scene.

"Really gross, Keaton's sister." Nevada jutted her hip.

"Gross?" Daisy spun toward her. "Because you don't get periods? Is that what you're confessing to everyone here?"

"No one bleeds like that." She scrunched up her face. "Unless they're dead or dying."

Daisy tensed as if she were about to physically attack her. I tightened my grip on her hand, silently telling her not to leave my side.

My period was a week early, probably due to stress. But it was always heavy. Most months, it flowed so excessively I had to change my tampon

every hour. The red puddle between my feet looked enormous, but it was normal.

What wasn't normal was bleeding all over the floor during a dance.

What would my mother do in this situation?

She wouldn't do anything. She had people. A personal assistant to fetch her a tampon. A maid to scrub the floor. A PR team to erase the embarrassment. And a devoted henchman to kill anyone who talked about it.

I had Daisy, who was having a great time dancing with a boy until I ruined her night.

And I had Magnus.

As if conjured by my thoughts, he appeared in the crowd, shouldering his way through the growing number of spectators. He carried a stack of party napkins and roughly shoved students out of his path, his eyes fixed only on me.

And here I thought the most embarrassing moment of my life was when I'd pissed on the floor in front of him.

"I want to die," I whispered when he reached me.

"No, you don't. You'd much rather live to annoy the hell out of me every day."

He lowered to a crouch and placed a few napkins over the crimson puddle. I wanted to reach out and run my hand through his tousled brown hair. What would it feel like? Was it as thick and soft as I imagined?

I was so glad he was here.

"Careful, Father," one of the St. John's linebackers shouted from the crush of students. "If she sneezes, you're gonna get splattered."

The muscles in Magnus's shoulders went dangerously tense beneath the confines of his black shirt. He rose slowly, each inch of height a visceral reminder that this man was not someone to piss off.

Too late for the linebacker.

Magnus prowled into the suddenly silent crowd and grabbed the kid by the throat. This went beyond a warning squeeze. The guy couldn't breathe, his hands pawing at his airway as he worked his jaw like a dying fish.

"You're out of here!" Magnus hurled him away.

He landed on his butt, skidding backward along the floor in his tux. Then he leaped to his feet and ran out the door.

I needed to go, too, but a glance down confirmed I was still dripping. I felt a pool of wetness collecting in the crotch of my panties. One slight movement and it would all flow over.

"I need more napkins," I whispered to Daisy.

She raced off.

Magnus charged back toward me, his eyes blazing, ratcheting my pulse.

One of the boys made a face after Magnus swept past.

He slammed to a stop. The room stilled as he swung around and stood toe to toe with the kid.

"Are you giving me an ignorant look, boy?" He exploded. "Or is stupidity just a condition of yours?" The thunder in his voice sent a reverberating shudder through the gym.

"N-n-no, Father. I'm sorry."

"Stop standing around!" He slashed an arm through the air, shouting at everyone. "Scatter! Get!"

The crowd dispersed in a flurry of taffeta and black jackets. With the music still playing, most of them congregated on the far side of the dance floor. Others proceeded to the food tables.

"Don't send anyone else home," I said when he returned to my side. "I've already ruined the dance."

"You haven't ruined anything." He leaned in and whispered at my ear, "You're so goddamn sexy it's taking all my strength not to maul you right here in front of everyone." He stepped back. "Go to the restroom. I'll catch up."

"No. I'm..."

Leaking.

My face burned, and my shoulders hiked to my ears. I felt like I was standing in a damn spotlight.

Daisy arrived with more napkins. He took them from her and gestured at someone near the entrance of the gym. I turned, spotting Father Crisanto reaching for the wall of light switches.

A second later, the dim overhead lights went nearly dark, making it difficult to see the floor.

"Go." Magnus pushed me toward Daisy and bent to wipe up the blood.

She grabbed my hand and pulled me into motion. Okay, wow, it was dark now. Too dark to see the trail I left in my wake. But I felt it trickling

down my legs and sliding between my toes.

I glanced back and found Magnus following at a distance. Every couple of steps, he angled down and discreetly swiped a napkin against the floor. I was fucking horrified, but it could've been worse. I could've been walking out of here alone, with the lights on, illuminating a trail for all to stare at long after I was gone.

"Thank you." I squeezed Daisy's hand. "For giving me the courage to walk out of here."

"Thank you." She squeezed back. "For giving me the courage to walk *in* here."

We exited the gymnasium and stood in the dark entryway. Turning my neck, I watched Magnus throw away the used napkins and return the lights to a soft glow.

The floor was clean. Not a drop as far as I could see.

Down the hall to the right, the line to the only bathroom was ten girls long. Straight ahead, a crowd of students gathered near the doors that led outside. To the left was the side door where I'd spoken to Father Crisanto earlier. No people there. I headed in that direction.

"Tinsley," Daisy whispered. "Where are you going? The bathroom's the other way."

It would be a long walk back to the residence hall in the freezing cold. I would have to clean up and find an adult escort before I could leave this building, but I didn't want to turn back and face all those people. I couldn't.

I slipped around the corner and pressed my back against the wall in the vacant hallway, disgusted with myself, humiliated, and on the verge of tears. I held my hands to my eyelids as fire swept through my sinuses and scorched my eyes.

The numb shock that had held me together for the past few minutes was cracking. Tremors overtook my limbs, and boiling pressure built in my throat. I couldn't stop the tears from falling, but I swallowed down the sounds.

I was so focused on trying to remain quiet that I didn't sense him until his fingers touched my face. I lowered my hands and stared into eyes so blue they made my chest hurt.

"I don't care what anyone thinks about me." I clenched my legs, trapping the cold, sopping wet crotch of my panties between them. "But this

is awful. I can't help it. It's a painfully humbling experience, and I hate that so many people witnessed it."

"You handled it with grace and class, Your Highness." His fingers tiptoed along my jaw, his voice caressing my lips with reverence. "I've never seen anything more beautiful in my life."

"Magnus." My stomach dipped.

"Tinsley." His mouth slid down the slope of my neck, curving into a smile that felt like the beginning of a journey. Perhaps the most important journey I would ever take.

The sound of footsteps pounded around the corner. He shifted away just as Daisy burst into view, holding our coats.

"Father Magnus." She draped my coat over my shoulders. "Can you escort us to the church? Tinsley can use the restroom there and—"

"You're not leaving." I pointed in the direction of the gym. "The dance just started. Kevin is in there waiting for you. Go dance with him."

"No, I'm not staying without—"

"You're so beautiful, Daisy. Please, don't let me ruin this night for you. If you leave with me, I'll feel worse."

"If I stay, I'll feel terrible."

She wanted to stay. I heard it in her voice, saw it in her posture.

"I need you to go in there and defend me." I slid my arms into the sleeves of the coat, holding her stubborn gaze. "Stand up for me when they call me Tampon Tinsley or whatever dumb names they'll think up. Father Magnus will escort me back to campus."

Her shoulders squared, and she stepped forward. As she gripped my hands, she pressed a tampon into one of my palms. She must've grabbed it from the bathroom. *God love her.*

"When I was born," she said, holding my hands, "my parents took one look at my face and saw something they never wanted to see again. They left the hospital within hours and never came back. No one would adopt me, so a convent of nuns took me in. When I was fourteen, Father Magnus moved me here and gave me the best education in the country for free." She gave him a grateful smile and returned to me. "When I met you, you took one look at my face and saw *me*. In that single look, Tinsley Constantine, you showed me how to bravely be me." She blinked, and a tear rolled down

her cheek, compelling my own tears to fall. “I just wanted you to know that.”

Walking backward, she wiped at her face. Her lips lifted in a soft smile, and she disappeared around the corner.

I pulled in a ragged breath, shaking. “That’s heavy.”

“It’s all true.” He clutched my arm and guided me out the side door.

The icy darkness attacked my bare legs, biting through my skin. I dreaded the five-minute walk to the church. But the residence hall was even farther.

I hunkered deeper into my coat and stared at my blood-soaked heels as I shuffled along, following his black shoes. He had such a confident gait, powered by muscle and aggression. It was a sexy swagger and a predatory prowl all rolled into one.

“So you let Daisy go to school here free of charge.” My teeth chattered. “How did that happen?”

“I read about her story in the Catholic Times. It moved me.”

“She’s not the first one, is she? I bet there are others who go here for free. Other students that you help.”

“Does it matter?”

“Yeah. It matters.” I lifted my face to the chilly night sky. “You come across as this scary, grouchy tyrant. But there’s some warm, squishiness inside you. Not a lot. But enough to...move *me*. Be careful with that, Magnus. You might just steal my heart.”

He said nothing, his concentration seemingly focused on getting us to our destination as quickly as possible.

Once we were out of view of the gymnasium, he gripped my hand. His frigid fingers drew my attention to his black shirt and hunched shoulders. He was freezing.

“Where’s your coat?”

“We’re not going far.”

That was when I noticed he’d led me in the opposite direction of the church and campus. I looked around, noting the quiet side street, the small single-story building, and his car parked beside it.

He tightened his grip and ushered me to the front porch.

“Magnus.” My heart stammered with excitement and worry. “I can’t go in there.”

Without a word, he opened the door and pulled me inside.

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CHAPTER 24

TINSLEY

“**T**AKE A SHOWER.” Magnus locked the front door and nodded at the short hallway on the left.

Don’t freak out.

It was just a shower. Harmless. Innocent. My cold, blood-caked skin rejoiced at the idea.

He didn’t have to tell me twice.

I shrugged out of my coat and left it on the small couch. As I stepped toward the bathroom, he crossed to the open kitchenette and removed a bottle of whiskey from the cabinet.

His private quarters fit the image I’d created in my mind. Clean, simple, and darkly masculine. He had no more than what he needed—couch, table, bathroom, bedroom—and for some reason, that made me feel instantly welcome and comfortable.

“Your floors.” I glanced down, searching for drops of blood.

“I gave you an order, Tinsley.”

Take a shower.

His bossiness helped shake the tension from my body. All I had to do was take a shower. He would handle the rest.

I needed that.

I needed him more than I was willing to admit, even to myself.

As my heels clicked across the wood flooring, carrying me closer to his bathroom, the scent of him curled through my senses. A virile masculinity that leaked into the deepest places inside me and filled me with warmth and hope.

His presence made it impossible not to dream.

In the small bathroom, I set the tampon on the vanity and closed the door. Then I stripped. The dress went on a hook on the wall. The lacy panties probably should've gone in the trash can, but they were my favorite, most expensive pair. Maybe I could hand-wash them?

Shower first.

I folded the underwear, blood and all, into a tiny little triangle and set them in the sink. My long, thick hair, piled in an elaborate updo, had taken me two hours to perfect. So I left it, pulled back the shower curtain, and climbed in.

I stayed in there for at least twenty minutes. Maybe longer. While the water ran from red to clear, I obsessively smelled his soap and shampoo, savoring the cedar scent. Then I rubbed the body wash everywhere, scrubbing away the blood and taking extra time to clean between my legs.

The steam cleared my head, and the aroma of his soap soothed my soul.

I think I have a crush on him.

Was it a crush? Or something else?

I think it's more.

This went beyond a physical attraction. He'd held me the night I thought Jaden and Willow were dead. He was at my side every step of tonight, during and after my horrific display at the dance. He'd even been there when I pissed on the floor. He hadn't treated me with disgust. Hadn't hit me when I was down. He'd lent me his quiet strength without judgment.

I'd never been drawn to a person the way I was drawn to him. Even when he was cruel and terrifying. Even when I despised him. Even when he made me sit in his classroom after school and read the scriptures out loud for hours. Even then, I wanted him in a way I'd never wanted anyone else.

The night I'd met him, he told me that ninety percent of this was how I reacted to it. The other ten percent was happening whether I liked it or not.

I figured my feelings for him, this inexplicable attraction, was the ten percent I couldn't stop. That meant the rest depended on how I reacted to these feelings.

Turning off the shower, I peeked around the curtain to look for a towel. The first thing I noticed—the dress was gone. The second thing—I wasn't alone.

I slowly pulled the curtain back, keeping my nudity covered, and froze at the sight of Magnus bent over the vanity. With one hand gripping the

edge of the basin, the other held my bloody panties.

“What the fresh hell?” Shame coursed through me.

But there was something else, something twisted and curious about his fascination with my dirty underwear. It filled me with dark delight.

“Come here.” He ran his thumb through the blood with a look of deep and solemn respect in his eyes.

I shivered and heated at once. Snatching a towel off the shelf, I knotted it around my body and joined him at the sink.

“I sometimes forget you’re only eighteen.” He turned on the faucet, falling quiet, seemingly mesmerized as the red-tinged water swirled down the drain.

“Why do you say that?”

“Your reactions to things, to *me*, are so self-contained and levelheaded. When you get upset, it’s over something important. Something that matters. You have a mature handle on everything around you. Despite the obscenities that come out of your mouth.” His lips twitched. “You’re an old soul.”

“Does blood turn you on?”

“Yours does. Does that scare you?”

“Depends.” My voice quivered. With alarm. With desire. “Do you want to make me bleed?”

“No. I would never cut you or wish to see you bleed in pain. I hated your pain tonight.” His hand fisted in the stream of water. “I *loathed* it. I don’t want to ever see you hurting like that again. But this?” He uncurled his fingers and dragged his thumb along the bloodstained gusset of the panties. “There’s nothing shameful or dirty about this. It came from you, from such a beautiful, intimate part of you. It represents life. *Your* life.”

My breath stilled.

Maybe I was crazy, but I loved that. I loved that he wasn’t grossed out by period blood. That was the difference between a boy and a real man.

But with Magnus, it was more complicated than that.

“A month ago...” I sat on the lid of the toilet, marveling at the ease and care with which he washed my underwear. “When I called you a sadist, you said you got help, that you came here, became a priest, and abstained for nine years. I have a lot of questions with regard to that. I’ve been afraid to

ask them. Afraid you won't answer them. Or maybe, I'm afraid you *will* answer them."

"Ask them."

"Do you need to inflict pain to get off?"

"I don't know."

"How do you not know?"

"It's not a simple answer. Not anymore."

He reached for a bottle of liquid laundry soap and worked a small drop into the lace. Then he plugged the basin and filled it with water to let the panties soak.

"Stand up." He cleaned his hands and turned to me.

My chin jerked back, but I did as he ordered.

"Remove the towel." He kept his voice low in a smooth dare that I knew, deep in my gut, would strip me physically and emotionally.

"You don't want to cross that line." My pulse accelerated. "You said you would never sin for me."

"This is *your* choice, Tinsley. Leave the towel on, and I'll return your dress and escort you back to the residence hall. There will be no punishment for your decision. We'll go back to the way things have been for the past three months."

Back to our daily interactions, unresolved sexual desire, and ceaseless mounting tension without consummation or fulfillment?

"Or?" I asked.

"Remove the towel. Show me your gorgeous body, and we'll have a conversation about my past and our present."

"If I do this..." Trembling, I clutched the knot of terrycloth between my breasts. "We're crossing a line we can't get back."

"It's only one line, not all of them. I'm choosing to cross this one. Now it's up to you."

Why now? Why on the night I was bleeding? Maybe my period was a deterrent to sex. But I knew that wasn't true. After watching him play with my blood, Magnus would never be turned off by a woman's menstrual cycle.

If I did this, if we got caught, it would bring deadly consequences. My mother would send Ronan to kill him. The henchman would probably show

up in broad daylight, aim a gun at Magnus's head, and shoot him. Just like that.

It would destroy me. I couldn't even imagine it.

Was this one small risk worth it?

Every student and faculty member from both schools would be at the dance all night.

No one would know.

Whatever this was, whatever Magnus had planned, he didn't believe I would comply. The truth vibrated in his rigid stance. The indifference in his expression didn't eclipse the vulnerability he tried to hide in his eyes. He braced for my rejection.

I loosened the knot and dropped the towel.

Too late, I realized what I must look like to him. I was nothing like the women taken in those photos with him ten years ago. All sultry, voluptuous, long-legged models in their thirties, forties, and fifties. He clearly preferred ladies in their social, professional, and sexual prime. Not tiny, short, boobless eighteen-year-olds who were still trying to figure out life.

The thought sank like lead in my stomach, but I refused to let it deflate me.

I would never stand naked before a man and wilt. I wouldn't cower for him. I wouldn't disintegrate.

I steeled my shoulders.

He stared at my body, absorbing all my pale, feminine lines without reaction. Resting a hip against the vanity, he cradled his chin on his thumb, curled his fingers against his lips, and continued to assess me as if I were a paper he needed to grade.

He was truly a sadist.

"I had particular preferences when it came to sex and women." He lowered his arm and slowly deleted the space between us, his voice a seductive caress. "Before I became a priest, I hurt women and got off on it. Only willing women. Only older women." His eyebrows knitted, and his hands flattened on the wall on either side of my head. "I've never touched anyone younger than me. I've never been with a virgin."

He surrounded my senses, smothered me with his heat. I shifted my weight from foot to foot, trying to alleviate the tension that chased my heartbeats into hysteria.

“Do I need to inflict pain to get off?” He watched my throat jog through a hard swallow, and his pupils dilated. A man aroused by fear and surrender. “I crave it. But I don’t need it. Not anymore.”

“Because you became a priest?”

“No. Because I found you. You’re a paradox. You don’t fit any of my predilections. You’re young, innocent, so delicately formed. You contradict every quality that used to arouse me.” He met my eyes. “I want you without cruelty and pain.”

“The welts you put on my ass disagree.”

“Oh, Tinsley.” A wolfish smirk. “A little breath play and some red marks are nothing compared to the brutality I inflicted on women. I can’t fathom the thought of hurting you the way I hurt them. I won’t. Every instinct inside me demands I protect you.” His mouth inched closer, coating my lips with the warm taste of whiskey. “I respect you.”

“You didn’t respect those other women?” I placed my palm on his hard chest. “The women you were with, the ones who let you hurt them?”

“No. I didn’t have an ounce of respect for anyone. I never felt possessive of a woman. Never cared about what they needed or who they fucked. I was never monogamous. Never emotionally available. I was a monster. Evil. Dead inside.”

Beneath taut muscles, his heart drummed wildly against my hand, a frantic rhythm that felt too alive for a man who believed he wasn’t.

“But with you?” He spoke against my throat. Lips like warm velvet. Voice like cold steel. “I am viciously, reprehensibly possessive of you.”



CHAPTER 25

MAGNUS

TINSLEY IN HER glittery gold gown had been a jaw-dropping sight to behold. But Tinsley now? Standing before me in nothing but milky white skin?

God help me.

“You’re more exquisite than I ever imagined.”

She strained toward my raspy whisper, lifting on toes, fingers stretching across my shoulders.

I was a bastard, making her wait for that compliment. I wasn’t one to readily offer praise, but with her, I would spill the verities of my soul.

“My boobs are, uh...” She stared down at her chest and laughed at herself, her eyes dancing with mirth. “There’s a committee for what they are.”

“They’re elegant.” I rested my palms on her ribs, just beneath her perky little tits. “Beautifully proportioned.” Heat rushed to my groin as I swept my thumbs over flawless skin and dainty nipples. “Soft as satin, tipped with immaculate beauty.”

“Magnus.” Her breath shivered.

The tiny buds hardened beneath my touch, stiffening my cock.

God, forgive me.

I lowered to my knees and caressed my lips along the divine shape of her figure. She was a fantasy of flexible limbs and graceful curves. Angelic. Malleable. Slender shoulders. Narrow hips. Porcelain complexion. Not a freckle or blemish to be found.

While I learned her body, her hands traveled north along the back of my neck, exploring, teasing.

“I’ve wanted to feel your hair for so long.” She tangled her fingers in the strands.

Her flat stomach quivered beneath my mouth as I nipped and licked lower, lower, my pants growing tighter, tighter.

She shouldn’t be here. I needed to stop, but my hands and lips kept moving until I arrived at the ultimate forbidden destination.

The apex of her legs, the golden hairs neatly trimmed, the scent of her painfully enticing, crippling, robbing my brain cells. I raked my fingers through the soft curls and edged toward her clit.

She gasped, held still. Then she canted her hips into my touch, seeking friction, demanding. Sexy. So damn naughty.

I snatched my hand away, letting her know it wasn’t her decision.

Her pouty bottom lip pushed out. A gleam lit her eyes. Then she slid her fingers down her abs and sank them between her legs.

My cock ached to be where her hand was, encased in her heat, submerged in her wetness. I gripped her arm and moved it to her side.

“Do you masturbate?” She started to reach for her pussy again. “Are you allowed?”

I knocked her hand away. “Masturbation is forbidden for all Catholics.”

“For me, too?”

“You’re Catholic now, Miss Constantine, so no more touching yourself. Lust of the flesh is a worldly sin.”

“Oh, really? Then you should change the name of the school. Instead of Sion Academy of the Sacred Heart, it should be Sion Academy of the Dry Vaginas and Flaccid Penises. I mean, come on. No masturbating?” A laugh burst from her lips. “You can fuck right off with that.”

“I do.” I hid my smile.

“Wait. So you...?” She tilted her head, looking too gorgeous and tempting to be resisted. “You *do* touch yourself?”

Every day.

Over the past three months, I’d become a chronic, just-one-more, oh-fuck-I-need-her masturbator.

“Yes.” I leaned back and reached for the tampon on the vanity to occupy my hands. “In matters of lust, I’m not a tedious model of priesthood.”

“Sinner.” She grinned.

She was perfect, like no other woman. It didn't matter that she didn't fit the female construct I'd pursued in my youth. Maybe that was what made her so incredibly appealing. I'd never been with anyone like her, and unbeknown to me, I'd been waiting forty years for her. She was made for me. Intelligently, impeccably designed. For me alone.

Mine.

And here were those feelings again.

This predatory, possessive, kill-anyone-who-touches-her state of my mind was foreign and unsettling. But there was no denying it. Tonight, I'd been a twitch away from smashing Tucker Kensington's skull. I didn't trust that kid, and I sure as hell didn't trust him around her.

"Give me the tampon before I make another mess." She held out her hand.

"Widen your stance."

"Uh-uh. Nope." Her fingers went to her thighs, tapping nervously.

The stiff pose framed her arms around her upturned breasts, her taut nipples hard, pink, and... *God, give me strength.*

Resisting my body's demand to kiss her tits, to suck and bite the sensitive peaks, was the worst kind of hell.

Needing a distraction, I unwrapped the tampon and examined the applicator.

"Have you ever used one of those?" she asked wryly.

"No. Looks simple enough."

"Let me do it."

"No." I inched closer on my knees and met her eyes. "Widen your stance."

She glanced down, trying to see between her legs. "I might already be leaking."

My cock twitched. The only one leaking was me. Thank God my pants were black. Otherwise, I'd have a very visible wet spot.

I bowed my head and kissed her abdomen. I kissed and licked until she shuddered and gripped my shoulders. Then she slid her feet apart.

"Good girl." I skimmed my fingers along her delicate, velvety slit, over and over, slipping deeper into the damp crease with each pass. "Tell me everything that's breached this hole."

“Um...” Her hands curled into trembling fists on my shoulders. “Toys, fingers—”

“Whose fingers?” I sank my own, just the tips, groaning at her tightness.

“Mine. And a few others. Guys I don’t remember.”

Jealousy flared, unreasonable and unnecessary. Those boys would never touch her again.

“No tongues?” I asked. “No dicks?”

“No. Just toys, fingers, and...*that*.” She gulped as I pressed the applicator inside her. Her hand shot out, finding a nearby shelf. “Holy fuck, Magnus. You’re ruining me for all other tampons.”

Laughter kicked from my chest, and she laughed with me. Then we both sobered as I pushed the tampon all the way inside.

I threw away the applicator, and when I turned back to her, she bent in and placed her finger beneath my chin.

“I’m insane to want anything with you, Magnus Falke. But if I could have just one thing, it’s you on your knees, inserting my tampons every month.” Her blue eyes sparkled with restrained humor. “You’re a natural.”

Rising to my full height, I cupped her face and ghosted my lips across hers.

“Maybe not so natural on your knees.” Her breathing accelerated against my mouth. “But you nailed the insertion part.”

I kissed her, open-mouthed and raw, my heart pounding and my veins afire with liquid desire. Gliding my palms down her back, I caught her at the waist, lifted her, and crushed her to my chest.

Her legs hooked around my hips as I trapped her between my body and the wall. Again and again, I took her mouth, devouring lush lips that parted so sinfully for me, matching my hunger.

She set my blood on fire, with her arms around my neck and her fingers sinking into my hair, yanking passionately. I dropped a hand to her bare ass and ground my hips against her core. She moaned into my mouth, our tongues tangling, heat flushing, bodies aching with want, lust, and more happiness than either of us knew what to do with.

I deepened the connection, overwhelmed by the sensation of this woman wrapped around me, her soft tits, graceful limbs, every muscle and bone vibrating with her need for me.

I never wanted to feel sexual gratification again. I didn't deserve the pleasure of a woman, least of all, *this* woman.

But with her mouth raised to mine in benediction, she made me want to be a better man. She made me want to be deserving of any and every part of her she might throw my way.

I would happily commit sacrilege for her. I would condemn myself to hell in exchange for this one blessed, blissful moment in her arms.

The rhythmic tug of her sweet lips. Her body, hot and slick, beneath my hands. Her addictive, magnetic personality, sucking me in with every word, making me delirious with adoration. I was ripping apart at the seams. There would be nothing left to redeem by the time she was done with me.

"We have a couple of hours," I said against her lips, "before the dance ends and the students get escorted to their rooms."

"May I stay a little longer?" She trembled as if desperate to hold on.

"I'll grab a shirt for you."

With her body entwined around me and her lips brushing mine, she didn't let go. Instead, she slid a finger down the placket of buttons on my chest. "I want the one you're wearing."

"It's yours." I let my head fall back on my shoulders, offering her my throat.

"You're so goddamn hot." She kissed the scruff along my jawline, taking her time.

When she reached the underside of my chin, she hooked a finger beneath the tab of white and slid the plastic collar free.

I twisted around and perched her on the edge of the vanity, standing in the V of her legs. The tampon inside her wasn't an obstacle. If I lost control, I would just yank on the string and fuck her. Also, she had two other holes.

I wanted everything. All of her. But I couldn't lose control. I couldn't have her for all the obvious reasons.

So I would live in the moment—her, here, in my arms—for just a couple hours.

She set the plastic collar piece aside. Our gazes collided. Then our mouths. Our tongues. I tasted lemon drops, felt the lust in her body like an electric current, and savored the moans rising in her throat.

Her fingers went to work on my shirt buttons, our eyes meeting between wild, greedy kisses. The intensity of her desire made my blood sing.

I pulled back to growl, “You make me crazy, Tinsley.”

“It’s a good crazy, right?” She wrestled the shirt off my shoulders and arms, panting, kissing my biceps, and smiling infectiously. “Do you feel alive? Free? Nothing beats this feeling. I know we’re taking a big risk. But the reward?” She slipped off the vanity and sidled around me, running her mouth across my spine. “The reward is so damn good.”

There was something insanely erotic about the feel of her supple nipples sliding against my bare back. Every pleasure zone in my body lit up. I gripped the base of my cock through my pants, squeezing it hard enough to stave off the need to come.

“We should leave this bathroom before we do something we can’t undo.” She pressed her smile against my shoulder blade.

I’d already broken my vows and half of the school rules. But she was right. There were things I could still avoid, such as taking her virginity, knocking her up, and...

Getting caught.

If that happened, I would have to invest in an armory and a team of bodyguards. The Constantines weren’t a forgiving bunch. Especially when it came to their youngest princess.

On the heels of that thought, I buttoned up the shirt she’d borrowed and led her out of the bathroom. Before I could stop her, she darted past me and disappeared inside my bedroom.

I shouldn’t go in there. I really fucking shouldn’t. But my feet were already moving, chasing. I would chase her to the ends of the earth.

“Do you know why my mother chose Sion Academy?” Her voice cut the chilly darkness.

Crossing the small room, I found her on my narrow bed. She lay on her back, staring up at me in the gloom.

“Do you?” The anger in her tone gave me pause.

“No.”

“She negotiated a merger with the Kensingtons. The Constantines will increase their holdings, and the Kensington heir will get a virgin princess.”

“Tucker?” My stomach plunged into a free fall. “She expects you to marry him?”

“It’s a done deal. Trust funds are modified. Contracts are signed. I’m here to get to know my future husband and vice versa. Maybe I’ll be a good

little girl and give him a blow job or offer up my virginity as an early down payment, an incentive for him to go along with this. You know, since that's all I'm good for."

Rage caught me in its strangling grip and painted my vision red.

I'll kill him.

The thought bled into my awareness as I shouted, "Walk away from the trust fund. You don't need her goddamn money!"

"It's not that simple now. If the merger is already underway—I'll confirm that tomorrow—I won't be able to walk away. I would have to run, hide, and do both of those things better than her henchman for the rest of my life."

"She won't kill you."

"No, but she'll use any force necessary to ensure I'm handed over to the Kensingtons as part of this merger. It doesn't even matter if I stay here or return to Bishop's Landing. Nothing I do will change my future." Her voice cracked. "This is the ten percent part, isn't it? The part that's happening whether I like it or not. That's life."

I set a knee on the bed beside her and tried to tame my furious pulse. Then I lay down with her and gathered her in my arms.

"I'm going to figure this out." I kissed her tense brow and the silent tears collecting in the creases around her mouth.

"*You* aren't going to do a damn thing, Magnus. Any interference will only get you killed."

"Don't underestimate me, **princess**."

"Don't underestimate my family." She shifted closer, touched our foreheads together, and ran a hand through my hair. "Can we not talk about this tonight? If I only have two hours with you, I'd rather hear about your family or your life before Sion Academy or anything that's not related to the future. We don't even have to talk at all."

For the next two hours, I set out to take her thoughts off Tucker Kensington. I held her in the dark and kissed her into mindlessness.

When we came up for air, I told her about my childhood with Crisanto and our skateboarding escapades around New York City. I talked about my parents, their monotonous life in the suburbs, and their realized dream for me to be a priest. I avoided topics related to my sexual history and the tragedy that had brought me here nine years ago.

When she broached that subject, I kissed her until she forgot to breathe.

I'd never engaged in a kiss that didn't lead to sex. I'd never kissed a woman just for the sake of kissing. But I kissed Tinsley for two hours. I kissed her until our lips were numb and swollen and the taste of her mouth embedded itself in my soul.

Eventually, I helped her into her blood-stained dress and escorted her back to the residence hall.

The lights were out in the building. Everyone assumed she'd been at the church, safe with her teacher.

I needed to be that for her. Safe. Protective. Someone she could trust.

No more crossing lines. No more kissing. No more naked Tinsley in my private quarters.

I wouldn't touch her again.

That was the biggest lie of all.



CHAPTER 26

MAGNUS

I LASTED FIVE days.

Five days of no touching. No kissing. No naked Tinsley.

She continued to earn punishments every day, which amounted to after-school detention with me and a Bible.

Her tardies and disrespectful mouth had become part of our routine. She gave me reasons to discipline her, and I used those punishments to make it impossible for her to participate in off-campus activities.

Since the Winter Formal, she hadn't seen Tucker Kensington, and I would keep it that way by monopolizing her time.

Was I controlling? Absolutely.

Was I wrong to keep her close? Debatable.

We'd confirmed the validity of the Kensington-Constantine merger. It wasn't public information, but she had her sources, and I had mine. When she'd called her mother, Caroline didn't deny it. Tinsley was expected to marry Tucker, and I was ready to commit mass murder over it.

On the fifth day, after the final bell rang and my classroom cleared out, she sat in the front row and stared at nothing across the room.

"Ask me what your correction will be today." I stood from my desk.

"More Bible readings." She growled her displeasure.

"No."

"What?"

"Ask me."

"I don't care." She held my gaze, and her chest hitched with a resigned breath. "Fine. What cruel and unusual punishment will I be enduring today, Father Magnus?"

“I’m glad you asked.” I paced to the door and angled my head so that I could watch her as I turned the lock.

Click.

She stiffened.

My skin heated. “You’re going to scrub the floors.”

The sound of her sharp inhale surged blood to my cock.

“We’ve been here before,” she murmured. “We can’t do it again.”

“No, Tinsley. We definitely have *not* been where we’re going today.”

“What do you mean?”

“On your feet.” I prowled toward her, relishing her beautifully flushed cheeks.

Arousal looked so fucking delicious on her.

She pushed to stand and faced me with her shoulders squared. I expected nothing less from this sublime woman.

“We should skip this.” Her eyes watched me, sharp and unflinching. “We can just imagine it. Pretend that I make my usual sexy, intelligent retorts. You make your unintelligent gorilla sounds. I roll my eyes. You spank me, and we both go back to our sad little rooms in physical pain, bereft and aching, because let’s face it...” She lowered her voice, frustration written in her features. “Three months of foreplay isn’t fun, Magnus. It’s agony.”

“Remove your underwear.”

“Where’s the bloody pair that you never returned?”

“Clean and safely stored in its new home beneath my pillow.”

She floated into my space, her hands and chest sliding up my torso, her toes stretching, mouth reaching, hunting for mine. “You’re such a creeper.”

“Only for you.” I angled my lips away, denying her. I brushed my nose against hers once, twice, teasing her. Then I stepped back and held out my hand, mastering her. “I gave you an order.”

Her shoulders lowered, and her gaze hooded. Acceptance. Surrender. Desire.

Everything about Tinsley was a tantalizing, kinky, forbidden slow burn. I didn’t even need to touch her, and I felt like I was having the best sex of my life.

This was no longer about keeping my vows. Those had been razed to the ground the night I’d met her. The night she’d ravaged my mind,

consumed my prayers, and made a home inside my cold, dead heart.

“I’m only doing this because I’m bored.” She slowly reached beneath her skirt and slipped the pink satin underwear down her legs, staring into my eyes the whole damn time. “Also, every girl knows that when a well-proportioned, powerfully built, humanlike creature—who could possibly be mistaken as a man—asks for her panties, she should just hand them over. Resistance is futile.”

Her pouty lip whitened beneath the press of her teeth as she flung the underwear at me.

I caught the scrap of satin and tucked it into my pocket.

“I’m still on my period.” She arched a brow.

“Remove the tampon.” I held out my hand again, palm up.

“You’re serious.”

“Deadly.”

“We can’t...” She sneaked a look at the door, her voice an urgent hush. “We can’t have sex. Especially not here.”

“What we can and cannot do is my concern. Your only responsibility is following my order and giving me access to your pussy.”

She could refuse me. There was always that possibility, and I would accept her rejection without retaliation. I’d been very clear with her on that point.

I was nothing like her mother. I would never force her into something for my own personal gain. But it didn’t hurt to remind her.

“Say no, and nothing changes.” I kept my hand extended between us. “You mean more to me than all the money and sex in the world.”

“Magnus...”

“You hold all the power between us. You always have.”

“I know.” She rested her small hand on my larger one. “There’s no tampon. I’m not bleeding anymore. Does that disappoint you?”

My heart thudded heavily as I closed my fingers around hers and yanked her against my chest.

“There are other ways to make you leak.” Slowly, sensually, I reached beneath her skirt and teased the soft flesh between her legs.

Fighting the impulse to bury my fingers, I played with the entrance of her cunt, circled it, stroked it, and within seconds, felt the slick gush of her arousal soaking my hand.

To sink my cock inside this glorious, sacred part of her would be the honor of a lifetime. It was the one line I refused to let myself cross. I'd already taken too many liberties with her, broken too many laws. But I shouldn't take her virginity. I didn't deserve it.

"You know where the cleaning supplies are." I released her, returned to my desk, and opened the laptop.

Her hands went to her hips, her expression fevered with hunger and frustration.

She thought I was the one punishing her all these months, but she was the one with the claws and teeth and shackles on me. If she strutted over here and sat on my cock, I would feed it to her, every inch, in any hole she wanted it.

I would go to prison for her.

I would bleed for her.

I wondered if there was anything I wouldn't do for her, and that thought was a torment in and of itself.

She had the power to level my world.

For the next hour, she scrubbed the floor on hands and knees in her schoolgirl uniform. Halfway through, she'd subtly, casually, inched her skirt up her back, exposing her gorgeous, heart-shaped ass.

"Demeaning bullshit." She crawled past my chair, every word out of her mouth making me hard as a rock. "Chauvinistic pervert."

Moving along on all fours, she arched her bare cheeks in the air, giving me a direct view of the glistening wetness between her thighs.

"Don't think I haven't noticed the freak flag you're flying in your pants." She smirked at me over her shoulder. "Kind of hard to miss."

She crawled around the corner, out of sight, leaving me aching, throbbing, gripping the armrest to keep from pulling my cock out and jerking off.

I couldn't bear it. Not another second of this torture.

My feet were already moving, my steps rounding the desk. Huge blue eyes in a delicately elven face watched me approach. Shimmery white-blond hair cascaded down her slender back. A pink tongue peeked out, wetting plush lips, and my damn heart rammed against my rib cage.

"Stand up." I didn't wait for her to obey.

With a fist in her hair, I hauled her to her feet and bent her over my desk, ass up.

“Oh God.” She whimpered, her breath bursting in wispy bits and pieces. “I want this, but I don’t want you to resent me. Your vows...”

Priests broke their vows every day. They only lost their jobs if they got caught.

I kept this to myself as I kicked her feet apart and gripped her thighs. Angling her hips to thrust up and out, I bent down and buried my face.

With my teeth against her sexy, toned backside, I gave her sharp bites of pain intermixed with languid, swirling kisses. She squirmed and writhed as I worked my way toward her center.

When my tongue reached her greedy, wet pussy, she lifted on her toes, flattened on her heels, and released tatters of sound meant only for me.

I ravished her untried flesh, my nose buried in her ass crack and the heavenly scent of her intoxicating my senses. With each pass along her swollen slit, my tongue ventured deeper, more aggressively into her hot clasp, twisting and flicking and making her moan.

She tasted like innocence and sin, temptation and ruination, and I couldn’t stop eating, sucking, and imbibing her like an addict whose only thought was to consume and indulge and seize the moment.

“Please.” She thrashed on my desk, her hands clawing through my papers, her body convulsing, shaking, aching to come.

I edged her toward orgasm, and right before the peak, I ripped her away from the fall. Over and over, I brought her there, surfing right up to the cusp, teasing, peaking, and teetering on that razored edge. With frantic need pulsing beneath her skin and pooling between her legs, I stopped, leaned back, waited for it.

“Please,” she whispered, trembling, rocking, panting. “Magnus, please, fuck me. Let me come. Put me out of my misery, damn you.”

Music to my ears.

For the next hour, I showed her how a sadist made a woman beg.

I taught her my lessons in sin.

“I hate you.” She lay facedown on my desk in a puddle of shivery, horny desperation. “Please, please, please. I beg you. I’ll do anything.”

Leaning forward, I stretched over her back and rested my brow against her spine. With two fingers still buried in her cunt, I groaned at the feel of

her clenching, spasming, so hot and needy.

She hadn't come. Not once since we started. But she was about to explode, and it was going to be the best fucking orgasm she ever experienced.

I twisted my wrist, running my fingers along her deliciously drenched flesh to circle her clit. My other hand lowered my fly.

The sound of the zipper had her craning her neck, but she couldn't see my erection. I pulled it out beneath the edge of the desk and fisted the unwieldy length.

I'd never been this hard. It didn't even feel like my cock. It was a goddamn steel bat encased in fire.

As I rubbed and massaged her clit, she reached back and clutched my ass. Her nails sank into the skin above my slipping waistband. Pinpricks of heat where her passionate fingers held me became jolts of electricity surging straight to my groin, thick and molten.

With my thighs pressed against the backs of hers, one hand working her pussy, and my other stroking the length of my cock, I pressed my forehead against her spine and marked the crescendo of her sounds.

Frenzied breaths. Guttural moans. Strangled pleasure. She was there, tensing, shaking violently. Then she buried her mouth in the bend of her arm and silently roared her release.

My throat closed around a gasp as I squeezed the crown of my shaft and sank my fingers to the root, roughly, erratically, coming with her, swallowing my groans, and jetting across her clean floor.

As we caught our breaths, I tucked myself away and pulled her into my arms. Then I kissed her slowly, softly, basking in the feel of her loose, satisfied limbs and contented sighs.

"You need to finish the floors." I bit at her lip. "You have a mess to clean up."

Perched on my desk with her arms and legs twined about my body, she peered down at the stripes of come on the floor between my shoes.

She hummed happily and returned her lips to mine. Her fingers snaked through my hair as my tongue took lazy strolls through her mouth.

Borrowing time.

Stealing moments.

Until a knock sounded on the door.

My pulse spiked.

Tinsley shoved away and dropped to the floor, frantically reaching for the bucket. Another impatient knock came as I crossed the room and opened the door.

“Hi, Father Magnus.” Nevada smiled flirtatiously, holding a laptop and twirling her hair. “Are you...?” She bent her neck to see around me. “Oh.”

I followed her gaze to Tinsley, who was scrubbing my come off the floor.

It was wrong. Immoral. Illegal.

But it didn’t feel wrong.

Nothing had ever felt so right.

“I need help with today’s calculus assignment,” Nevada purred, making my skin crawl.

I didn’t want to help her. I didn’t want to do this job. Right now, all I wanted was my golden angel spread across my desk and screaming my name.

“Come in.” I motioned at the front row. “I’ll be right with you.”



CHAPTER 27

MAGNUS

THIS WAS WRONG.

I sat in the confessional and leaned my head against the wood panel behind me. I didn't want to be here.

On the other side of the screen, the penitent, a soft-spoken Sion girl, whispered in the dark about the usual sins—disobeying her parents, cheating on homework, and cursing with friends.

I'd heard it all before, but I wasn't hearing it now.

My restless mind ran on a single track that began and ended with Tinsley Constantine.

It had been three weeks since the Winter Formal, and in those weeks, I'd spent a great many hours with my face buried between her legs. At every opportunity, I laid her out on my desk, spread her wide, and feasted upon her body.

Her inner thighs bore abrasions from my whiskers. Bruises from my fingers dappled her hips. Bite marks decorated her tits.

While I couldn't keep my hands and mouth off her, I'd had enough restraint to stop her from touching me.

Jerking off where she couldn't see my hand was bad enough. But putting my filthy cock anywhere on, in, or near her? That was out of the question. She was too pure and decent. Too good for my tarnished existence.

I justified every interaction by telling myself I was giving her pleasure and making her happy. But at the end of the day, I knew what I was doing was selfish and reckless and *wrong*.

I needed to stop.

I had to let her go.

“Father?” the girl asked through the latticed opening. “Are you there?”

She couldn’t see me. I could only make out a vague silhouette of her. I’d completely tuned her out and forgotten she was there.

“Yes.” I cleared my throat.

“I said, that’s all, Father. Those are my sins.”

“For your penance, say ten Hail Marys...”

I tried to pay attention through the next hour of confessions, but my heart wasn’t in it.

Had my heart ever been in this?

I needed the structure. The disciplined life of priesthood helped me suppress the violence inside me.

Today was the last day of school before Christmas break. By tomorrow, the village would be a ghost town. With the exception of a few faculty members, everyone would be gone for the next three weeks.

Crisanto would head to New York City to visit his mother. I should go with him and see my own parents, but I wouldn’t. I wasn’t close to them anymore. I’d ruined that relationship many years ago.

Last week, I sent a satisfactory report to Caroline Constantine, ensuring Tinsley would spend Christmas with her family. She was leaving tonight for Bishop’s Landing.

For three weeks.

The thought was debilitating.

Rather than celebrating the reprieve I would have from the students, I was lamenting it. Dreading her departure.

This kind of behavior wasn’t me. I didn’t miss people. I didn’t care about anyone.

Yet here I was, swimming in an upside-down world where all I wanted was to be with a woman I couldn’t have. A woman who could frustrate me, turn me on, and fire me up like no other.

I didn’t want this. Not these feelings—the uncertainty, the hunger, the endless fucking dread.

Praying should’ve come naturally to a man of my vocation, but it’d never been that way for me, and it certainly wasn’t now. I couldn’t pray on this. I couldn’t talk to Crisanto about it. I didn’t know how to put any of it into words.

I was turned around, fumbling in the dark and losing my way. Everywhere I looked, she was there.

Because she was the only place I wanted to be.

The confessional was a revolving door. Students and faculty from both schools came and went, getting their confessions in before Christmas break.

I was scheduled to sit here for several hours to make sure everyone had an opportunity to confess between their classes or during lunch.

By the end of my shift, I'd heard from most of the students. Except Tinsley. I wouldn't. She didn't practice the sacraments unless she was forced.

The door opened with a new penitent, and I recognized his voice immediately.

Tucker launched into the formal dialog, and I gritted my teeth through my parts. Then he confessed his sins.

"I know who I'm going to marry," he said. "When I graduate, my parents are giving her to me, and at first, I wasn't thrilled. I mean, being the only Kensington heir and all, I always knew I would have a certain kind of wife, one who was specifically suited for me and our family brand. But I wasn't excited about the idea. Until I met her." He took a breath. "She's a knockout. Like a perfect ten up here and down here."

I couldn't see his fucking gestures, but in about two seconds, he was going to see my fucking fist.

"I know that's you, Father Magnus. I asked who was doing confessions today. So the reason I'm here is to tell you to give her some free time. I haven't seen her much since the Winter Formal, and she doesn't answer my texts or calls. I kind of freaked out over the whole blood-on-the-floor thing. Whatever. I need her to understand how things are going to be. She's only going to school here to help me get acquainted with her. So I need you to free up her schedule and give me some time with her if you know what I mean."

"No, Tucker." I kept my voice even, despite the rampage roiling inside me. "I'm afraid I don't know what you mean."

"She's going to be my wife. I can do whatever I want with her." He coughed. "After we're married, of course."

"Is this your confession?"

"Well...no, I don't have any sins to discuss."

“Get out of my confessional.” When I didn’t hear movement, I leaned toward the latticed screen and roared, “Get out!”

He flew to his feet and ran, slamming the door behind him.

I was unraveling, shaking, my heart banging in my chest. I barely made it through the next two confessions without putting my fists through the wall.

Then I sat there in silence, alone with my loud, tumultuous thoughts.

The Tucker Kensington situation was a delicate goddamn mess. The Constantines weren’t mafia. They were worse. Insidious, secretive, and subtle in their brutality. If I raised one finger to interfere in their business, my body would never be found.

As if that would stop me. No matter what happened between Tinsley and me, I wouldn’t stand by and watch her get handed off to that entitled prick.

With my elbows on my knees, I dropped my head in my hands and tried to measure my breaths. Minutes passed. I checked my watch. It was time to close up.

The door opened and shut. Someone knelt on the other side of the screen, creaking the padded step.

I clenched my jaw, debating the prudence in telling whoever it was to fuck off.

Tinsley’s wearing off on me.

“Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned.” Her enchanting voice sliced through my impatience and melted my anger. “This is my second confession.”

Pulse detonating, I leaned toward the screen and placed my palm on the lattice. “I’m listening.”

“Whew.” She blew out a breath. “I was afraid it wasn’t going to be you behind there.”

“Why are you here?”

“To confess.” Her silhouette edged closer, and her palm pressed against mine on the other side of the screen. “Probably isn’t much of a confession. It’s pretty obvious I have feelings for you. Feelings I shouldn’t have for my teacher. Or a priest. Maybe I shouldn’t crave the things that I do, but I really need...I need *you*.”

A hot ember formed in my throat, and I lowered my hand. “In what capacity do you need me?”

“In every capacity. All of it. But we can start with your cock. I want to see it—”

“Stop.”

“—touch it, put it in my mouth, and—”

“Enough.”

“—ride it.” Through the nebulous screen, her labored breaths chased mine. “What are you hiding, Magnus? What do you want?”

My self-control clung by a gossamer thread. I didn’t trust myself to speak.

“If this is about your vows,” she whispered, “I understand. I’ll leave you alone. I’ll...leave. But the way you touch me, the way you *kiss* me...” Her voice quivered. “I don’t think I’m alone here. Am I? Alone?”

I dug my knuckles into my thighs, fighting every selfish word I wanted to bellow. I wanted her body. I wanted her mind. I wanted her fucking soul. Damn all the consequences.

“Okay.” She hardened her tone. “Fine. I just thought, since Tucker Kensington is coming for me, I could have this one thing for myself. That I could have *you* for just a little while. It sounds so selfish, but I don’t... I don’t want him to be the one who gets me first.”

Everything inside me snapped, exploding into blinding rage.

One second, I was flying out of my booth, and the next, I was inside hers, with a fist in her hair and her body slammed against the wall beneath me.



CHAPTER 28

TINSLEY

“**M**AGNUS! Ow!” I clawed at the fist in my hair and twisted around, coming face to face with the wrath of hell.

He’d come for me with havoc in his blood and destruction in his voice. “He will *never* touch you. Not him or anyone else.” His muscles coiled. “Do I make myself clear?”

“Oh, you’re making yourself insanely clear. *Insane* being the key word.”

Holy fuck, he was angry. I’d never seen him so unhinged that he wasn’t even aware of his actions. We were in the church, in the damn confessional, for Christ’s sake, and he’d crashed in like a chest-pounding, hair-grabbing caveman.

There had been no one in the church when I arrived, but what if someone came in after?

“I hope no one witnessed your dramatic entrance into my booth.” I propelled my hand toward the door to check.

He beat me to it, cracking it enough to peer outside before shutting it again. “The church is empty. Who escorted you here?”

“Father Isaac. He ran over to the theater to do something in the music room. Magnus, we need to—”

“Kneel.”

One word, a single command, and I was shook. Owned.

It was my unshakable need for him that had me lowering to the floor.

I’d knelt for him in all manner of ways over the past four months, but this was different. This time I might see his cock, touch it, wrap my lips around him. He didn’t have to say anything. I saw the dominance and ineradicable lust in his eyes.

His breathing thundered, loud and explosive, charging the air and compelling my heart and lungs to work faster.

Dim light filtered in from beneath the door and somewhere in the ceiling, allowing me to see the shadows of his severe features and the hands on his waistband.

Standing before me, he opened his belt. Lowered his zip. Then, before I could blink, he had his cock in his hand.

Hard and long, it dominated the space between us, standing right up in my face, millimeters from my mouth. I'd waited so long to see this, and all I could do was stare.

He was so beautifully formed. Rigid. Thick. Thicker than any dick I'd ever encountered.

My pulse shuddered and skipped. I parted my lips, aching to kiss and lick and take my time.

He didn't give me a chance. With a ruthless hand on the back of my head and a sharp shift of his hips, he rammed himself into the back of my throat.

I gagged, choked, and oh my God. Oh my fucking God, he was huge. My hands flew out to the sides, looking for something to grab as he thrust deeper into my airway, driving the oxygen from my body. I couldn't breathe. I tried to retreat, but the hand on my head became a fist in my hair. His other collared my neck, holding me immobile, making me take every inch of his rage.

Tears ran from my eyes. Saliva dribbled down my chin, and my throat convulsed as he painfully, repeatedly fucked my face.

He groaned, retracted his hips just enough to give me a gulp before shoving in again. My arms flailed, smacking at his, my hands shoving, fingernails clawing. Unmoved, he roughly withdrew and impaled me again.

I gasped, gobbling breaths between thrusts, my hold on his arms brutal, desperate, and ineffective.

With a cruel yank of my hair, he tore my mouth off him. Gripping himself at the hilt, he slid the damp crown over my cheeks and lips then smacked me in the face with it.

"Magnus—"

He slammed back into my mouth, strangling my voice, my breath, each brutal thrust pounding my throat into a bruised pulp.

I went crazy, bucking and jerking in shackles of masculine flesh and testosterone, but my efforts to slow him down weren't working. Thrashing about and hitting him only made him meaner, more aggressive.

He fed off my vulnerable energy like a predator with a prey drive.

Regardless of whether I wanted this—dammit to hell, but I wanted it—I wouldn't let him hurt me.

Fighting my reflexes, I forced my body to give beneath the feral flexing of his hips. I unclenched my fingers and splayed them on his bunching abs, softly, tenderly. Then I stroked his body.

He worked his cock in my mouth like a piston as I stared up at him, loving him with my eyes, adoring him with my hands on his chest, and caressing him with my tongue on his shaft.

A gust of air escaped his throat, a strangled grunt. Then his fingers loosened on my neck. The fist in my hair slid to my face, cupping. His pumping slowed to rocking, his hips sensually rotating, grinding, and his gaze gleaming with more lucidity.

His violent, carnal nature lurked in the depths, but his disposition was calmer, more in control. And that control was a dangerous assault in seduction.

With his hands supporting my face and his cock stroking into my mouth with diabolical precision, he laid siege to my desire. Everything I wanted was right in front of me, staring down at me with something akin to veneration.

How could I not swoon? The sensuous curve of lips, carved jaw, shadow of stubble, and messy brown hair, long enough on top to tangle and yank in the heat of the moment—he was a sculptor's rendering of perfect masculinity, chiseled in rich marble. A masterly work of art created in homage to the god of beauty.

I felt pretty fucking privileged to have this man in my mouth. The claiming pressure in my throat. The delicious taste of him on my tongue. The guttural sounds in his chest made only for me.

His powerful legs flexed with the roll of his hips. Hard wood dug into my knees. And my hands, in contact with so many honed muscle groups, wandered and explored until I arrived at the rock-hard ridges of his ass.

God help me, my fingers found heaven, tracing the hewed edges and digging into rugged brawn. When I pressed into the hot valley between his

cheeks, his glutes clenched, damn near breaking my fingers.

I gave an undignified yelp, which he cut off with a deep thrust. As his rhythm climbed, I focused on sucking, swirling my tongue, and opening my throat. It made him go wild, and I knew he was close.

He pressed in, digging his hips with purpose, chasing his release. The growly, animalistic sounds he made were the most erotic I'd ever heard. Filthy. Sinful. Dangerous.

With his hands controlling the movement of my head, he jerked against my lips, his balls hot against my chin.

Then he came, and holy hell, there was no smothering the loud, convulsive catching of his breath. He buried himself to the root, dropped his head back on his shoulders, and released heavy, hot spurts of salty come.

For long seconds, he heaved for air, lazily fucking my face as if trying to milk himself of every last drop.

"Fuck." His thumbs absently stroked my cheeks as he stared down at me with a dazed look, his cock pulsing against my tongue.

He slowly pulled back, withdrawing completely. Then he bent at the waist, a glint of cruelty flickering in his blue eyes as he gripped my jaw, holding it closed. "Swallow."

I smacked his hand away and opened my mouth, tongue out. "Already did."

He hauled me to my feet. A muscular leg wedged between my thighs. Strong hands clasped my wrists, pinning them to the wall at my back. Then he kissed me, his firm lips overtaking mine with passion and purpose, his hungry tongue invading, claiming every hollow of my mouth.

I'd never been kissed the way this man kissed me. His lips made love to mine with such mastery and heat it felt like an out-of-body experience. As if we were meeting on another plane, floating and entwined in a realm that only belonged to us.

He moved his hands, placing a palm to my throat and the other against my nape, trapping my neck and controlling the angle of my head and the position of my mouth. He kissed me like that, holding my much smaller frame in the cage of his. A cage of power, influence, and potent sexuality.

My lips obeyed his mouth. My gaze followed his eyes. My hands clung to his muscled forearms, my entire body dangling in his strong grasp as he kissed me. With each press of his warm tongue, my pussy clenched harder,

hungrier. His hot, wet mouth stoked the flames inside me, and within seconds, he was lifting me up the wall, reaching beneath my uniform skirt, and spreading my legs.

His rigid cock pressed against the soaked gusset of my underwear, ready, waiting.

Please, don't wait.

I didn't care where or how. All that mattered was *who*. It had to be him. I felt like I'd waited my whole life for this man to take me in every way possible.

His hard-edged stare imprisoned mine. He hooked a finger under the crotch of the panties, flicking the flimsy barrier out of the way. His gaze stayed with me, the arm around my back holding me up as he notched his cock against my entrance.

My breath hiked, and his echoed.

I wriggled, and he hesitated, his hands trembling against my overheated skin.

Goddammit, don't get a conscience now. Fuck me, Magnus. Please.

"Tinsley?" Father Isaac's voice sounded from the other side of the door. "Are you still in there?"

My heart stopped, restarted, and spun into my throat. I pushed at Magnus, but he didn't move. His face showed no emotion. No reaction whatsoever. Was he in shock?

I took several rigorous swallows, hoping to strengthen my voice. "I'm here. Almost done."

"Are you with Father Magnus?" His footsteps moved away, treading toward the other booth. "Oh. I see. It doesn't appear he's here."

"He had to step out." I shoved harder against Magnus's chest, forcing his arms to release me. "I think he needed to use the restroom."

"You can finish your confession another time, then. I need to return to the campus."

The door handle twisted.

Shit, shit, shit.

"Yep." I gripped the knob, holding it closed. "I'm just going to finish my prayers. Be right out."

I almost had sex.

In a confessional.

With a priest.

Now would be a good time to start praying.

As the old priest shuffled away, I shifted back to Magnus.

That wasn't shock on his face. His features twisted with disgust. Regret. Shame.

My chest constricted, and my mind spiraled. But rather than focusing on the *could've's*, I needed to deal with the *now*.

Father Isaac's pacing footsteps. Magnus's expression. The weight of his stare. His hand lifting to my face. I knocked it away. My skirt. Fixed that. Underwear. Shirt. Hair. Good enough.

By the time I reached for the door, my chest ached from stress, and my pulse slogged in exhaustion.

But I couldn't leave without looking back.

Turning, I soaked up his rock-hard jaw, the flat line of sensual lips, the arrogance of perfect features, and his eyes. I nearly crumbled at the display of penitence there.

Well, he was in the right place for his guilt. He could just sit his ass down and pray an Act of Contrition to his heart's content.

I had to go.

Leaning up on my toes, I left a kiss on those brooding, unresponsive lips.

Then I slipped out the door and strode toward Father Isaac like a good girl.



CHAPTER 29

TINSLEY

TWO HOURS LATER, a discreetly armed Constantine driver arrived to take me to Bishop's Landing.

I hadn't seen Magnus since our confessional blow job, and everything between us felt so strained and unresolved. Not only had he left me absolutely ravenous, but I also couldn't unsee that grim look on his face—his loathing and guilt, not with me but with himself.

Stepping out of the main building with my bag, I scanned the campus grounds for him. Luxury cars with personal drivers lined the road to the gate. A sea of black steel, waiting to take the students back to their mansions.

I didn't want to go.

How fucking ironic. I'd put so much time and effort into getting expelled so that I could go home. But nothing would change my future at this point. I only wanted to spend what little time I had left with Magnus.

Except he was nowhere in sight. That was odd. He would normally be standing at the front entrance, seeing everyone off.

He was avoiding me.

I pulled out my phone and sent him a text.

Me: Where are you?

It showed *Read* within seconds.

"Good evening, Miss Constantine." My armed bodyguard-slash-driver approached and took my bag. "I'll pull the car closer."

"I can walk."

"It's beyond the gate, ma'am. If you don't mind waiting—"

“I can walk.” I breezed past him, staring at my phone.

Magnus never replied. Not unusual. We rarely communicated this way. Too incriminating.

I sent another text.

Me: I want to say goodbye.

His reply was immediate.

Magnus: Go home, Tinsley.

My chest squeezed painfully.

I turned toward the main building and probed the third-floor windows until I came to his. I would recognize his stern silhouette anywhere, and there he was, standing behind the glass, wrapped in unsettling shadows. Watching. Avoiding.

“Oh, it’s going to be like that?” I thrust my hand up and shot him a universal gesture.

A gasp sounded beside me, someone’s wide-eyed, pearl-clutching mother. I flipped her off, too.

Without checking his reaction, I pivoted and made a show of shaking my ass in my sexy tight pants, giving him a taunting view all the way through the gate and to the waiting car beyond.

The moment I was inside the sedan and motoring away from Sion Academy, all cheekiness and self-confidence evaporated, leaving sadness in its wake. And loneliness.

I’d begged Daisy to spend the Christmas break with me in Bishop’s Landing. But she’d already made plans to stay at the convent in Vermont where she grew up. I wished I could’ve changed her mind. I didn’t want to spend this six-hour drive alone with my thoughts.

Or the next three weeks.

I tried to sleep on the way, but my mind wouldn’t shut off. I couldn’t stop checking my phone for messages from him. Couldn’t stop replaying our almost-sex in the confessional box. Couldn’t stop dreading the next three weeks without him.

This was a bona fide obsession, bordering on clingy, which I didn’t do. My only interest in guys was sexual. And though I felt intense sexual

chemistry with Magnus, my desire for him was so much more.

I liked that he scowled when he was hiding a smile. I liked that he could scare my heart into a gallop, but he couldn't scare me. I liked that he was twice my size and twice my age. He had a lot to teach me and show me while I ran circles around him and kept him young. I was so small, but compared to him, I was teeny tiny. I liked that. I liked that he was huge and aggressive and growly and could pick me up with one arm and maneuver me into any position imaginable. I liked that whenever I looked at him, he was immediately in control. No, I loved that. I was riveted by the energy he possessed. He was *the* fantasy. The powerhouse man that every woman wanted.

I was nothing like the mature women he used to date. But I was a woman he was attracted to, and he made that viscerally clear with his hands and lips and eyes. Fuck me, his eyes...

Those windows to his soul held answers to questions I didn't even know to ask. I just knew there was something in there when he looked at me, connecting us on a level I didn't understand. Whatever it was, it involved both of us. This wasn't one-sided. Not by a long shot.

It was after nine at night when the mansions of Bishop's Landing came into view.

Ours sat at the top of the hill like a queen on her throne overlooking her subjects. The Constantine land and its three-hundred-year-old sprawling estate was our legacy. Every tennis court, guardhouse, swimming pool, manicured garden, and helicopter pad within a one-mile radius belonged to my family.

The driver motored up the hill, following the long driveway to the front doors. During my mother's many extravagant parties, those front doors gaped open as gowns and tuxedos meandered in and out, gathering on the huge veranda or in the ballroom.

Tonight, all was quiet. The only signs of life were the armed men in the guardhouses and on various balconies. The Morellis had never tried to take out our stronghold, but my mother would never risk it. She kept the mansion guarded like Fort Knox.

I didn't care about the house. Only about the people in it. By the look of the empty driveway and carriage houses, no one was here.

Christmas was four days away. Unfortunately, Keaton couldn't fly in until the following week. But where was everyone else?

The butler met me at the door and disappeared with my bag. I hadn't been home in four months. Nothing had changed. Yet everything felt different.

I wandered down the halls, through the kitchen, around the wood-paneled study, past the windows that overlooked the pool house and swimming pools. I encountered a few people who were paid to live here—bodyguards, security detail, housekeepers, and chefs—but didn't see anyone who was raised here, namely my brothers and sisters.

Corridors led to other corridors, mazes of stairs, and more sitting rooms than any family needed. If I hadn't grown up here, it would've been easy to get turned around in the many wings of The Queen of Bishop's Landing.

But I knew where I was going.

Her throne awaited in the turret. I climbed the grand staircase to the second floor, a smaller staircase to the third, past the maid's quarters, and took the final staircase to my mother's office.

"Welcome home, Miss Constantine." Justin smiled from behind his desk at the top of the stairs.

"Where is everyone?"

"Your mother is holding a video conference with overseas clients." He touched a finger to his lips as if I needed a reminder to keep my voice low. "Your siblings are out."

"Out where?"

"Don't know." He turned his gaze to his computer screen. "Would you like to make an appointment to see your mother?"

"Not really." I pinched the bridge of my nose. "Is she working straight through until Christmas?"

"She's very busy."

I refused to schedule a time to see her. "If she wants to talk to me, she can come find me. I'll be in the east guardhouse, fucking that new security guy I just ran into." I fanned myself. "So. Hot."

His face turned beet red, and he averted his eyes. "I'll just put you down for eight a.m. on Friday."

"Oh, yay," I deadpanned. "What should I bring?"

"Good behavior."

“Fuck that. I’m not coming.” I turned toward the stairs and glanced back, meeting his puppy eyes over my shoulder. “That single bag you packed for me? Fuck you. Also, you said no thongs. Wrong as usual, Justin. There’s butt floss underneath all those plaid skirts. You’re fired.”

I had no authority to fire my mother’s lapdog, but it felt good to say.

I took the stairs back to the main floor, roamed the empty rooms for a while, and eventually retired to my equally empty bedroom suite.

For the next twenty-four hours, I slept, ate, watched movies, and obsessively checked my phone. After dozens of texts and calls to my siblings, I’d heard from most of them.

Viv was out of town with a friend. Luckily, I got a quick meal with Winny and Perry before they raced off to another business meeting. But Elaine wasn’t returning my messages.

Neither was Magnus.

I spent two goddamn days in this compound, completely alone.

The worst part? I knew Magnus was sitting in Maine, completely alone, too.

I didn’t see my mother until the third day.

She pushed her way into the kitchen pantry, shoving right past me as I reached for a bag of granola. She grabbed a bottle of aspirin and left without a word.

“Mother?” I tried not to take her aloofness personally, but dammit, it hurt. I chased her through the kitchen. “Hello? Remember me?”

“I’m in a hurry.” She didn’t spare me a glance. “If you need something, talk to Justin—”

“I need *you*.”

She paused, checked her watch, smoothed down the straight lines of her pantsuit, and turned to face me. “You have three minutes.”

“Where’s Elaine?”

“She’s been staying in the city.”

“She’s not answering her phone.”

“She rarely does. Is that all you needed?”

“I’m not marrying Tucker.”

She was known as the ice queen, and that was the face she gave me now. But inside those tiny lines that fanned out from the corners of her eyes, I saw the sadness she tried so hard to conceal beneath makeup and

counterfeit smiles. My father had been dead for five years, and she still missed him.

“I want a marriage like you had with Dad.” I softened my voice. “I want love. I won’t marry for any other reason.”

“Do you love this family?”

“Yes, of course. More than anything.”

“Marrying a Kensington is marrying for love. *Love for your family*. We need this merger, Tinsley. If we don’t strengthen our holdings—”

“The Morellis will own us. I get it.” I stared at my feet and pulled in a ragged breath.

I could run away. Call a cab. Skip town. And just go, go, go. Maybe I could outrun all her henchmen. But what would happen to my siblings? I couldn’t leave them. Even if they weren’t physically in this house, I couldn’t walk out of their lives.

But I didn’t have to be here. Not in Bishop’s Landing. I didn’t have to spend the holiday alone.

“I want to return to Maine.” I brushed past her. “Today.”

“Tomorrow is Christmas Eve.”

“Do you intend to spend any time with me at all?”

Her face blanked, and her lips pinched in a line.

“Why am I here, Mother? Why did I even come home?” My pulse quickened with a cautious mix of excitement and sadness. “Tell Justin to arrange a driver. I’ll be ready to leave in an hour.”



CHAPTER 30

TINSLEY

“**I** CAN’T GET through the gate without the headteacher.” My teeth sawed my inner cheek as I leaned toward the driver in the front seat—he’d introduced himself as Galen—and scanned the lifeless, snow-covered village through the windshield. “Just drop me at the rectory. Right up there.”

The sight of Magnus’s parked car gave me hope. Given the thick layer of white powder atop it, he hadn’t gone anywhere in a while.

Unless he left with Crisanto for New York.

As soon as Galen pulled to a stop, I grabbed my bag and jumped out. “Thanks for the ride.”

I didn’t wait for his response. My nerves had made me so damn twitchy during the six-hour drive, and all that worry frayed at the edges as I paced to his front door.

What if he wasn’t here? What if he rejected me? What if he had another woman in there with him?

Why would I even think that?

I knocked on the door.

When he didn’t answer, I panicked. Galen waited in the car. He was a new guy. New to me. My mother had so many drivers. They all carried guns and served as bodyguards. Galen had a military look about him—severe expression, dark skin, muscles everywhere, and fuck-off vibes for days.

He wasn’t going to leave until he could report back to my mother that I was in Magnus’s care or safely behind the gate of my prison.

Shifting to block his view of my hand, I tried the knob. The door opened.

Hallelujah!

I waved bye and slipped inside the house, shutting the door behind me.
“Magnus?”

Quiet.

Empty.

It took all of five seconds to walk through each room and determine he wasn't here.

He wouldn't have left town with his door unlocked. He could've gone for a run. But probably not in this extreme cold. The only tracks leading to the front door were mine. Wherever he'd gone, he'd left before it snowed.

I peeked around the drapes and confirmed Galen was no longer here. Then I slung my bag over my shoulder and set out to find Magnus.

The blustery walk turned my fingers into icicles, but when I reached the arched doors of the church and opened them without resistance, I forgot all about the freezing temperatures.

A fever of elation swept through me as I crept into the foyer.

The scent of candle wax and incense permeated the air. Glossy woods and colorful stained glass danced in the glow of countless candles. Rows and rows of flickering flames illuminated the perimeter and behind the altar.

And there, kneeling in the front pew, was the dark outline of broad shoulders and a bowed head.

As the door shut behind me, his neck turned, and his blue glare sliced a path from my boots to my knitted hat. No smile. No evidence of happiness. No relief to see me.

My heart spooled out in tattered strips of vulnerability, spilling all over the floor.

In his hands, he held a rosary. I wondered how long he'd been praying in here. The candles sat in pools of liquid wax, suggesting they'd been burning for hours.

“Hey.” I dropped my bag, clamped my trembling fingers together behind my back, and steeled my spine. “I don't have the code to the gate.”

“You're supposed to be in Bishop's Landing.” He unfolded his tall frame from the pew and stood, a deliberately unhurried motion that shivered my blood.

“I was alone there, and you're alone here. I don't have any expectations. I just...”

I had this very dirty fantasy of him taking control of me. I just wanted to stand here, give myself over to him, and let him use me however he wanted.

"I just thought..." My teeth chattered. "We could have coffee together, listen to Christmas music, trade witty insults..."

The barely restrained, sinister energy rolling off him eroded my voice.

He tucked the rosary into his pocket, stepped into the center of the aisle, and faced the altar with his back to me. A strong, proud back, encased in black. Long, talented fingers clasped at the base of his spine. Muscle-corded legs braced apart to support his powerful stance.

"I want more than coffee and music and insults with you." His black velvet voice slid across my skin. "Lock the doors."

Sweet holy Lord, there was no mistaking what that meant.

The past four months had wound so tightly around us, there was no stopping this. I didn't, for a single second, want to slam on the brakes. I was so fucking aroused. Nervous.

Terrified he was making a mistake.

"Don't do this for me."

"Oh, princess." He kept his back to me as his dark chuckle reverberated through the church. "I'm doing this for *me*."

That was the answer I needed. He wanted me for himself. No matter the punishment or consequences. He would be breaking his vows for his own purpose.

Reaching back, I locked the steel bolt on the door. The sound crashed through the consecrated space, the fall of a heavy hammer, blaring its warning.

No turning back. My boots were already moving, following the path I'd chosen, chasing my one great passion.

Halfway down the aisle, I yanked them off. My scarf, hat, coat, and socks left a trail behind me. I tried to discard my nerves, but they clung, turning my insides into a jittery mess.

By the time I reached his back, he still hadn't turned to look at me. His rigid posture vibrated with tension.

He stood at the base of four wide steps which led to the altar. I ached to touch him, to run my hands up and down his gorgeous body, but more than that, I needed to see his face.

I circled him, climbing two stairs to stand before him. At eye level, he still had the ability to glare down the length of his nose at me, and he did with those fierce glacial eyes.

Good thing he didn't scare me, or I would've run straight out that door. But all the same, he made me nervous as hell. It was his silence. His unflinching eye contact. The motion of his thumb rubbing against his forefinger.

"Stop doing that with your hand." My heart pounded. "You're freaking me out."

His expression darkened. His fingers went still. Then he slowly, menacingly moved toward me, setting one foot on the step. I backed up. He stayed with me. Just like the night I met him. He had the power to push me through a room without even touching me.

I kept retreating, and he continued to advance, his features stern and the tendons straining above his white collar.

When my back hit the altar, my hands flew up in defense. He grabbed them and pinned them to my sides. A half-second later, he spun me away. I wobbled with my back to him and my palms flat on the marble surface.

Fingers curled around my waist, hooking into the belt loops of my jeans and yanking my butt tight against his groin. He angled us over the altar at a slight incline, his chest hot against my back and his lips closing around the shell of my ear.

My body reacted instantly, heating, pulsing. I arched my spine and pushed back against his cock.

He caught my hips and set them away, controlling the pace of this, making me wait. His mouth went back to my ear, my neck, teasing and kissing sensitive skin, seducing with the rush of his breath.

"I'm nervous," I whispered.

"You should be." Standing behind me, he opened the fly of my jeans and lowered the zipper. "I'm going to tear your pussy in half."

His huge hand sank into my pants, beneath my panties, fingers sliding over my clit and pressing into my folds. His other hand captured my throat, bringing my head back to his shoulder. All the while, his mouth continued to assault the sensitive spot beneath my ear.

Despite his verbal threat, my nerves subsided because he was so achingly gentle and caring and loving. By far the most beautiful, sensual

man I'd ever had touch my body.

He flattened my spine against him, working those expert fingers in my pants, playing with my slit and teasing my opening. The palm on my throat controlled my head, which he kept tucked against his own. The stubble on his jaw abraded my cheek as he nuzzled my face and neck.

Then he pushed two stiff fingers inside me.

My heart stopped. My legs gave out, and my lungs caved in.

I'd never felt more alive.

Everywhere I was, he was there, invading me with his heat, stroking me with his touch, his digits sinking through flesh, and his sensuality consuming my awareness.

He shoved my jeans and panties to my thighs and fingered me until I whimpered and moaned for release. Then he removed all my clothes and sank his hand back between my legs, torturing me.

Quivering and naked, I gripped the edge of the altar, staring up at the life-size crucifix of Jesus on the wall.

"I'm going to hell." I rocked my hips, riding the thrust of his fingers.

"Not without me." He nipped my jaw, his breath heady and delicious.

He surrounded me. Arms, hands, lips, and masculine need—he was everywhere all at once. My body reacted as though I was made for his touch.

Everything he did, every kiss, every caress, was a long, languorous expedition in seduction. Meanwhile, I just needed him to throw me onto the altar and fuck me six ways from Sunday.

I tried to hurry him along, but he wouldn't allow it. He pinned my hands when I touched his cock. He smacked my ass when I ground against him. I wanted to kiss him, but he wouldn't give me that, either.

He drew out his seduction in the most excruciating and delicious way possible.

He made me desperate to surrender to his will. So I held still, with a death grip on the altar, my feet spread apart, and my spine arched as he fondled, licked, kissed, and tormented every inch of my naked body.

I dropped my head back on his chest, absorbing his strength, the support of his arms around me, and his hands roving in tandem up and down my front, rubbing my abdomen, cupping and kneading my breasts, pinching my nipples, tracing my breastbone, and stroking the curve of my neck.

With his steely jaw against my temple, he rested the tips of his fingers on my lips and throat. My head lay back on him, my neck stretched and fully exposed, and my mouth open, accommodating heavy breaths.

He played with me like that, gliding those ten featherlight pads across my cheeks, into my hairline, around my throat, and back again. With each pass along my neck, he squeezed, strangling my airway and kicking up my pulse. Then the collar of those fingers became soothing knuckles, sliding over my mouth and cheeks again, taking time to circle my ears and trace the inner flesh of my lips.

The eroticism in every tiny detail was profound. By the time he turned me to face him, my body was boneless, my nerve endings overstimulated, and my pussy swollen, throbbing, and leaking down my legs.

With my back against the altar, he towered over me, crowding me, stealing all the air. He wore the expression of a man who was beside himself with need. He was feral with it, his pupils blown, lashes half-mast, breathing labored, and forehead dotted with perspiration.

When he grabbed my throat and took my mouth, I tasted the depth and intensity of his emotion. I heard it, the rumbling growl deep within his chest. I felt it, the tautness of tendons stretching from his neck to his thighs.

He was aroused and excited and overwrought. We both were.

His kiss turned frantic, his hands reckless. I tried to grab his belt again, and this time, he let me. I made quick work of removing it and opening the buttons on his shirt. When I reached the collar, he raised his chin. I removed the plastic piece and stripped him down to his boxer briefs.

His erection tented the fabric, pointing directly at the juncture of my legs.

“The realm of no return.” I gripped the waistband and met his eyes.

“If the church catches fire and the walls start bleeding...” His timbre roughened. “I’m still not stopping. Nothing is going to prevent me from being with you in the way I’ve only ever been in my dreams.”

I melted, reaching for his face. He smirked, reaching for his briefs. When the last of his clothes hit the floor and his cock bounced between us, he picked me up, perched my ass on the edge of the altar, and buried his tongue between my legs.

My nipples hardened, and my head dropped between my shoulders as he worshiped my body with all the devoutness of a Catholic priest. He

knew what he wanted and reached for me with open arms.

I reached, too, winding my limbs around him as he lifted me and laid me on the wood floor before the altar.

With my legs spread and the head of his cock pulsing against my core, he stared at me. I stared at him. We were both breathing through our mouths, panting, spellbound.

“Watch us, Tinsley.” He looked down.

I followed his gaze to the longest, thickest erection I’d ever seen. How that would ever fit inside was beyond me.

“Do you want this?” He smacked it against my soaked flesh.

“Magnus, you fucking prick.” I arched my back, half-snarling, half-laughing. “Give it to me already.”

He swooped in and hungrily kissed my lips, filling my mouth with his raspy promise. “You’re getting all of me, baby. There’s no going back.”

Pushing up on his arms, he stared into my eyes and pressed the head of his cock past my opening. His mouth hung open on a silent gasp as I moaned and writhed on the tip of his invasion.

And there, on the floor of the church before the altar, Father Magnus Falke broke his vow of celibacy and took my virginity.

Inch by glorious inch, he pushed, his body shaking above me, his gorgeous blue eyes never looking away.

The stretching burn swelled into enormous pressure. I shifted, widening my legs to accommodate his girth.

“Oh, fuck. Yes.” The words husked from the back of his throat, low and scratchy. “Spread that pussy. I’m gonna go so deep into that.”

And he did. He buried his full length, gently pulled out, and worked himself back in. Over and over, slow and steady, he trained my body to take his cock.

He hadn’t had sex in nine years, yet he held himself back, staving off the urge to plow into me like an animal.

His patience was such a goddamn turn-on, and I knew it cost him. His muscles were hardened bricks, his breaths shallow and taut. Tremors racked his whole body.

Swear to God, I felt him in my womb. I felt him all the way to my chest. I felt him in every corner of my soul.

Then I felt something different. Something changing. My core muscles unclenched, loosening, accepting, and the discomfort melted into staggering, overwhelming pleasure.

I wrapped my legs around him, his body like a marble altar as I pulled him closer, deeper. “Harder.”

He watched my face, kicking his hips, testing each stroke while adding more force. So fucking good.

Jaw locked tight, eyes afire with desire, his expression blazed with intensity, like tunnel vision, as if he focused exclusively on my reactions and nothing else existed.

The sensations he scattered through me were unfathomable. Especially once he got going and really let the reins out. His muscles flexed and bunched, his body a sensuous line of sex. He was built for this, hands down. The man knew how to fuck.

I fucked him back, grinding my hips and holding his magnetic gaze between greedy kisses. Our hips moved as one, skin slick with sweat, limbs entangled, and hands groping, caressing, loving.

I loved this.

I loved this with him.

“Slow down, slow down,” he whispered. “You’re going to come.” He pressed his lips against my blissful smile. “But not until I tell you.”

This was the man beneath the collar. He believed he was a monster. Maybe that was true when he was with other women. But he wasn’t like that with me.

A conversation loomed on the horizon that neither of us was ready to have. But right now, one thing was certain. He took me with every ounce of passion in his body, holding my gaze, kissing my mouth, gripping my throat, and grinding his hips. Magnus didn’t just make love to me. He made love to me harder than any man ever could.

Sinking my teeth into my lip, I focused on the friction of his skin against mine, the hard length of his cock rubbing across my clit, and his tight ass. My God, his ass was the best place to hold on. All those contracting muscles, like boulders grinding beneath my palms, had a wicked effect on my libido.

And his dirty talk only added fuel to the fire.

“Yeah, that’s it. Take it. Fuck it like a dirty girl,” he rasped, his voice seductively dark. “Goddamn, look at you.”

I could only imagine what I looked like. A wanton creature with her legs splayed open and her tits bouncing and her eyes shining with infatuation, adoration, and maybe, if she was stupid enough, love.

“You’re mine, Tinsley. No one’s going to touch you again. No one but me.” His thrusts deepened, growing harder, punctuating each word with ferocity. “You belong to me. No one else. Mine, Tinsley. Fucking mine. Do you understand?”

“Yes. Always.”

I meant it. No matter what happened, no matter who I was forced to wed, I belonged to Magnus Falke from this day forward.

The air changed with his declaration and the direction of my thoughts. It thickened, deepened, and our bodies came together in a more profound way, fusing on a soulful level that transcended the lust burning between us.

Each thrust felt like an expression, an extension of something growing beyond our flesh and bones. I felt my world expanding, and where I’d once only known loneliness, I now felt warmth and soul-deep happiness.

His hand found mine and held it between my breasts with our fingers entwined.

Then he kissed me, looked directly into my eyes, and growled, “Come with me, baby.”

His will was my command. God knew I could come just from the sound of his voice. As he bore down and thrust with the perfect pressure and rhythm, I dove into his gaze and right off the cliff, soaring with him, moaning with him, and falling with him. For him.

“Tinsley, fuck. Oh, God, fuuuuck.” He slammed to a stop, buried to the hilt, and dropped his head back, roaring my name.

That strong jaw worked as he came, his muscles straining and body shaking. I was so entranced by the glorious sight of him I forgot to fill my lungs.

“Breathe, gorgeous.” His mouth covered mine, his tongue licking lazily.

Once we both floated back to the ground, he let his flaccid cock slide out of me, only to replace it with two fingers.

“Have you missed any pills?” He circled my opening, tormenting and arousing sensitive tissues.

I shook my head.

We'd never talked about this, but of course, he knew everything about me. I was on the pill to help regulate my heavy bleeding, and he had to sign off on all the medications that came into the school.

He pushed his fingers inside me, scooping and pressing as if to keep his come from falling out.

"You're such a caveman." I flopped a leg over his thigh, enjoying the view of him playing with my body. "I want to do it again. Unless, of course, you can't? What's the recovery time for old men? Will you be needing Viagra?"

In a blur, he was on me, tearing his teeth into my boob and wrenching a howling scream from my throat.

"We're leaving." He kissed the bite mark, watching me.

"Back to your rectory? I don't want to stay in the dorm. I have a couple of weeks with you and—"

"We're leaving the campus." He stroked a thumb across my lips. "I'm taking you into the mountains."



CHAPTER 31

MAGNUS

VERY FEW RESIDENTS hung around the village during the holidays, but I couldn't risk anyone seeing me leave with the youngest Constantine daughter. So I put her in a cab and sent her into the White Mountains without me.

Then I waited an agonizing three hours.

During that time, I could've changed my mind. I could've made a dozen different choices that didn't fuse her fate with mine. But I didn't. I couldn't. This was happening. Not because I'd planned it. But because it was destined. We were inevitable.

I hadn't been called to be a priest.

I'd been called to be *hers*.

Whether this was kismet, God's will, some divine decree, or a fucking cosmic alignment, I didn't care. I didn't need an explanation to be with her. Just like I didn't need an explanation to breathe. I did both by instinct.

No one in the village witnessed her departure, and three hours later, no one was around to see me leave, either.

I sent texts to Crisanto and a few faculty members, letting them know I'd decided to go to my cabin for the remainder of the break. Not unusual since I spent the summers and most holidays there.

On the way, I stopped in a small New England town and picked up a couple of weeks' worth of groceries.

A couple of weeks with her all to myself.

My dick was already hard, and it stayed that way through the one-hour drive.

The onset of dusk shrouded the winding, heavily wooded road in darkness. But I knew every turn and incline. I'd bought this land nine years

ago and renovated the timber-frame cabin. At that time in my life, I needed the isolation. I hadn't trusted myself around people and didn't know how I would fare as a priest.

As it turned out, the collar hadn't fixed the cruelty inside me. But it had taught me how to control it.

I navigated the car onto the final dirt road and drove carefully along the steep hill to the cabin. The moment I parked and turned off the engine, the front door opened.

She stepped out, hovering over the porch like an angel.

Goddamn. I was so fucked.

She was the princess of Bishop's Landing, born of rolling green lawns and blood-soaked money. The Constantines had maintained their monopoly through generations of inheritance, nepotism, and intermarriage between ruling families. But the woman on my porch wasn't like them. She didn't fit.

She was too pure. Too celestial.

Illuminated by moonlight, she was a chorus of pearlescent hues from her golden hair to her snow-white skin.

As she sauntered toward me through the snow, my fingers tightened on the steering wheel, my eyes tracking her alluring form. She'd changed into a thin shirt. No bra. The frigid chill vaporized her breath and turned her nipples into sharp little bullets beneath the blouse.

I was gobsmacked by her. Staggered. She floated toward me like a tiny body of fairy dust from heaven, burning with incandescence as she entered my cold dark atmosphere.

She was the shooting star in my life, appearing as a streak of light in the night, compelling me to make wishes and never take my eyes off her.

When she reached my door, I climbed out and touched her parted lips, aching to kiss her.

"Where's your coat?" I shrugged out of mine and wrapped it around her.

"Where's your collar?"

"I'm off duty."

"Does that mean no bossiness while we're here?"

"Didn't say that." I opened the trunk and started unloading groceries.

"What about church? You left the Bible behind, too, right?"

"Didn't say that, either."

“Oh, good.” She pursed her lips. “I was afraid we might actually have fun while we’re here.”

“Get inside before you catch a cold.”

“Okay, Boomer.” She loaded up her arms with bags of food.

“Call me a Boomer again and—”

“Boomer.”

She took off, but not before I slammed a palm across her ass hard enough to make her scream.

The cabin’s open floor plan, two-story ceilings, and well-placed windows provided views of the surrounding mountains from every room. It had the same basic structure as my private rectory—kitchen, sitting room, bathroom, bedroom—just on a grander scale.

She followed me from room to room as I put away groceries and checked the heating and water systems.

“When you said *cabin in the mountains*, this wasn’t what I pictured.” She paced along the windows, staring out into the dark. “I imagined the Unabomber shack or something equally...psychotic.”

Without comment, I tossed logs into the stone fireplace and gathered the kindling.

“There’s a river running down the mountain back there.” She jabbed a finger toward the rear door, her voice rising octaves. “With multiple beaver dams. There are whole families of actual beavers living just a few feet from your back porch, and they’re not afraid of me. I sat right beside them, talking to them while they gathered twigs and roots.”

My lips twitched. I knew she would love them.

“While I was waiting for you, I explored the property.” She leaned beside the fireplace, studying me. “There are paths everywhere. No other cabins. In just one hike, I saw deer, otters, a raccoon, red fox, and peregrine falcon.”

“We’re in the mountains, Tinsley. In a protected area near the state park.”

“How much land do you own?”

“One hundred acres, give or take.”

“With snow-plowed roads, unparalleled views, and a cabin that’s been upgraded with modern utilities. This place is worth a lot of money.” She

narrowed her eyes. "I thought your vows were obedience, chastity, and *poverty*."

"Priests don't take vows of poverty anymore. We own houses and pay taxes just like the next guy."

"How much money do you have?"

The fire ignited, and the flames spread across the logs.

I stood, facing her. "A lot."

"How much is a lot?"

"Does it matter? Does it change the reason you're here?"

"No, I mean, I knew you were a self-made billionaire. But you never mentioned a cabin in the mountains, and I'm just wondering how many other things I don't know about you."

There was a lot she didn't know. A lot of ugly things. I intended to tell her everything while we were here. She needed to do some soul-searching, and I wanted her to have all the information.

But right now, I didn't want to think about the ugliness of my life. I'd waited four months to indulge in her perfect beauty, and I was coming to her after a nine-year dry spell. I was beyond ravenous.

"You're gorgeous." I prowled toward her.

"You're evasive. And I guess you're not completely awful on the eyes." Rather than retreating, she stepped into me and slid her hands around my hips. "This ass, though."

She squeezed my backside with bold fingers.

I touched my mouth to hers, basking in the feel of her pouty lips. They pushed out, begging to be sucked and licked and bitten. I ran my nose alongside hers and skimmed my hands down her shoulders. Simply touching her like this put me in such a state of warm, peaceful happiness. It didn't feel real.

None of this felt real. Apart from the supple scoops of tits in my hands with their pointy, irresistible peaks. These were definitely real. And her soft mouth against mine. Didn't get more real than that.

I banded an arm around her lower back, hauling her close as I captured her lips, devoured her breath, shredded her clothes, and fucked her against the wall.

Her moans vibrated against my throat, and my cock stroked in and out, the friction slick and hot and so damn addictive.

I moved her to the couch to leverage my thrusts, but I couldn't get deep enough. I tried to bury myself inside her—my body, my entire being—digging harder, heavier, with more and more intensity.

“Fuck, Tinsley.” My breaths were choppy and feverish, our tongues tangling outside of our mouths, our lips coming together, parting, and colliding again. “So fucking good.”

“Is it always this good?”

The heat of her pussy molded to me like a wet glove, made for me. The shape of her body fit snugly in the bend of mine, flexible, pliable, the perfect size for me to position and carry around. Her eyes never left mine, staring so fucking deep into my soul I felt stripped, exposed, and vulnerable in a way I could never let myself be with anyone else.

“No.” I stroked my knuckles along her beautiful face. “No, it's never felt like this.”

Her sexy softness absorbed my hardness as I took her in every room of the cabin. On the rug before the fireplace, bent over the kitchen table, against the shower wall, and in my bed, I tore her pussy in half. And I was only getting started.

I would never get enough of her. Not in two weeks. Not in a lifetime.

Hours later, we lay in bed, naked, exhausted, serene. She sprawled facedown across my chest, her cheek on my heart and her gaze angled toward mine. We stared at each other for the span of a timeless moment, floating in postcoital bliss.

As her eyes grew heavy and her blinks grew longer, I knew I was losing her for the night.

I reached over and shut off the light, my hand going to her long, satiny hair, stroking from roots to tips. “You're my first.”

“Your first girl to pee on the floor.”

“Yes.”

“Your first to bleed on her shoes.”

“Yes.”

“Your first tampon insertion.”

“Yep.” I felt my lips quirking into a smile, such a strange sensation.

“Man, I'm classy as fuck.”

“You're classy, even under duress. Especially then.”

“Thank you.” She kissed my chest, her voice drowsy. “I’m your first orgasm in a church.”

“First and second.”

“Oh, yeah. The confessional blow job.” She sighed. “That was so hot.” Her eyes drifted closed. “What else?”

“You’re my first overnight.”

“Like the first girl to sleep beside you?”

“The very first person.”

“Ever?”

“Ever.”

“Happy to help you work through those commitment issues,” she murmured, snuggling closer to my neck.

I hadn’t allowed this level of intimacy with anyone, not even my regular lovers. When I wasn’t fucking a woman, I didn’t want her around.

The soft rhythm of her breathing told me she’d fallen asleep. The warmth of her body atop mine lulled me to follow her.

“You’re my first.” I ran my fingers through her hair, content to my marrow. “And my last.”



CHAPTER 32

MAGNUS

I WOKE WITH her mouth on me.

A warm, delicate mouth sliding along my semi-erection, making me harder with each breathy pass.

“You were soft just a second ago.” Tinsley pressed her smile against the crown, her golden hair shining in the morning light. “I woke early just to get a glimpse of the rare sighting. You were so adorably squishy and limp —”

“Less talking, more sucking.” I shoved her face down and thrust.

She choked and came up for air, laughing. “And big. I was going to say that but—”

I pulled her mouth down on me again while driving my hips. Christ Almighty, my balls drew up. My toes curled, and my back bowed as overwhelming pleasure surged through me.

She took my cock to the back of her throat as if it were her penance. Then she took me between her legs as if I were her lifeline.

Tinsley Constantine didn’t need any man to save her. But I wanted to be the one she depended on. Everything inside me demanded I provide for her, starting with a means of escape from the future her mother was scheming.

With the right incentive, I could be a tenacious son of a bitch. And Tinsley was that incentive. It was in my nature to keep a firm hold on her. She would call it controlling. I called it protective. Maybe possessive. Definitely jealous.

No matter my flaws, I was going to take Tucker Kensington out of the equation. The thirty seconds he’d danced with her was all he would ever get. She was *my* charge for five more months, and I would use those months to sort out her future.

After we came down from our groaning, explosive orgasms, I gathered her in my arms with my back against the headboard.

“Best night’s sleep ever.” She straddled my lap, her face nuzzling my neck and the light tickle of her lips softly kissing.

“Agreed.”

“And morning sex. Another first for you?”

“Yes.”

“What a sad life you’ve led, Mr. Billionaire Bachelor of New York.”

“I’m making up for it with you, Your Highness.” I slid a hand along her beautiful backside and teased the tight ring of muscle between her cheeks.

She clenched, whimpered.

“I’m going to violate this hole before we leave the mountains.” I dragged her leg farther around my hip, opening her for my touch.

“You’ll have to work me up to that.”

“I will. That’s a promise.”

“It’s Christmas Eve.” Her eyes twinkled.

“What do you want to do?”

“You.”

“That’s a given. What else?”

“Let’s go on a hike.”

We showered, ate breakfast, and made out on the couch like it was our first time. Then we laughed at ourselves, pulled on our boots and coats, and I gave her a tour of the property.

The snow-covered mountain terrain sparkled like diamonds in the sunlight. With her gloved hand clasped in mine, I led her along the main trail to my favorite spot.

When we arrived, she stood on the alpine bluff overlooking the icy river below. Cloaked in evergreens and crowned in white, the mountain peaks rose like tributes to the blue-slate sky. With wildlife galore and the panoramic vista stretching from north to south, there was no better view in the world.

Except the one I had.

The chilly air pinkened her cheeks and frosted her breath. Her white knitted hat failed to contain the wild tangle of hair around her shoulders and arms. She was all bundled up in puffy outerwear and heavy snow boots with a smile so wide she out-glowed the sun.

“What?” She touched her chin to her shoulder and bit down on her grin.

“You’re painfully beautiful.”

“Thank you.” She pulled in a slow, deep breath as if inhaling my words. Her gaze turned back to the view, and her demeanor shifted, growing sober. “We need to talk.”

“I know.”

“Okay.” She picked at a string on her gloves, thinking, possibly stalling. “You and me, what we’re doing, how does it affect your relationship with God?”

“That relationship is in the shitter at the moment.”

“Can you fix it?” She took a breath. “Do you want to fix it?”

“Yes. Maybe. I need to do some serious introspection.” I touched a gloved finger to her temple and brushed a lock of hair from her face. “Understand me, Tinsley. You’re not the cause of this. I’ve had an on-again, off-again relationship with God my entire life. I believe. Then I lose my way. Then I believe again. Then I question everything. Back and forth, it’s a vicious cycle. My faith has never been easy, and it never will be. Relationships with me aren’t easy.”

“You’ve been friends with Crisanto for a long time.”

“He’s the only one. When I moved to Sion Academy, I chose to live alone rather than in the main rectory with Crisanto. I didn’t want to destroy our friendship.”

“What about your parents? Why aren’t you spending Christmas with them?”

“I destroyed that relationship when I was in my twenties. We fought about religion. They wanted me to go to church. I had other priorities. It was a constant battle that strained every interaction.”

“Even after you became a priest?”

“Especially after. They didn’t want anything to do with me until I became a priest. Fuck that. I didn’t choose this life for them.”

“Why did you? Become a priest?”

“The short answer...absolution.”

“Absolution from what?”

“Hurting people. Hurting women.” The cold air felt suddenly colder, sinking into my bones. “I did something, and I need you to...”

Not run.

If she ran, I would chase her.

I paced to a fallen tree and brushed the snow off a section to sit on. Then I lifted her, surprising a yelp out of her. With her legs wrapped around me, I straddled the huge trunk. She sat before me, face to face, her thighs draped over mine and arms resting on my shoulders.

Much better.

“I know you’re about to tell me your experiences with other women.” Her gaze searched mine. “I can see the dread in your eyes.”

I nodded, my pulse hammering.

“I don’t want to hear it.” She laughed without humor. “I don’t even want to think about it. But first I need to know, before you tell me anything... Have you ever been in love?”

“No. Never.”

“Okay.” A shaky breath left her. “Any long-term relationships?”

“No.”

“And you already said you’ve never been monogamous.” Her dainty brows pulled together.

“The man I was before only cared about himself. I didn’t have relationships with women. I had *arrangements*.” I gripped her thighs and monitored her expressions. “I tied them up, humiliated them, whipped them, choked them, cut them, burned them—”

“Wait. You cut them? And burned them?”

“Yes. They were willing. I needed to hurt them to get off, and I chose women who wanted that sort of thing.”

“When I saw you holding my bloody underwear in your bathroom, I knew something was different about you. Blood doesn’t gross you out. It fascinates you.” Her voice lowered, and her eyebrows followed. “But you seem to get off just fine now without the pain and blood.”

“Yeah.” I leaned in and rested my forehead against hers. “I do. That’s all you, Tinsley. I craved it when I first met you. And I still crave it with you—spanking, choking, fucking the back of your throat. I love to play with you, but I could never hurt you the way I used to hurt other women. I only want to protect you.” I stroked my thumbs on her thighs, unlocking my deeper self with every word. “You make me a better man.”

“You should give yourself some credit. You spent the past nine years atoning. And besides, if all you did was have rough, *willing* sex, that

doesn't make you a bad person. Just means you're kinky."

"That's not all." I inched back, needing space to watch her eyes. "I used to flip businesses. I preyed on corporations that were going under, strong-armed the owners to sell, and after I fixed them up, I made a killing on the resale."

"I know."

"I often targeted women-owned corporations and used sex to manipulate them into selling. I did this for ten years."

"Jesus."

"I used those women. Sometimes they fell in love with me, and in the end, I left them penniless and brokenhearted."

"You were a misogynist." She made a sound of revulsion.

"No, I wasn't prejudiced against women. I hated everyone equally. I was a narcissistic asshole, obsessed with myself, my appearance, sex, money, and power, and I knew how to use all that to seduce women and grow exceedingly richer and more powerful."

"Always older women?"

"Always."

"Except I'm not older."

"I'm not the same man, and you're not those women. Everything about this is different. I've never wanted anyone the way I want you. I'm captivated by your beauty, your boldness, and your infuriating mouth." I smiled to myself. "I don't want to hurt you, use you, or take your money."

As the confession began to unfurl, I felt my energy weaving itself into hers, tingling, sparking, and rewiring me. I felt myself becoming part of the fabric of this woman. I felt her goodness, her purity, and it was fucking liberating.

"Thank you for being honest with me. It's hard to hear. Disturbing. But it helps me understand." She worried her lip with her teeth. "Do you think, if I'd met you back then, you would've treated me the way you treated everyone else?"

She wanted to know what was different now. What had changed? Was it me? Nine years of celibacy? Or was she the catalyst?

"Priesthood helped me. It taught me how to treat people better. I still crave erotic pain, but with you, it's manageable because my need to keep you safe far surpasses my selfish compulsions. Protecting you is my

compulsion. If I'd met you in my twenties when I was the worst prick in existence? I don't know. I can't imagine our relationship being any different. I'm instinctively drawn to you in a way I've never been drawn to anyone."

"I feel the same about you." She placed a kiss on my lips. "So what happened? You said you did something. What brought you here?"

"I met Amelia." My hands twitched on her legs, my stomach knotting. "She had a software company that she built from the ground up. I wanted it. I knew I could drastically improve it in sixty days and make a fortune on it. So I seduced her. She fell in love with me and eventually sold me the company, thinking we would end up together, and she would somehow still get to keep it."

Tinsley didn't move, didn't blink.

"She let me hurt her during sex." My mouth dried, my monotone scratching the air. "I knew she wasn't into it, and she knew I was fucking other people. I think that hurt her more than anything. But she wouldn't let go. She never told me no. She was desperate to keep me. So she endured my kinks and my philandering." Old guilt bubbled up, festering. "She had a congenital heart defect, which had led to a weakness in her heart. She never told me. She knew I would stop seeing her if I couldn't use her the way I wanted." I skimmed a hand down my face, sick to my stomach. "I didn't know."

"What happened?" She removed her gloves and clutched my fingers on her leg.

"I choked her during sex and sent her into cardiac arrest. She was bound and gagged and couldn't tell me. She died with my hands around her throat."

And my filthy dick inside her.

"Oh, Magnus, no." She cupped my face, her features twisting in grief. "Oh my God, I can't imagine what that must've been like for you."

I hated the pity in her voice, in her touch, in her damn bewitching eyes.

"I cared nothing about that woman. I could barely tolerate her beyond a quick fuck." I gripped her wrist, squeezing delicate bones. "Don't you dare feel sorry for me."

"I don't." Her expression hardened, and she ripped her arm away. "But I do *feel* for you. It was a terrible tragedy that you've been carrying around

for nine years. A tragedy that wasn't your fault. You didn't know. You weren't charged, right?"

"There were no criminal charges. Her family threatened to sue me in civil court, and I paid them off. I also gave them her corporation, which they ran into the ground. I buried the whole thing. Made it all go away. Not even your family can dig it up."

"Was Amelia your last...? Was that the last time you had sex?"

"Yes."

She pulled in a deep breath, and her eyes lost focus. It was a lot to process. God only knew what she thought of me.

"No wonder you've been celibate all this time," she murmured. "It's an awful thing to reconcile, and you're already emotionally constipated. Even if you cared about Amelia, you wouldn't have two tears to rub together for her."

"Tell me what you really think," I deadpanned.

"I think that absence of emotion indicates deep pain. If it's too vast to manage, you freeze it. It's like shock that never goes away. I think you have to let that go and let yourself feel before you can even consider having a relationship. Not that I'm suggesting that's what we're doing here. But you can't even live with another person, so..."

I could live with her.

It wouldn't be much different than what we'd been doing. Hell, we'd been inseparable for four months. The number of hours we spent together every single day—bantering, flirting, arguing, kissing—was incomparable. Married couples didn't even do that.

Whether she liked it or not, we were already in a relationship.

I'd never cloistered myself with another person the way I had with her. I didn't even realize I was doing it at first. The one-on-one tutoring during the day. The punishments every afternoon and night. I'd kept her to myself, monopolizing her. But rather than ruining our relationship, our time together had only deepened our bond.

I was in a romantic relationship with her long before it became sexual. And now she knew all my secrets. She knew me better than anyone.

Amid the evergreens, between the snow-hardened earth and the expansive blue heavens, my heart beat stronger than it ever had before. A weight had been lifted, and my angel wasn't running.

Not yet anyway.

She was contemplative, quiet, her gaze skipping from my eyes to my hands on her lap and back again.

“Let’s head back.” She untangled her body from mine and stepped back, turning toward the trail.

We hiked back in silence, the snowy path rising to meet our boots and the bright sky illuminating the way. I watched her with new strength and inner peace as she marveled at every animal track, cloud formation, and bird within sight.

When we reached the cabin, I pulled her toward the door. But she dug in her feet and withdrew her hand.

“I’m going to hang out with the beavers for a while.” The look she tossed me was *not* an invitation to join her.

If I were a sensitive, insecure man, I would’ve taken issue with it. But I wasn’t. She could have her space. I respected her need to absorb my hideous past, and I would give her time. So long as she didn’t run. That would be a mistake.

I caught her by the throat and yanked her against me, relishing the spark in her eyes and the snag in her breath.

“I’ll make dinner.” I hauled her mouth to mine, kissing her until she melted. Then I set her away with a whisper in her ear. “Behave.”

I left her there, headed to the kitchen, and made lobster pie, with tail, claw and knuckle meat, smothered in a buttery cracker and tomatillo dressing. It took me an hour to prepare while following an online recipe. My mouth watered as I slid it into the oven, but my attention stayed on the windows.

While I sliced cornbread and cleaned up, I watched her. Thirty feet from the house, she sat on a rock beside the stream, her unfocused eyes on the beaver dam, her expression lost in thought.

With nothing left to do in the kitchen, I moved to the sitting room and lowered onto the couch with a rosary. Then I occupied my mind and heart with prayer, my fingers rhythmically moving along the sacred beads, my whispered words like a chant.

I’d sought priesthood for the wrong reasons, but it had been the right decision. After nine years in this life, I felt reformed, absolved, healed.

After nine years, I felt my path taking a sharp turn and shooting in another direction.

When the back door opened, every molecule in my body sizzled to life. I kept my head bowed over the rosary beads, eyes closed, mouthing the prayers, even as all my senses followed her approach.

The sounds of her coat, hat, gloves, boots—everything hit the floor. A second later, I felt her standing before me, silently waiting for me to finish. I let her wait, focusing on the words. Then I set the beads aside.

Her arms hung in repose at her sides, her stare bright and flinty. “You’re a hard man.”

A hard man to love.

She didn’t have to voice the subtext. It shouted from her eyes.

“Does God forgive the person you were?” she asked.

Nine years of Crisanto’s counseling made it easy to answer. “Yes.”

“Do you? Do you forgive yourself, Magnus?”

I’d never asked myself that question, and I paused, poring over the significance before landing on the truth. “Yes.”

She nodded slowly, tugging on her bottom lip before stepping forward and setting a knee on the cushion beside me. I leaned back, inviting her to climb on, and she didn’t hesitate.

Straddling my hips, she circled her arms around my neck, enveloping me with the fragrance of lemon drops, fresh snow, and mountain air.

“I’m still not afraid of you.” She brought our foreheads together. “Do you know why?”

“Tell me.”

“You encourage me to learn and go to college. You trust me with the secrets you hide from others. You hold me when I cry over opossums. You clean the gym floor in the dark when I bleed. You crave my humiliation in private, but you never degrade me in front of others. You raise me up. You protect me. You’re my constant defender.” She ghosted her lips across my cheek. “So no, I’m not scared of you. I treasure you beyond words.”

Shameless bastard that I was, I grew hard. Rock-fucking-hard beneath her sweet little ass. I wanted her. I needed to bury myself inside her and make her come on my cock again and again and again.

“But hear this, Magnus Falke.” She gripped my jaw, eyes flashing. “If you ever cut or burn me, I will fuck up your world.”

“I have no doubt, Miss Constantine.”

“Do I smell lobster?” She grinned.

“Dinner will wait.”

I slanted my mouth over hers and eased my tongue past her teeth. Unrushed. Sharply focused. My lips anticipated it, needing her sweetness and magical aura that was unlike anything in the universe.

She was my greatest fantasy, shimmering with life and pumping blood through my cock. I craved her every breath, thought, and tight hole. Whether or not I deserved her, I was going to claim all of her tonight. Right now.

I put away the lobster pie and carried her to the bedroom, overcome with excitement and sexual longing. I felt it in the friction of our lips, the heat of our kiss, and the tremors in my legs. Everything shook as I laid her on the bed—muscle, breath, and heart. I was beyond redemption and didn’t care.

She was my enlightenment, my everything. She showed me how to have sex without pain and experience it on a whole new level. A lost-and-found, can’t-get-naked-fast-enough, all-consuming, soulful level. Without her, the world would never move again.

Within seconds, I stripped off our clothes. Our kisses turned messy, incapable of parting for air. We rolled across the mattress, moaning, hips grinding, wanting to fuck so badly. I was a starved animal, freed from my cage, and she was the sin racing through my veins.

But I forced myself to slow and take my time. With my lips and hands on her delectable body, I taught her what it meant to be worshiped by a fallen priest.

For the next hour, I memorized her. The image of her underneath me spun my breathing out of sync. She was stunning, beautiful, so goddamn perfect I wanted to spend the rest of my life at her feet in devotion. As I kissed and caressed her beauty, I was all instinct and emotion, desperate to have her. Not just her body. I was desperate for her love and long-term happiness.

Since the night we’d met, I’d been involved with her on a level that transcended every professional, emotional, and physical relationship I’d ever had. It began with our first interaction, involving a bat. Four months later, my attachment to her was vibrantly alive and demanding. I was

committed. Dedicated. It would terrify her if she knew how invested I was in our bond.

As I licked her pussy through her third orgasm, I felt her rapture as if it were my own. I tasted her exploding across my tongue, saw galaxies, and felt the spitting sparks of her aftershocks.

Oh, merciful God. I could do this all night, wrenching cries out of her while feeding upon the sweetest, most perfect dream.

My pulse tightened. I couldn't stop my pelvis from humping the bed. She had me so turned on I couldn't think straight.

Tracing the lines of her ribs, I crawled up her hot, little figure and plumped both breasts, weighing them in my palms, thumbs flicking the tips.

"You're flawless." I covered her with my body and sucked on her tongue. "Unreasonably so. You were made for me."

"Then stop teasing and fuck me." Her lust-heavy eyes flared bright, and a kitten growl chuffed past her lips. "I'm fucking dying here."

The impatient sound was so Tinsley. Always trying to take the reins—literally with her hands on my ass, pulling me tighter between her legs.

She had no idea how thoroughly and savagely I was going to fuck her tonight.

"You're not in charge." I braced my arms over her head, surrounding her, denying her my cock.

Mouths inches apart, we shared eye contact, heartbeats, and air. Our bond charged through us like an electric pull, our lips unable to bide the distance. We kissed, hot and deep, each touch of our tongues producing a sonic boom of sensation—always too much and never enough. We gasped together. We rocked together. And I died. And consumed. And died again. The perfect consumption and the death of consciousness.

Before Tinsley, I rarely kissed. I never enjoyed it. But this was an expression of our intimacy. With her tongue stroking in and out of my mouth, beckoning me, I gave her sharp flicks of mine, opening my jaw wider, clasping her head, turning her at will, and controlling how deeply I fucked her with my tongue.

Eventually, I ceased the torture and notched the head of my erection against her drenched pussy.

"I'm going to fuck you raw." My heart stuttered as I fisted her hair, angling her to look deep into my eyes. "I won't stop until I physically can't

fuck, and with you, my stamina is endless.”

“Do it.” She kicked her hips and went after my mouth, feeding me her tongue.

Kissing her feverishly, I gave her slit a few teasing swipes with my cock. Then I thrust, encasing the full length of my shaft in her greedy heat.

Time halted. Neither of us breathed. Impaled to the hilt, I held myself still, savoring the delicious feel of her before expelling a harsh noise, withdrawing, and pounding deep, over and over, establishing a rhythm.

“Oh, fuck.” My face found her neck, my lips licking and kissing.

The saturation of her moans aroused me as effectively as the tight clasp of her body. She was my addiction, my obsession, and as my hips rolled, so did hers, meeting me thrust for thrust.

“Fuck my cock.” I gripped her waist, lost in the fantasy. “You’re so fucking wet for me, grinding that hungry little pussy, trying to get more friction.”

She was tiny everywhere, and I filled her to capacity. There was no room to think, not a sliver of space or time to consider the wrongs. Too late for that. I was submerged in sensation, my brain exploding in joy. She was my only thought. My only need.

She breathed, and I had air.

If I’d been holding any part of myself back, it was all exposed now, wholly surrendered to her.

Rabid hunger clashed inside me. The piston of my hips didn’t let up as I moved beneath the force of my desire for her, fucking in free fall. She was so much smaller than me, and each time I sank deeper, harder, I feared I would split her in half. But her orgasm-loosened body gave around my invasion, yielding, taking all of me. Because she was mine.

I groaned against her gaping lips and stared into her oceanic eyes. We were locked at every viable point of contact, inseparable, fucking like this was our last night on Earth.

“You’re so fucking small. So tight and hot. I’m going mad with it—the incredible way you feel.” I dug deeper, pushed further, faster. My body had never felt this alive. “I’ve never wanted anything this badly, the way I want you. Jesus, you feel so goddamn unbelievable.”

I peppered her face in kisses as another rushing orgasm convulsed through her, seizing her breaths. I saw double vision, strangled by the

spasmodic clenching of her inner walls. My rhythm became disjointed, my balls tightening as my body tried to join her in the release.

Not yet.

With superhuman strength, I pulled out. She protested with indiscernible sounds as I lifted her boneless, featherlight weight and carried her into the bathroom.

“You didn’t finish.” Her lips trailed across my whiskered jaw, her chest heaving.

“Oh, princess. I’m only getting started.” I set her on her feet before the vanity. “Hold on to the counter.”

She was four climaxes in and seemingly drunk on pleasure as her heavy-lidded eyes roamed my reflection in the mirror. I helped her lean forward with her hands steady on the sink.

Then I angled her hips and fucked her through a fifth orgasm.

“What are you doing to me?” She moaned as I continued to thrust.

“Making this pussy as wet as possible.”

Christ, she was soaked, dripping down her legs and all over my balls. I gathered some of the wetness and smeared it around her tiny, clenching asshole.

With a whimper, she clenched harder, watching our mirrored images.

I continued to pound into her, riding her hard while sinking my thumb past the tight ring of her back hole. She was so relaxed, so fucking spent from the orgasms, her muscles released, welcoming me in. Just as I’d planned.

Working her toward another release, I replaced my thumb with two fingers. Then three. My attention fixated on her reactions, searching for signs of pain or objection.

“How does it feel this good?” She pushed back against my cock, both holes completely relaxed and open to me. “I feel so full and overstimulated, and I still want more. You’re like a drug, Magnus. That should scare me, right?”

“I’ll never hurt you.” I held her gaze in the mirror, fucking her with my dick and fingers.

But I would give her a little discomfort. Some pressure. A bite of pain. Nothing she couldn’t handle.

Taking this final hole was going to wreck me. It was so indecent and forbidden and fucking tight I was rocking with delirium just thinking about it.

I needed to come. Every nerve ending in my body screamed for relief.

Setting my lips on her throat, I bit down. She arched, crying out. I sank my teeth harder while slipping out of her pussy, removing my hand from her ass, and plunging inside her virgin hole on a smooth thrust.

Her mouth opened on a silent, airless scream. Her fingers lost their purchase on the counter, and she shoved her elbows into my ribs.

Then her ass locked up around me, squeezing so tight I saw stars.

“Wrong hole! Wrong hole!” Short bursts of whimpers escaped her.

“You have no wrong holes.” I grabbed her throat, holding her against my chest and trapping her lower body between my hips and the counter, with my cock seated deeply, deliciously inside her ass. “Breathe.”

“I can’t, you fucking asshole!”

“It’s *your* asshole, and damn me to hell, but you feel fucking amazing.”

“Get out of me! Oh my God, get out!”

“Calm down.” I held her still, stopping her from dislodging me.

“Why didn’t you warn me? You promised you would work me up to this!”

“Look at me.” I found her eyes in the mirror. “Had I warned you, you would’ve stressed about it, clenched, panicked, and made it unbearably painful for yourself. I worked you up to it by making you as relaxed as possible. Were you relaxed?”

“I was.” She squeezed her buttocks around me, stealing my breath. “But I’m not relaxed now. Fuck, Magnus. It’s too much. You’re too big.”

“But it’s not unbearable. It’s not more than you can handle. Take a deep breath. Good girl. Another. There you go. Keep breathing. Let your body adjust.”

While she concentrated on breathing, I reached around her and washed my hands in the sink. Then I ran clean fingers through the slick folds of her pussy, reawakening her desire.

“I won’t move until you’re ready.” I might die before then, but I couldn’t think of a better way to go.

“You’ve done this before.” Her eyebrows bent as she braced her hands on the counter, studying my reflection.

“Anal sex? Yes.”

Her jaw set.

“I used it as a means to inflict pain.” I caressed her beautiful breasts and flat tummy while kissing the side of her neck. “That’s not what this is. Your pleasure and need affect me more than my own. If you don’t enjoy this, we’ll never do it again. Understood?”

She nodded, and the tautness in her muscles shake loose on her exhale.

We stood like that, locked together, while my hands roved, my lips nuzzled, and her ass grew accustomed to my invasion. For long minutes, I remained somewhere in purgatory, hovering between the heavenly sensation and the hellish agony of not moving.

I focused on her breasts, tweaking a nipple, then its twin, caressing my way down her abdomen, and lower to the valley of my dreams, so wet and soft and pink, begging to sheathe my fingers.

My cock throbbed inside her back hole as I played with her pussy. I felt her loosening by the minute, stretching around me, accepting the pressure and fullness.

She angled her face toward mine, finding my mouth, kissing me hungrily, ravenously, until I heard the words that made my pulse thunder.

“I want this.” She pressed her smile against my lips and teasingly wriggled her ass. “I’m ready.”

My heart sounded like rushing water in my ears. *Oh fuck.* I might die.

Shaking from head to toe, I started to move. With my body mounted over hers and my chin on her shoulder, we locked gazes in the mirror.

“Take it, filthy girl.” I worked in and out of her with measured slowness, grunting, overheating. It felt so fucking good it hurt. “Take my cock. That’s it. I’m fucking that ass, baby. Goddamn, you’re squeezing me to death.”

“So much pressure.” She covered her hand over mine between her legs, touching herself as I circled her clit. “It’s indescribable.”

“Good indescribable?”

She nodded rapidly and gasped my name with each plunge. We were so messy, so unbelievably drenched, that we slapped and slid together.

“Faster.” She braced her feet farther apart and pushed back against me. “Harder.”

I went up in flames, my libido firing with her eagerness. Seeing the lust etched on her face and knowing she was into this was the ultimate arousal. Because I was so into fucking her, my need to be inside her a constant, urgent demand.

So I surrendered to it, letting my hips go in a feral unleashing, hammering, pounding, taking it all. I took everything. She was my everything.

“Fucking hell, take my cock.” I gripped her waist and pressed my thumbs against the dimples in her lower back, holding her in place. “Feels so goddamn good. Fuck it like it’s all you need. That’s it. Fuck, yeah.” I groaned, mindless with pleasure, and bit her shoulder. “You make me crazy. I can’t go an hour without fucking you.”

Our joined reflection was insanely erotic, writhing and frenzied. She looked like an X-rated angel high on ecstasy, our bodies moving as one, as animalistic sounds clawed from my throat.

The pleasure between my legs was unparalleled. I had half a mind to tie her to the bed and never let her leave. Her wetness covered my lowered body, and I wanted to rub it in and never wash it off.

I had a serious addiction to this woman.

I was addicted to giving her pleasure. Addicted to her kisses and the way they stole my sanity. Addicted to the gleam in her heavy-lidded eyes as I kissed along her neck. Addicted to her hungry little sounds as I fucked her toward another orgasm.

But even without the sex, I was addicted to her. I felt unhinged and wonderfully balanced. All I wanted was her.

I picked up my pace, moving with urgency. Faster, feverish thrusting. My dizzying thoughts distorted my control. It was too much pleasure, and she felt it, too. One of her hands moved from the counter to clasp my butt, her nails biting into my flesh, her cries loud and explosive.

It only spurred me harder.

“You sound so fucking sexy taking it in the ass.” With my lips at her ear, I nipped at her earlobe. “You love it dirty and hard in any hole you can get it.”

“Only with you, Magnus.” She gulped, trembling, holding my gaze in the mirror. “Only you.”

She came with a shrieking shudder that shook her tiny body. I pushed deep into her ass and pinned her to the sink, choking, heaving, and filling her with so much come I thought I would pass out.

I wanted it dripping out of her, puddling on the floor, and coating her gorgeous legs. Then I wanted to take her again.

“I’m dead.” She collapsed onto the counter, laughing.

I dropped my mouth to her spine, softly kissing as I eased from her body. The loss of intimacy was too much, so I hauled her up and pulled her chest to mine, joining our lips.

“You’re going to let me sleep now, right?” She encircled her arms around my neck.

“I have endless orgasms to give you.” I lifted her and carried her toward the shower. “You’re going to get them in every room of the house, on every flat surface. Then we’ll move on to the hundred acres outside.”

“Oh my God.” She moaned.

“Did I hurt you?” I set her on the seat in the shower stall, inspecting her flushed body. “I fucked you like an animal. Was I too—?”

“You’re perfect.” She lifted her pleasure-soaked smile to my mouth, kissing me lazily. “I love... I loved it.”

“Good. Because I’m going to live between your legs.”

I washed her. I loved her with kisses. Then I carried her back to bed and loved her with my body again and again and again.

I’d broken my vows and taken the virginity of my student. The youngest daughter of the Constantines. My day of reckoning would come. Until then, I would take profuse, unholy pleasure in the sin.



CHAPTER 33

MAGNUS

HIKING WITH TINSLEY in the mountains became one of the greatest pleasures of my life.

The hours we spent on the trails weren't about the destination. That time together was about bonding and learning and appreciating each other. It was about arguing and laughing and kissing.

I'd come to know her in depth at school, in the classroom, in the church. But seeing her among the evergreens and chasing her through the snow, I gained new perspectives.

Nature gave her a deep sense of wonder, like a salve for her mind, a place to rest her thoughts. She didn't belong in the city. She wasn't happy in a mansion. I couldn't even picture her in a classroom anymore.

This was her home, amid the mountains, rivers, beavers, opossums, bats, and falcons. This was where she belonged, and I was right here with her, absorbing the land, welcoming it into my lungs, knitting her to my soul.

Our footfalls became our heartbeats, the trees our cocoon. Here, safe in our private world, we formed a ride-or-die connection that thrived in the forbidden. It was raw. It was dangerous. It was our comfort. We floated in a sense of wakeful dreaming.

I spent two weeks with her in the mountains, and for the first time in my life, I felt no inner battle. No regrets. She was the greatest blessing heaven could've given me, and I wouldn't misuse or squander this gift. I would cherish her and protect her at all costs.

"Uh-oh." She lay on her side in the bed, facing me. "I see brooding eyes."

Neither of us wore a stitch of clothing, yet the only parts of us that touched were our gazes.

“My thoughts are pure joy,” I murmured.

“You know what’s pure joy? My silk pillowcase. Since your face is pressed to that cotton abomination, it’s no wonder you look so darkly menacing and grouchy.”

She said this while snuggling into her shiny ivory pillowcase, which was absurdly juxtaposed with my plaid flannel sheets. She was the only person I knew who would bring a fancy pillow covering to a cabin in the mountains.

It was also one of the few high-maintenance things about her. She didn’t wear makeup or paint her nails or fuss over her hair. But she was rather protective of her pricey undergarments. Whenever I ripped one, she turned feral.

She was a contradiction of her upbringing. A spoiled rich girl with integrity and a beautiful mind that she could put to use in a million different ways. I knew, whatever she decided to do in life, she would use that brilliant brain to make the world a better place.

I just needed to keep her safe until I figured out how to deal with her mother and Tucker Kensington.

“We need to discuss our return to school.” The words felt like sand in my mouth.

“Don’t be a buzzkill.” Her expression shuttered. “We have three days.”

“School resumes in three days. I need to go back tomorrow. I’ll send a car for you the day after. We need to stagger our arrivals to avoid suspicion.”

“No.” Sadness leaked into her voice. Then harder, firmer. “No.”

“Listen to me carefully.” I reached for her face, my fingers sliding into her hair. “We’re going to take every precaution possible. No more sneaking around.”

“What?” She clutched my wrist against her neck. “What does that mean?”

“It means that once we leave this cabin, we must return to a professional relationship.”

“That’s ridiculous. We never had a professional fucking relationship. What are you even talking about?”

She was right, of course. I didn’t know how we would maintain distance while spending every minute together in the classroom. But I refused to

fuck this up. It was her and me against the world, and we would win. End of story.

“I’m your guardian. I’ll stay with you. I’ll keep you. I’ll fucking roar for you. If anyone fucks with you, I’ll be their nightmare. I’ll burn down the goddamn world for you. But I can’t do that if I get caught.” My chest buckled beneath the gravity of my decision. “No sex. No touching. No risks.”

“For how long?”

“Until you graduate.”

As if the words slapped her, she reared back, flinching with pain in her eyes. “That’s five months!”

Hiking the trails with her had become one of my greatest pleasures, but it didn’t light a candle to the feel of her body—gripping, clenching, sucking, pulling—as I sank inside her.

When I’d taken her virginity in the church, I’d never come so hard in my life. But it was like that every time with her. We fucked like rabbits. My dick was chafed. Welts, bruises, and hickeys covered her flesh. I wanted my marks branded on her permanently as a declaration to all that she was mine.

But there could be no declarations. No public claiming. No one could know.

“When you’re in the residence hall, undressing or taking a shower, you can’t let anyone see these.” I ran a finger over the bites on her tits. “Until they fade, keep them covered. They’ll raise questions.”

“I don’t care.” Air expelled from her nose with little heat. She knew I was right. “Dammit, Magnus. We can be careful, just like before. Lock the doors and—”

“No.”

“It’s never going to work. You’ve lost your fucking mind. The very first time you put me on my hands and knees to scrub your damn floors—”

“I won’t. No more punishments. If you misbehave, I’ll put you in detention with another teacher.”

“Bullshit.” Her hand fisted on the bed between us.

“Try me, Tinsley. See what happens.”

Her jaw stiffened, and she looked away.

“I’ve been thinking about this long and hard. I’ve had some time to get used to the idea.” I caressed the delicate edges of her face, bringing her

gaze back to mine. "It won't be easy. It's going to be five months of pure torture."

After going without sex for nine years, a few months should be nothing. But it wasn't nothing. I'd had a taste of her. More than a taste. Depriving myself was going to be endless, excruciating hell.

"It won't be five months." She leaned up on an elbow and smacked my hand away. "You and I end here. Tonight. You made a decision not to touch me at school. Fine. But you don't get me after that. Have you forgotten my future has already been written, sold, and signed?" Anger impassioned her voice. "When you leave here tomorrow, you're leaving me for good."

I would never leave her. She belonged to me for always and in all ways. But she didn't need to be convinced of that right now. Not yet. First, I needed to get us through the remainder of the school year without a disaster. Perhaps her anger would help us maintain that required distance.

Once she was graduated and I had a solution for the Kensington-Constantine merger, I would make her understand how committed, possessive, and very fucking serious I was when it came to her.

I'd inflicted a lot of cruelty and endured a lifetime of loneliness to get here. I wanted her too badly to risk losing her.

The next five months were temporary.

"Trust me." I grabbed her curvy little hip and yanked her against me. "Do as I say, and I'll take care of everything."

"Are you going to fuck me goodbye? Is that what this is?" She bared her teeth and pushed away.

"No, Tinsley. I'm going to show you how much I'm going to burn for you until I have you again." I hauled her back and captured her mouth.

She fought me, but I didn't care. This was our last night, and if we didn't spend it joined together in every humanly way, she would regret it. We both would.

So I kissed her and put my hand between her legs and convinced her body to accept me. If she truly objected, she would have made it abundantly clear, probably with her fists. But despite her anger and dread, she didn't want to lose this precious time.

Within seconds, she fell upon me in a fury of claws and kisses. I devoured her desperation, longing, and dread as it exploded from her and into me. Without words, her lips confessed her fear about our impending

separation. And in that kiss, I assured her I would be with her, watching over her, even when I couldn't physically show her.

I'd never made love to a woman, but there was no other way to do this with Tinsley. I consumed her, idolized her, paid homage to all her perfections, and committed every heavenly sensation to memory.

With each stroke of my cock and sweep of my tongue, we spiraled from anger to devotion, from recklessness to delirium. We fucked until neither of us could move.

Hours later, I lay in a sheen of sweat, staring at the ceiling in the dark. She slept beside me, peaceful at the moment, but she'd fallen asleep angry.

Had the circumstances been different, I wouldn't have allowed her to go to bed mad. But there was no resolution for her grief. I would not compromise on this. If her family discovered what I was doing with their daughter, they would try to kill me.

I didn't want to deal with a henchman. I only wanted to focus on her. And my mind was already swimming with solutions for her future.

Carefully, I slipped out of bed without waking her, grabbed my phone, and shut the door on my way out.

In the kitchen, I poured a shot of whiskey and dialed my best friend.

"It's late," Crisanto said in greeting.

"Too late for a confession?"

"Hm." Rustling sounded over the phone. "Sounds serious."

"It's the most serious confession I'll ever give."

"I'm listening."

I confessed everything. But it wasn't an Act of Contrition. I wasn't sorry. I was deeply unrepentant and unashamed of every second I'd spent with Tinsley.

He already knew how I'd felt about her leading up to the holiday break. So when I told him she'd returned to the school and I'd taken her to the cabin, he gave no reaction. He'd probably been expecting this call for a while.

I told him our relationship had become sexual but not in the way I'd been with other women.

"You don't mistreat her?" he asked.

"No. I don't even have the urge. I adore her too much."

"That's...new."

“Yeah. All of this is new.”

I explained the nature of our relationship while leaving out some of the details. He didn’t need to know I fucked her face in the confessional and took her virginity in the church.

“Does her family suspect anything?” he asked.

“She’s been in contact with her brothers almost daily. They call constantly, checking on her. She’s convinced them she’s enjoying a quiet holiday with a few friends she made at school.”

“If they discover—”

“They won’t. I’m heading back to the school tomorrow and am discontinuing my relationship with her.”

“Can I be honest with you?”

“Always.”

“God has forgiven you for the things you’ve done. You don’t need to continue this cycle of self-punishment.” He paused, breathing in and out. “You’re not meant to be a priest, Magnus. It was never your calling.”

My heart thudded as his words sank in. The thought had always hung around in my head, but hearing it from his mouth made it more real.

“Do you love her?” Uncertainty laced his voice.

He didn’t believe I was capable of romantic love. And why would he? I was the king of pain and heartbreak.

Until her.

Pure heart, beautiful mind, bright soul. I loved her. How could I not? She was so very easy to love.

“Yeah. I love her with everything that I am.”



CHAPTER 34

TINSLEY

I FELT HIM in the hinterland between slumber and awareness. I felt his breath in the juncture between my neck and shoulder. I felt his lips in the rivulets of warm sunlight on my face.

Then I felt him ripping away.

The agony of his leaving came with a gnawing coldness that invaded every nerve, organ, and bone in my body. The instinct to chase him was enormous, but I fought it. I let him go without screaming and sobbing and demanding he stay just one more day.

I'd been so angry with him when I fell asleep last night. But this morning, I felt nothing but harrowing grief.

He was doing the right thing. The noble thing. He was protecting me, protecting *us*, and it hurt him as much as it hurt me.

I refused to make this harder than it already was.

So when he quietly, tenderly kissed me goodbye, I held still and pretended to sleep. I stayed in bed as he slipped out of the room. I didn't make a sound until the front door shut and his car motored away.

Air heaved in and out of my lungs, fast and heavy, the pain gathering and building until I couldn't contain it. When I finally let it out, it poured in an avalanche of ugly sobbing tears.

Other than the mornings he'd left me in bed sleeping while he attended Sunday Mass at the small church in town, we'd been inseparable. Having spent every second with him for the past two weeks, I'd grown accustomed to his company. I'd grown to depend on it and need him in a way I'd never needed another person.

I still had five months left with him. But I would never be with him in the way we'd been in this cabin in the mountains. He was going back to be

a priest, a teacher. And I would return as his student, a Constantine heiress, and the future wife of Tucker Kensington.

He'd told me to trust him, and I did. I trusted he would do everything he could to change my fate. But he wouldn't change my mother's mind. She would have him killed if he so much as mentioned he was interested in me.

He would already be dead if she knew he'd fucked me.

As the bed grew colder in his absence, I crawled out and got ready for the day. Then I cleaned the cabin, visited the beavers, and packed up my belongings.

It was late afternoon when I found myself sitting at the table, out of distractions, and missing him with every broken beat of my heart.

How was I going to see him every day and not touch him? How would I look into his eyes and not kiss him? How would I sleep in my dorm without his arms around me?

The only consolation was in knowing that I would spend every day with him until I graduated. Even if it was only on a professional level. We still had time. I had time to find a way to escape my mother's plans. Maybe one of my brothers could help me. I wasn't giving up.

I ran my fingers over the tennis bracelet on my wrist. At some point last month, Magnus had sneaked the broken jewelry out of my room and had it repaired. He gave it to me on Christmas morning along with an e-reader loaded with books. Dozens of books, manuals, and journals on every aspect of launching and running a business, as well as step-by-step guides to starting an animal rescue.

He'd done all of this before we'd had sex. He'd done it because he cared about me.

Did he love me?

We hadn't talked about that. We never said the words, even though I'd felt them every goddamn time I looked at him.

It was for the best.

But sitting here obsessing over him wasn't for the best, so I decided to go on a hike. As I pulled on my boots, the sound of an approaching car reached my ears.

I froze, listening. Had Magnus returned?

My heart hurtled to my throat as I raced to the window.

A black luxury sedan emerged on the road amid the trees. Not Magnus.

I recognized the make and model. My mother always commissioned the same kind of car.

Blood pounded in my ears, and every ounce of warmth drained from my body.

My mother was here.

In Maine.

At the cabin that belonged to Magnus.

She knew.

She fucking knew.

My first instinct was to run. Hide. But I had to see who was in that car. Was my mother alone? Or had she sent someone in her place? My brothers? Her assistant?

As I waited for the car to park, I stood out of view of the window, my brain running on overdrive.

She was here to retrieve me. Of that I had no doubt. But how did she know where to find me? Who told her? Did she know Magnus was at the school? Or was she hoping to catch us here together?

I had to play this cool. I would tell her he'd given me the keys and let me stay here by myself during the break. Or I could just not open the door at all. I could pretend no one was here.

My head pounded with tension as the passenger door opened. My heart stopped as Ronan climbed out.

The henchman.

"No, no, no." My muscles locked up, and everything inside me went numb.

Ronan only showed up when someone needed to be killed.

Thank fuck Magnus wasn't here. But it would only take seconds for Ronan to learn that and head to the school to finish the job there.

Tremors started in my chest and worked their way to my legs.

Think, Tinsley. Think.

A second pair of shoes stepped out of the car. I didn't breathe until I saw my brother's face.

Keaton would've been my first choice, but he'd already flown back to Europe.

It was Perry. My second choice. He might've been a spoiled mama's boy, but he was a thousand times more forgiving than my oldest brother,

Winston. With Perry, I had a chance to plead my case. But first, I had to figure out what he knew.

I stayed out of view as he strode to the door with Ronan on his heels.

The Irish henchman rested a hand on his hip beneath his suit jacket, his fingers against the gun holster as his eyes probed the surrounding woods.

Perry pounded a fist on the door.

I didn't move, didn't breathe.

"Tinsley!" He knocked again. "I know you're in there. Open up or we're breaking in."

Fucking shit.

I closed my eyes. Drew a deep breath. Then I crossed the room and let him in.

"Hey!" I hid my nerves beneath a smile. "What are you doing here?"

"You know why I'm here." He pushed past me, his blue eyes flashing with a rare glimpse of rage as he scanned the room. "Where is that son of a bitch?"

"Who?"

Ronan breezed by and disappeared in the bedroom.

"The priest." Perry spun toward me and cupped my face, his expression twisted in horror. "Tinsley. God. What has that motherfucker done to you?"

"If you're talking about Father Magnus, he was kind enough to let me stay at his cabin." I stepped back from his touch, arranging my features in a mask of confusion. "Why? What's going on?"

"He's not here." Ronan emerged from the back room.

"Where did he go?" Perry squinted at me.

"How the fuck would I know? I've been hanging out here since Christmas."

"Except you told us you were at the school, hanging out with friends."

"I thought you would all freak the fuck out because I was staying out here in the woods alone." I crossed my arms. "Guess I was right."

"No, Tins. We freaked the fuck out because of this." He tapped his phone screen and held it in front of my face.

My throat closed.

He had a photo of Magnus and me right outside the cabin door. It was taken yesterday after our morning hike. We hadn't made it inside before we

tore at each other's clothes. He'd fucked me on the porch against the house in the freezing cold. Best outdoor winter sex ever.

And my brother had a picture of it on his phone.

It was captured from far enough away that our nude parts were blurry, but there was no mistaking where Magnus's cock was buried.

"Who took that photo?" The question scraped past my dry lips.

"Where's the priest?"

"I'm not telling you shit until I know who was spying on me and why."

He pocketed his phone. "Ulrich took the pictures."

Our private investigator.

"Why was he following me?" I asked.

"Nevada Hildebrand contacted Mom a week ago and said she thought something was going on between you and your teacher."

"Of course, she did, that selfish, jealous, filthy fucking whore."

"Jesus, Tinsley." He stared at me like he didn't recognize his own sister. "What's happening to you?"

"Let me get this straight. Mother believed Nevada's allegations and sent Ulrich to Maine to investigate? I assume there are more photos where that came from?"

"Yes and yes."

"Who's seen them?"

"Mom and me. And Ulrich."

"Not Keaton or Winny?"

"No. She wants to keep this as quiet as possible."

No scandals.

Perry was her favorite child, her charming, agreeable boy. He was only twenty-one, but she trusted him to deal with the press and smooth over any bad publicity. So it was no surprise she'd sent him to retrieve me and stop me from making a scene while Ronan did the dirty work.

The henchman stood near the front door, tracking our conversation. Dark hair, dark whiskers, blue eyes, muscles in all the right places—Ronan might've been handsome if he weren't so goddamn scary.

"Have you seen the photos?" I asked him.

"No."

"But you're prepared to kill a priest because my mother ordered it?"

His glare probably sent a lot of necks shriveling into shoulders. But he wouldn't get any hunching or cowering from me. I had a lot of practice dealing with growly, glare-y men.

"Wait outside." I motioned at the door.

At Perry's nod, Ronan left, taking all the murderous air with him.

If I were facing my mother right now, I would concoct some sort of haphazard plan to save Magnus's life. But this was Perry. He was nurturing and protective and usually laid-back. The best approach with my brother was the truth.

"I love him."

His eyes bulged. "The priest?"

"Yes. I love Magnus."

"Oh, Tins. You think you do but—"

"Don't you dare *Oh, Tins* me." Frustration steamed from my pores. "I'm not a child, and I'm not a fucking moron. I'm smart, Perry. Smart enough to know who I fucking love."

"Okay." He held his hands up, trying to placate me. "Calm down."

"I can't. You know why? Because if anything happens to him, it will destroy me. Do you understand? I will *not* survive it."

"Why? Why him?"

"He sees me and understands me. He accepts me and defends me."

I paced through the room as the words rushed out. I told him how awful I was when I first came to Sion Academy, how I plotted to get expelled and put Magnus through months of hell. I told him how Magnus helped me with the opossums and cleaned up my blood at the Winter Formal. I explained how he kept his hands to himself for months and fought the pull we both felt down to our souls.

"He would jump in front of a bullet for me." My insides quivered with fear. "And I would do the same for him."

"Fucking hell." He raked his hands through his hair. "We don't have a lot of options here. We can't lose this Kensington deal. The Morellis are closing in, taking over everything around us. We need assets, resources. We need the Kensington holdings."

"If that's what this is about, why do you need to eliminate Magnus?"

"If he talks, if the Kensingtons find out you're mixed up with your teacher—"

“Magnus won’t talk. He has his own career to protect.”

“Does he love you?”

My heart stuttered. “I don’t know.”

“If he loves you, he’ll screw up this deal. I’m sorry, Tins. We have to take him out.”

I had one shot at this, one chance, one time to turn up, do what was right, own it, and protect the man I loved.

“Take me to the school. I’ll fix this without bloodshed.” My stomach sank to my feet. “Then I’ll marry Tucker Kensington.”

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CHAPTER 35

TINSLEY

PERRY AGREED TO do things my way.

On three conditions.

One, I would return to Bishop's Landing with him today and finish high school at home with a private tutor.

Two, my only priority going forward would be the long-term success of the Kensington-Constantine merger. As the wife of Tucker Kensington and heiress to the Constantine dynasty, I would be the mediator between the ruling families.

Three, I would never speak about my relationship with Magnus Falke. Under no circumstances could there be a scandal. It was a secret I would take to my grave, and I would never see or talk to him again.

These were the sacrifices required of me. No question, this would be too much for me to bear. But the alternative was worse.

I would endure just about anything to keep Magnus breathing and unharmed.

But all this hinged on him letting me go. It had to be a clean break. No contact between us ever again. And he couldn't tell a soul about us.

He'd already decided we wouldn't have sex or any sort of romantic involvement from here on out. Our goodbye was coming in just five short months anyway. We both knew what would become of me after graduation.

Ending our entanglement immediately would be easier. Less messy.

But I knew better. I knew he would fight for me with every vicious bone in his body.

I would have to hurt him. Convince him I didn't want him. There was no other way to accomplish this.

The gravity of what was about to happen didn't hit me until I was in the car with Perry and Ronan, speeding toward Sion Academy.

Anxiety and torment crashed together like a swarm of angry wasps in my chest. I felt like I was going to throw up.

Perry called our mother the moment we were on the road and updated her on the change of plans. He held the phone to his ear, but her impatient voice blared through the confined space.

"This is a better solution, Mom." Sitting beside me, he gripped my hand and held it on his bouncing knee. "No blood. No dead body. It's cleaner this way."

My stomach turned inside out, but I kept my expression neutral. Perry understood how deeply invested I was in Magnus, but we'd decided it was best to keep that detail from our mother. That meant hiding it from her henchman, who sat eerily still beside me.

While on the phone, Perry laid out the conditions I'd agreed to follow, which seemed to appease her.

"No," he said, glancing at me sidelong. "They're not in love. This was about a rebellious girl getting it on with her teacher. A slimeball teacher who was too fucking weak to resist her."

Whatever her response was, he tightened his grip on my hand, his thumb stroking my knuckles, reassuring me.

"I know, Mom." He sighed. "I swear. If he gives us any trouble, we'll go back to plan A." A pause. "Yep. Hang on."

He stretched across me, passing the phone to Ronan on my other side.

Ronan tilted his head, listening to my mother. Silence descended, broken up by the occasional bump of tires on the road.

"Understood." Ronan disconnected the call and handed the device back to Perry.

And that was that.

My mother would go along with this so long as I held up my end and Magnus didn't put up a fight.

I would have to give Magnus the most believable, persuasive performance of a lifetime. Anything less, and he would see straight through my lies.

As Sion Academy came into view, I started to lose my nerve. My chest hurt. My head spun. A sour taste overwhelmed my mouth, and a painful

lump took up residence in my throat.

“Where to?” Perry gave my hand a squeeze.

“He’ll be at the main building, his rectory, or the church. Let’s check the church first.”

The driver motored through the quiet village and parked beside the arched doors. Since school didn’t resume for two more days, most of the students hadn’t returned yet.

“Give us a minute,” Perry said to Ronan.

The henchman stepped out and shut the door.

Perry shifted to face me, wrapping both of his hands around one of mine. “I’m sorry, Tins. I know how much this is hurting you. I swear if there was any other way...”

“There isn’t.” I drew in a deep breath, steeling myself. “It’s not your fault.”

Once this was over and I’d made it to the privacy of my bedroom, I would let myself fall to pieces. Until then, I channeled my mother’s cold ruthlessness and held my shit together.

Perry and Ronan would be with me through this. I’d rather they weren’t, but Perry wouldn’t allow it another way. Probably a good thing. I didn’t trust myself to be alone with Magnus.

“Don’t ever fall in love, Perry.”

“No way.” He laughed, appalled at the idea. “Never.”

“When we go in there, no matter what happens, don’t interfere, okay? Magnus is going to be mad at first. Like scary mad. We’ll argue. But I’ll convince him to back off and let this go. I just need you to make sure Ronan doesn’t get twitchy with that gun.”

“He won’t interfere unless I give him the order or your life is threatened.”

“Okay.” Swallowing a jagged ball of dread, I opened the door and forced my feet into the church.

As expected, Magnus was here, kneeling in the front pew, head bowed and rosary in hand. Exactly how I’d found him nearly three weeks ago. Except this visit would have a completely different outcome.

I couldn’t look at the altar without thinking about our delicious desecration, so I kept my gaze averted, fixed on the back of his head.

He took his time finishing his prayers. Then his neck slowly turned, bringing his blue eyes around to lock on mine.

White noise flooded my ears, swallowing the devastating rupture of my heart.

I'd gone to bed last night angry and hadn't said goodbye this morning. For all he knew, I'd woken still pissed as hell. Pissed enough to make some rash decisions.

As he rose to his feet and faced me, his gaze shifted, marking my escorts where they stood by the door. I saw the recognition in his eyes when he looked at Perry, and again when his attention landed on Ronan.

I didn't have to make introductions. He'd told me he had his own investigator, whom he used to glean information about my family and everyone on my mother's payroll.

Yeah. I brought my mother's henchman into your church.

A flicker of hurt crossed his face, there and gone in a blink. But I felt it like a thousand knives in my chest.

This was the price for loving him, for proving I was strong enough to do what was needed to protect him. Our bond was alive and present, deeper and more tangible than ever. As the pain threatened to buckle my legs and pull me to the floor, therein existed the proof of my love.

"I called my family after you left this morning." A vulnerable shiver ran up my spine. "I told them about us. I told them everything."

His stare, hard and shatterproof, moved to Perry. Everything about Magnus was deadly still. Silent. Too fucking calm. Why wasn't he speaking? What was he thinking? If he could sense my lie, he gave nothing away.

He wore jeans and a blue Henley. Casual. Breathtakingly gorgeous. Extraordinarily attentive.

Oh God, this was going to hurt.

"It's time for me to leave. For good." My eyes burned. *Don't cry.* "There are some disturbing things going on with you that you need to work through, and I've been very clear from the beginning about what I wanted. I want to go home."

"You went home." His jaw turned to stone, his silken timbre mocking and mean. "You lasted what? Three days in your mansion before you came running back to me?"

“I came back because I knew you were here alone. It was the perfect opportunity to have sex and give my mother a reason to pull me out of this school. The problem is I enjoyed our time together in the mountains.” Truths mixed with lies, propelling me toward him, one foot before the other. “For a while there, I almost forgot I wanted to go home. Until you ended things with me last night.”

His razored eyes tracked me, stalked me, his features twisting in disbelief and anger.

He was mine, and I was giving him up.

It defied logic and reason and violated every instinct inside me. It fucking hurt. I couldn’t breathe beneath the weight of agonizing pain.

By some miracle, I kept the tears at bay and maintained my composure. “After I told my mother what we’ve been doing, she agreed to bring me home. Good news for me, but not for you. I’m sorry, Magnus, but she’s really unhappy about the situation. That’s why Ronan’s here.”

Magnus didn’t take his eyes off me. With a backdrop of burning candles, he stood with his feet braced apart, the rosary dangling from his fist, glaring at me like an angry god refusing to relinquish his virgin offering.

If he discovered the truth, if he knew the conditions I had to follow, the sacrifices I was forced to make, he would never let me leave.

“You’re lying.” He slipped the rosary into his pocket and turned as I brushed past, his feet following me, coming for me.

“Why would I lie? I called my family to come get me.” I swept out an arm, indicating Perry while pacing through the church. “I don’t want to be here. Especially knowing you intend to ignore me for the rest of the year. I have better things to do.”

He stayed on my heels, breathing down my neck as I fought for air.

“I don’t hate you, Magnus.” *I love you.* “I care enough that I don’t want Ronan to kill you.” *I would die for you.* “So I made a deal with my mother.” *I gave up my dreams so you can live to realize yours.* “I need you to cooperate.”

“No.” The fury in that one word burned with unholy fire. He grabbed my arm, spun me around, and shoved his face in mine. “Choose me.”

I am. This is me choosing you. I will always choose you.

When he met me, he thought I was nothing more than a shallow, spoiled, rich brat. I played on that now, hoping to convince him his first impression of me was correct.

“You can’t be serious.” I laughed against his mouth, taunting and cruel, as my insides shriveled and died. “You’re an old man, living a boring life in a lame little hovel. You drive a piece of shit, read the Bible for fun, and have one friend. *One*. You have nothing to offer me, and I have everything to lose if I choose you.”

“Tucker Kensington.” He released me, pivoted away, his breaths cleaving the air before wheeling back and jabbing a finger in my face. “You’ll lose him if you choose me. I’ll save you from that fate.”

He knew it wasn’t that simple. Goddammit, he knew I didn’t have a choice when it came to the Kensingtons.

Before I could argue that point, I was staring at the rigid length of his spine as he stormed away, heading back toward the altar.

I cut a sharp glance in Perry’s direction, his posture stiff and braced for a fight. Giving him a sharp shake of my head, I trailed after Magnus.

He stopped in the aisle and stared up at the huge crucifix on the wall, his gruff voice echoing through the church. “Sometimes, all you need is a leap of faith.”

I needed him alive. Unless faith was a bulletproof vest, I had no use for it.

“I don’t need faith.” I approached his back, my heart shrinking with each word from my mouth. “I have a trust fund. A lot of fucking money waiting for me at home. Security. Luxury. And family. That’s what I need.”

If he were to turn and show me his face, there would be no devotion left for me in those perfect features. I stripped it with my lies. I felt the completeness in his undoing before he spoke.

“I’ve accepted the discipline I’ve earned, but there is only so much correction a heart can withstand. You’re my greatest, most painful punishment, Tinsley Constantine.” He whirled around to face me, shoulders heaving, hands flexing at his sides as he roared, “Get out of my church!”

My feet stuck to the floor as my insides rattled and jarred loose with his outburst. The ratty scraps that held my heart together came apart, leaving a bottomless, blistering chasm.

I shook uncontrollably, unable to hide it. “My mother agreed to let you live, but only if you keep your mouth shut. If you tell anyone about us, Ronan will return for you.”

“Make this fact fast in your mind.” He surged forward, his gaze fracturing as he snarled in my face. “You no longer exist to me. Get out!”

His rage propelled me toward the door, but it was the hurt in his eyes that crushed my heart. The shapeless mass of flesh in my chest continued to beat, thundering unbearably. It beat with ferocious sorrow. It beat to the rhythm of his pain, drumming with chaos and irreparable damage.

Goodbyes were multifaceted things. Some were trivial and temporary. Others were harrowing and permanent.

As I walked away from Magnus Falke, this one shattered my soul, broke me into pieces, and left me for dead.

Being with him had been an ascension to heaven.

Leaving him condemned me to eternal hell.

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CHAPTER 36

TINSLEY

GIVING HIM UP hadn't been a choice. It was a duty. A moral obligation. An expression of love.

I'd saved his life.

Didn't matter how many times I reminded myself of this. I was angry.

I walked amid the cold rooms of the mansion, enraged at the universe. I sat through my daily homeschooling lessons, furious with a god I didn't believe existed. I spent every night alone, so infuriated with my mother I couldn't talk to her. Not that she noticed. We shared a residence but never saw each other.

In the weeks and months of missing Magnus, I couldn't come to terms with how things ended. I would never make peace with it. Losing him had changed me at a fundamental level. Hurting him the way I had turned me into this shell of myself. I would never recover. My existence was a sucking, gutting torment that just wouldn't quit.

I couldn't even begin to entertain the idea of being with Tucker Kensington. Not in a friendly way. Certainly not in a sexual way.

But if I refused him, Magnus would die.

If I escaped, if I walked out the door and ran, Magnus would die.

Not that I would get far. My babysitting bodyguard never left my side. My mother had assigned Galen—the middle-aged Black man who had driven me back to the school over Christmas break—to watch me day and night. He was so far up my ass that he'd moved into the bedroom across the hall from mine.

I had no privacy. No space to cry.

What a waste of a good bodyguard. I wasn't going to run away, and I sure as fuck wouldn't mess around with boys.

I burned for one man only.

I hadn't seen him in three months.

Three fucking months.

Daisy sent texts every week. I never asked about Magnus, but sometimes, she mentioned him in passing. She had no idea anything happened between him and me. No one knew. When Justin cleaned out my dorm after Christmas break, he told all the spectators I didn't like the school and decided not to return.

Magnus had a lot of time on his hands now. No more one-on-one lessons with me. No afternoon punishments. I hoped he was spending that time on himself, searching his heart and figuring out what he wanted.

More than anything, I hoped he wasn't hurting.

I hoped he didn't feel the suffering I felt over the past three months.

This was only the beginning. The beginning of the rest of my life without him.

I would never see him again.

Why couldn't I just die? I didn't want to take my own life. But sometimes, when I lay in bed, alone and hurting down to the depths of my soul, I wished for a terminal disease or a fatal lightning strike or a venomous spider bite. I wanted the choice to be taken from me. I just... I needed this pain to go away.

"You could graduate right now if you wanted." Mindy, my private tutor, scrutinized me over the lenses of her glasses. "You're very smart, Tinsley. You've already mastered all the material." She rested her forearms on the table in my father's study, tapping a pen against the surface. "Every day, I come in here and bore you to tears."

It wasn't boredom.

I was profoundly, inconsolably sad. The kind of sad that couldn't be medicated or counseled. There was no cure for heartbreak.

But she was right. I could take the tests now, earn my diploma, and be done with high school.

It would change nothing.

My future wasn't waiting on my graduation. It was waiting on Tucker. He would graduate from St. John de Brebeuf in May, spend the summer traveling, spreading his seed to women far and wide and living his male privilege to the fullest.

My mother intended to announce our engagement at her annual winter ball. There would be no proposal. No courtship. Just the contract, which was already signed and waiting for Tucker to settle down and step into his role.

“If I took the final tests now,” I asked without enthusiasm or care, “what would I do for the next two months?”

“You can get a jump on your college studies. You can study topics that interest you.”

I could read the books Magnus had put on my e-reader and learn how to run an animal shelter that I would never have. There was no place for that in Bishop’s Landing. I would be expected to attend parties, look pretty, and smile like a princess for our royal subjects.

I felt sick.

“I’m finished for the day.” I closed my laptop and slumped back in the chair.

Familiar with my moods, Mindy packed up her belongings and left. The instant the door shut behind her, I wept. Quiet tears coursed down my cheeks. I couldn’t help it. My misery was constant.

Galen sat on the couch, his gaze on his phone, probably sick to death of watching me cry. He saw it every day and never said a word.

Perry had mentioned he was retired military. That fit his hardened exterior. But he had a softness in his brown eyes. Compassion. I felt it as he rose from the couch and handed me a tissue. He carried them in his pocket just for me.

“Eat.” He pointed at my untouched breakfast on the table.

How could I eat? How could I, knowing it wouldn’t fill the emptiness?

“I said eat,” he growled, losing patience.

“I’m not hungry.”

“I’ve watched you lose weight for three months. Weight that you don’t have to lose. If you drop another pound, you’ll disappear.”

“I want to disappear,” I whispered.

I want to die.

“You’ll eat if I have to force it down your throat.” He slammed a fist onto the table, rattling the dishes.

This was the tenth time in as many days that he’d stood over me, threatening me with food.

He didn't know the source of my grief. To him, I was just a self-absorbed rich girl, wallowing in her mansion. My mother had probably tasked him with watching over my diet. I was supposed to look a certain way, maintain a perfect weight, and assume the ideal image of a trophy wife.

I'd agreed to do this. Crying and refusing wouldn't change a damn thing.

Holding his gaze, I scooped up a handful of dry cereal from the bowl and crammed the pieces into my mouth. I chewed with loud, smacking, crunching sounds that shattered the strained silence. Crumbs fell down my shirt and stuck to my chin as I fisted more and shoved it into my already full mouth.

"You're a mess." His lips bounced with a smile as he returned to the couch.

I wanted to share his amusement and dug deep to find a morsel of happiness. But it wasn't there. That emotion simply didn't exist. Not today.

Not the week after.

Not the month that followed.

I continued my lessons with Mindy. In the evenings, I read the books Magnus had given me. On the weekends, I put on sparkly gowns, did my hair, and went downstairs to show my face at my mother's hoity-toity parties. Sometimes, Tucker made the trip home to attend them.

At every opportunity, he tried to talk to me, corner me, and get me alone. Those were the moments when I appreciated Galen's presence. He intervened every time Tucker tried to touch me.

Four months after I left Sion Academy, my mother hosted her biggest party yet. A charity ball. All the schmoozers and socialites of Bishop's Landing were here—bankers, politicians, business moguls, and the like.

Perry led me through the ballroom with my hand tucked inside his elbow. I felt the floor through the soles of my heels. I heard the orchestra music flowing around me. But I wasn't really here. I was a ghost. Nothing more.

The air felt like water, bogging down my steps and drowning me in a sea of indifference.

"I want to go back to my room." I squeezed Perry's arm.

“Stay an hour.” He stopped and rested a knuckle beneath my chin, his expression creased with understanding. “Mom needs to see you making an effort with Tucker. Then you can leave. Okay?”

“Okay.” I felt numb.

“Here he comes. I’ll be within earshot.”

He strolled away, but I wasn’t alone. Galen’s strong presence hovered behind my elbow, my constant shadow always within arm’s reach.

Tucker sauntered right into my space, wearing a tailored black tux and his usual cocky smile.

“Jesus, Tinsley.” He prowled around me, soaking in my white lacy gown and releasing a low whistle. “You look fucking amazing.”

The dress clung to my body from chest to ankles. My mother commissioned all my fancy clothes in shades of white as if she were trying to convince the world I was innocent and pure. Perhaps trying to convince herself. As if she didn’t have photos of me getting wall-banged by my teacher.

The memory rose with a vengeance, catching me off guard. The feel of Magnus’s expert hands, the scratch of his whiskers, the dark, seductive scent of his skin—he was embedded in my senses.

My lungs burned for oxygen. I needed fresh air. My feet were already moving before I was aware.

“Where are you going?” Tucker chased after me, oblivious.

Minutes later, I stood outside on the vacant veranda, gripping the railing and burning up, despite the cool April evening.

Galen was silent behind me, but I knew he was there.

Tucker leaned a hip against the banister, staring out at the beautifully manicured lawn and twinkling lights of the mansions dotting the hillside below.

“Nevada Hildebrand was expelled.” He met my eyes.

“Big surprise.” I usually avoided all conversations about Sion Academy with him, but I couldn’t stop myself from asking, “Did she get caught with pills again?”

“No. She got caught with Father Magnus.”

A whooshing sound erupted in my ears. Bile surged to my throat, and my legs lost strength, buckling my knees. I swayed, wobbled, and Galen’s hand caught my arm, holding me upright.

“What’s wrong with you?” Tucker’s brows dipped into a V.

“I didn’t eat today.” I shrugged away from Galen’s grip, ignoring his disapproving glare. “Makes me lightheaded.”

“Let’s sit down.” Tucker motioned toward a nearby bench.

I didn’t want to sit anywhere with him, but my trembling legs took the choice away. I followed him to the seat.

“So I guess Nevada tried to fuck your old teacher.” He lowered beside me and stretched out his legs. “She gave him a little strip show and put her hands down his pants. Crazy, right? I mean, he’s a priest. That’s like so wrong on so many levels.”

A splinter wedged itself into my chest. “Sounds like a dumb rumor.”

“She sent texts about it to her friends, describing the whole thing in detail. He expelled her of course. I guess she lost her shit when she went home, tried to overdose on a bunch of opiates, and now she’s in a psychiatric hospital.”

Maybe I should’ve felt bad for her, offered up some prayers, and hoped for a quick recovery. But I didn’t. I couldn’t. I felt nothing.

Nevada was the reason my mother found out about my relationship with Magnus. She was selfish and vindictive, and karma had come for her.

Tucker droned on about his friends at school and the few short weeks he had left until graduation. My thoughts drifted to Magnus, replaying our time together in the mountains, surrounded by trees and snow in our microcosm of happiness.

I would never feel that depth of joy again, but I was so grateful for the memories. They’d carried me through four months of hell and given me escape when I needed it most.

Fingers slid over my lace-covered thigh, pulling me back to the present. Tucker rested his arm along the bench behind me as he glided his hand toward the apex of my legs.

I reached down to smack away his touch, but Galen beat me to it. With his hands fisting the lapels of Tucker’s tuxedo, he dragged Tucker off the bench and shoved him across the veranda.

“What the fuck?” Tucker threw his arms in the air. “Don’t fucking touch me!”

“You”—Galen thrust a finger at Tucker—“will not fucking touch her.”

“She’s going to be my wife. I’ll touch her if I damn well please. As a matter of fact...” Tucker stood taller. “Get out of here. There’s no reason for you to be here when I’m around. I’ll protect her.”

Galen stepped behind me, returning to his post without comment. I appreciated that. Even though I could take care of myself, it felt good to have him at my back.

I rose to my feet and met Tucker’s livid gaze. He might not want to marry me, but over the last few months, he’d made it no secret that he wanted to fuck me.

Me and every other girl he set his sights on.

There would be no fidelity in our loveless, sexless marriage. Not that I cared.

“I’m never having sex with you, Tucker.”

“Yeah, right. We’ll be married by next year.”

“You will never touch me. Not even when we’re married. Get yourself a mistress. Get a whole goddamn harem. I don’t fucking care. You will never share my bed. We’re business partners. Nothing more. Do I make myself clear?”

“You’re a fucking bitch.”

“Does that make you feel better? Does calling a woman a bitch make you feel like a big, powerful man? Because you don’t sound like one. You sound like a spoiled little boy who didn’t get to put his fingers in the honey pot.”

With a growl, he stormed back inside.

“Have a lovely evening, darling,” I called after him. “Can’t wait to see you again.”

With a broken sigh, I turned back to the railing and closed my eyes. I’d made my bed, and I would lie in it. I just wouldn’t be lying in it with him or any man.

The floorboards creaked behind me, sounding Galen’s approach.

“You just got a nice glimpse of my future,” I muttered.

He shifted, and the weight of his suit jacket fell around my shoulders, protecting me from the cold.

“Thank you.” I pulled it tighter around me, feeling his heat still trapped in the fabric.

I missed Magnus's heat, the cage of his arms, the warmth of his breath, the vibration of his voice, and even his bossiness. Especially that.

But what I missed most was his kissing. I closed my eyes, attempting to conjure the sensation. The feel of that first brush of his lips on mine. The drugging way his assertive tongue slipped past my teeth. The taste of his hungry mouth, opening, deepening, trying to consume me. God, I missed him so fucking much.

"There's more to this than that." I blinked, my eyes growing hot and achy.

"I know."

"What do you know?" A tear rippled down my cheek.

"I know your heart belongs to another."

My breath stilled, and I pivoted to look at him. "Am I that transparent?"

"No. But it's my job to watch you." He removed a tissue from his pocket and brushed away the moisture on my face. "I see pain that only comes from heartbreak."

"Do you report that to my mother?"

"No. Your secret is safe with me."

"Thank you." I squinted. "What is your background?"

"Badassery." He smiled with the whitest teeth, the darkest skin, and the kindest eyes.

And I believed him. It wasn't the gun on his hip or his constant vigilance. I trusted him because, at gut level, I knew he was one of the good guys. He had my back.

"I don't know what to do." *Do I go back inside? Do I try to do this sober? Or do I self-medicate and fade away?* "I don't know where to go from here."

"Does this feel like rock bottom?"

"Yeah."

"Then there's only one direction to go."

Up.

Missing Magnus was a painful way to grow up. He wasn't a mistake. I would never regret the time I'd had with him.

He'd taught me how to live and let live, how to make every moment count, how to be more than what I was, how to experience what I learned, how to be taller and stronger for the struggle.

He taught me that the best things in life didn't come easy.
He taught me how to love.

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CHAPTER 37

TINSLEY

WHY WAS MY mother looking at me like that?

I sat across the boardroom table from her, meeting her stare for stare. Her gaze rarely spent this much time on me. Maybe I had something on my dress?

I glanced down at the starched white fabric. Pristine. Perfect. I was dressed for business today. We all were.

The boardroom belonged to the Kensingtons. Situated on the top floor of their corporate office, it overlooked the glinting steel of downtown Manhattan.

My family occupied half of the long table—my mother, Winny, Perry, Viv, Elaine, Keaton, and all our assistants and lawyers. Galen stood near the wall behind me.

The other half of the table sat empty, awaiting the Kensington family and their legal team. They'd called us here to make the final arrangements for the merger.

Tucker graduated from St. John de Brebeuf last month and was off gallivanting across Europe. I hadn't been allowed to attend his ceremony. My mother didn't want me near the school for obvious reasons.

My graduation had been a quiet affair. I received a digital copy of my diploma. Galen and I opened a bottle of wine, which he ended up drinking by himself.

It'd been six months since I'd seen Magnus, and the pain was still as raw as the day I'd left. I was surviving, but I wasn't living. I was barely breathing.

Perry sat beside me, speaking in low tones with Winny next to him. My mother hadn't stopped staring at me.

“What?” I squared my shoulders. “You’re freaking me out.”

“You don’t look like my daughter.”

The room fell quiet, and I glanced around at all the faces that so closely resembled mine. Pale blue eyes, blond hair, fair skin—the genes ran strong in my family.

“Just say it.” I fisted my hands on my lap. “Say whatever you’re thinking if it’ll make you stop staring at me like—”

“You’re sad.” My mother stated the fact as if remarking on the weather.

Jesus Christ. I’d been fucking miserable for six months. “You’re just now noticing?”

“I notice everything, Tinsley.” She drummed her manicured nails on the table, holding the room in suspense. Then she stilled. “The Kensingtons need this merger as much as we do. Perhaps more. The Morellis have been trying to buy them out for years, undercutting them at every turn and offering deals that would leave the family in ruins.”

I didn’t know that detail. I’d never thought to ask. I only knew that if we didn’t merge, the Constantine dynasty would lose the strategic Kensington holdings to the Morellis, thereby giving the Morellis a stronger position in Bishop’s Landing. In our cutthroat world, if we didn’t remain on top, we would be crushed.

“I want you to know,” my mother said stiffly, “every person in this room appreciates the sacrifice you’re making to save this family.”

“We love you, Tins.” Keaton smiled softly.

More smiles appeared around the table. Perry gripped my hand and squeezed it on my lap.

My heart thudded with an exhaustive ache. Even though I’d been forced into this position, it didn’t change the fact that I loved these ruthless people. They were my blood. My tribe.

“Where are they?” Winston glanced at his watch. “The anticipation is fucking wearing.”

Anticipation?

The door opened, and a stream of suits rolled into the room. Lawyers, corporate officials, followed by Hugh and Anna Kensington. My future in-laws. I hadn’t had much interaction with them. I’d been avoiding them for months.

Greetings erupted around the room, and I started to fade, detaching, retreating inside myself. I didn't want to be here. It was too real. Too final.

"Thank you for coming here at such short notice." Mr. Kensington ran a hand over his balding head, addressing the table. "The past day has been quite a whirlwind, as you can imagine. We're just waiting on—"

Footsteps sounded in the hall, drawing my attention to the door. Every head in the room turned as another man stepped inside.

Crisp black suit, white shirt, black tie—he was dressed like everyone else in the boardroom. But I knew the body beneath those threads, every hair, blemish, indentation, and ripple of muscle. I knew how he held me skin-to-skin, the pleasure of those hands on my prickling flesh, the texture of that thick brown hair falling across my abdomen as those lips—those perfect, chiseled lips—moved between my legs.

I floated out of my body, lost in stupefied shock and not trusting my own eyes. I saw his gorgeous face, heard his familiar gait, but he might as well have been an illusion. My brain couldn't process the image of Magnus Falke in a suit, in a boardroom, standing among my family.

Where was his clerical collar? Why was he here? Why did no one in the room look surprised to see him? My mother barely glanced at him.

His gaze flicked to me, lingering long enough to shred my insides before skipping away to greet everyone else.

My heart raced as I turned, desperately searching Perry's relaxed expression.

What's happening? I wordlessly begged him. *Help me understand.*

He leaned in and whispered, "You're looking at the new owner of Kensington Hotels."

If I'd been standing, I would've collapsed. Even in the chair, my legs weakened beneath me. The room spun. My head pounded, and I gripped the edge of the table to catch my balance.

He'd bought the company? How? What did that mean? Was he still a priest? What about the merger?

Lawyers pulled papers from briefcases and launched into legal jargon about amendments and revisions. I couldn't follow what they were saying. I couldn't think. I couldn't stop staring at the man who held my heart in his fist.

That confident, agile stride of his carried him through the room. He shook hands with Hugh Kensington, and they exchanged a few words. Then he stood at the head of the table, looking fine as heaven in the aristocratic lines of an expensive tailor. But it wasn't the suit that made him a figure of power. He commanded the room with his intimidating presence and strong eye contact.

Everyone quieted, giving him their full attention.

Holding a pen in his hand, he depressed the end—*click, click, click*—as he examined each face, making them wait.

I sat in a fugue of disbelief, wonderment, and something I hadn't felt before. Hope. It made my breath hitch. My sinuses swelled, and a tear escaped. I was too deep in shock to lift a hand and wipe it away. But I felt its slow descent, tracking its course down my cheek. When it reached my lips, more followed.

A tissue appeared beside me.

Oh, Galen.

Magnus glanced at the bodyguard, and in two seconds, his long legs eliminated the space between us. He took the tissue from Galen, pocketed it, and spun my chair around, putting my back to the table.

Our eyes locked as he lowered to a crouch, set the pen between his lips, and lifted both hands to my face. I held still, hyper-aware that my entire family was watching.

Slowly, tenderly, he rested his thumbs on my cheeks and brushed away my tears. His touch jolted through my body, and we both skipped a breath.

"You're really here?" I whispered.

"Told you," he murmured around the pen between his teeth. "I promised I would stay with you. Keep you."

"Fucking roar for me." I cried through a laugh.

"Always." He withdrew his hands to retrieve the pen, keeping his eyes on me as he addressed the room. "Unless there are questions, sign the contract."

Papers rustled, accompanied by the din of multiple conversations.

"What are they signing?" I asked. "You own Kensington Hotels now?"

"Yes. I'm a silent owner with a controlling interest."

"A majority of voting shares."

"You've been reading the books I gave you."

“All of them. What does this mean for my family? The merger?”

Us?

I didn’t dare ask. As of five minutes ago, there was no *us*.

“It means that everyone in this room knows I will fight to the death for you.” He stood and turned my chair toward the table.

My attention flew to my mother, and I found her staring back.

“I only just learned about Magnus’s interest last night.” She signed the paper before her and passed it to Hugh Kensington with a mien of indifference. “Evidently, Magnus and Hugh have been negotiating behind my back for weeks.”

“Magnus made an offer I couldn’t refuse.” Hugh signed the paper and handed it to Magnus. “He agreed to all my terms, and I agreed to his one condition.” Hugh gave me a pointed look. “He was very specific about his interest in you.”

“Marriage is the key provision in the merger.” Magnus placed the contract in front of me and opened it to the last page.

Two signatures were missing. Mine and his.

I felt every beat of my heart as I skimmed the words.

Companies were bought, sold, merged, and liquidated every day. This negotiation was far more significant and complex than a standard corporate merger.

What made a dynasty was the practice of intermarriage between ruling families. The bonds of kinship and generations of heirs had built my family’s empire into what it was today. This contract followed that tradition.

It wasn’t a merger between the Kensingtons and the Constantines. Magnus owned the Kensingtons now, effectively removing Tucker from the equation.

This was a merger and intermarriage contract between Magnus Falke and my family.

But I only needed to glance at the intensity in Magnus’s expression to know he hadn’t come for business or money or power.

He was here for love.



CHAPTER 38

TINSLEY

A FEELING OF breathlessness shimmered through me, tingling my limbs.

Was this really happening? So many questions swirled in my head. I didn't know where to start.

I met Magnus's eyes—*When will my heart stop skipping at the sight of him?*—and asked, “Are you still a priest?”

“I officially left the priesthood one month ago. But you and I both know I left long before that.”

A thrill ran through me, and I looked around the room, taking in all the expectant expressions. “Everyone knew about this but me?”

“I told your siblings last night.” My mother cocked her head. “They know your history with Magnus.”

“Why wasn't I told?”

“Magnus requested we wait until today.”

And she listened to him? What world was this?

I turned, drinking in the magnetic glow of his deep blue eyes. He regarded me so profoundly, so unnervingly focused on my every twitch. And therein was my answer.

He wanted to see my expression when I learned about the new contract. He wanted to be certain that I approved of this. That I loved him.

“Are you asking me to marry you?” I tapped the signature line, my pulse quickening.

“No, Miss Constantine.” He held out his pen. “I'm demanding it.”

The throb of my heart became a full-body *thud-thud-thud* as everything inside me resurrected with energy and life.

“You're lucky I'm into the bossy thing.” I accepted the pen, the words blurring through tears while I signed.

He signed after me. "It's done."

The relief in his voice was palpable. I felt it. Basked in it.

As the room began to clear out, he gripped my hand and pulled me to my feet, interlacing our fingers in a silent promise. He wasn't letting me go. Not now. Not ever.

My siblings hugged me on their way out. The Kensingtons and their staff said their goodbyes. Then my mother approached.

Six months ago, she'd sent her henchman to eliminate Magnus. Now she was building a future with him. But she'd gotten what she wanted. A merger between powerful families and then some. She hadn't only gained the strength of the Kensington dynasty. She'd acquired Magnus's wealth and power as well.

She stepped forward, expressionless, and reached out to touch a finger beneath my chin. "No one can hide a broken heart from me."

My eyes widened. She'd known I loved him all this time?

"Mrs. Constantine." Galen appeared at my side. "I'm turning in my resignation."

She nodded. "Thank you for your service."

Then he turned to Magnus, and they shook hands.

"Thank you for watching her for me." Magnus pulled him in and patted his back before releasing him. "I hope you're not turning in your resignation to me."

"No." Galen chuckled. "Call me when you have the next assignment."

"Wait. Hold up." I glanced between them and noted the confusion in my mother's eyes. "I don't understand."

"I hired Galen when you went home for Christmas." Magnus smiled down at me. "I hired him to pretend to work for your mother so that he could keep an eye on you."

My mouth fell open. So did my mother's.

She quickly closed it, her words hissing past her teeth. "I hired Galen to guard Tinsley."

"Yes," Magnus said. "But he works for me. I sent him to you to get that job as Tinsley's bodyguard."

Galen grinned, all white teeth and glimmering eyes.

My mother glared. "Well done, Magnus. You got one by me. It won't happen again."

With that, she strode out of the boardroom. Galen followed her, leaving Magnus and me alone.

I pinched the bridge of my nose, replaying every interaction I'd had with Galen over the past six months.

"He drove me back to the school that day." My mind spun, and I lowered my voice. "The day we had sex in the church."

"Yes."

"If he was working for you then, does that mean you knew I was coming back?"

"Yes."

Oh my God. Magnus had been waiting for me in the church.

How much of this had he planned?

I stepped back and slumped into the closest chair. "Did Galen give you updates on me over the past six months?"

"Every day. Every detail. I know how little you slept, how little you ate, how much you cried." His voice thickened, darkened. "Your beautiful pain."

That was a disturbing revelation. A glaring invasion of privacy. And if I knew him at all, which I did, he'd gotten off on my suffering. The filthy freak.

I should've been outraged. Except it confessed something important.

"You've been working to get me back the whole time." I flattened my hand against my pounding heart.

"Yes." He lowered to his knees before me.

"By inserting Galen into my daily routine, you..." I gulped, thinking through the ramifications. "All this time, you were up in my business, breathing down my neck, providing tissues for my tears, blocking Tucker's advances, making deals with the Kensingtons, railroading, bulldozing, and basically manipulating the hell out of my life."

"You have a problem with that?" He hovered his hand near my face, waiting for my response.

"If this isn't right, I don't know what is." I touched my fingers to his palm, savoring the sparks of heat. "If I'm wrong for wanting your possessive, overbearing, steamrolling brand of devotion, then I'm wrong about everything."

For long minutes, only our hands moved, palms and fingertips softly rasping together, caressing with the lightest brushes of skin.

I stared into his eyes, marveling, thunderstruck, aching to feel his beautiful lips on mine.

Kiss me.

He made a fist against my palm and stood abruptly. “Not here.”

“Then where?” I rose, sliding my hands up the brick wall of his chest. “If you don’t kiss me—”

He swooped in and took my mouth with firm lips, hot breaths, and a rumbling groan vibrating in his throat. I gripped his hips, and he cupped the back of my head, stepping closer, pulling me against him, trapping me in the prison of his arms.

There was nowhere else I’d rather be.

I whimpered, and his kiss turned ravenous, forceful, making me giddy and delirious with desire.

“Not here.” He tore his mouth away with a growl and grabbed my hand. “The things I want to do to you shouldn’t be legal.”

“Where are we going?” I tried to get my bearings as the world spun around me, my brain struggling to compete with my craze for this man.

If he hadn’t come to his senses, I would’ve jumped his bones in the boardroom.

Or this hallway.

Or, *oh fuck*, the elevator.

When the doors to the lift opened up ahead, several people stepped on with us. I was both relieved and annoyed.

He held my hand as we descended, keeping his eyes straight ahead. His thumb roved along my palm, comforting me, talking to me, telling me how much he missed me.

“Do you still have the cabin?” I asked quietly.

“Yes. But I haven’t been there since Christmas. The memories...”

“I’m sor—”

“Don’t apologize.”

The elevator doors opened, and he led me out and through the large foyer.

“The way I ended things...” I tugged on his hand, stopping him. “Magnus, the day in the church has haunted me for six months. The shit I

said—”

“Were lies. I was angry as hell with you, but that lasted all of two seconds. When I yelled at you and told you to get out of my church, I saw the truth. It was etched all over your beautiful face. Every word out of your mouth was an attempt to protect me. I didn’t piece it all together until much later, but I knew at that moment that your entire performance was a lie.”

“Nevada told my family about us. She suspected something was going on, so they sent an investigator. They have pictures of us at the cabin.”

“I know.”

“How?”

“Galen was in that mansion with you for six months. He watched and listened and reported back.”

“Goddamn Nevada...” I kept my voice soft despite the fury seething through me. “I know she put her hands down your pants. I mean, seriously, Magnus. How the fuck did that happen?”

“She’s an entitled, immature, dishonest brat. She unbuttoned her shirt in my classroom, and that was as far as she got. I chased her into the hallway without touching her. She didn’t put a hand on me.”

“So it was a rumor.” My shoulders fell with relief.

“No one touches me but you.”

“I love you.” Blood thudded through my veins.

“I know.”

“Galen told you that, too?”

“No.” He slid his thumb along my bottom lip. “Your face did. That day in the church, I watched your heart break into a million pieces.”

He was on the move again, guiding me out of the building and onto the noisy, crowded streets of New York City.

“We’re not going far.” Sexy brown hair fell over his forehead.

I gave in to the impulse to reach up and sweep the strands away from his stunning face. “How did you buy a controlling interest in the Kensington dynasty?”

“I have a lot of money.” He led me down the next block, turning every female head in his direction as he passed.

He’d been gorgeous in his priestly white collar. But in a suit and tie? The man was dangerously, deliciously, seductively arresting. Every time I

looked at him, I felt incapacitated. There were no thoughts, no focus, only desire and the agony of waiting.

“How much is a lot of money?” I asked.

“Does it matter?” He cut an icy glance at me. “Does it change the reason you’re here?”

“We’ve had this conversation before.” I sighed. “I just want to know how you did it.”

“I traded some stocks, moved holdings around, sold businesses, bought others, flipped a few—”

“How many women did you seduce into selling their companies?”

“None.” His voice snapped, harsh and angry. “There have been no women. How could you even think that?”

“I didn’t think it. It’s just... You did all this in six months?”

“Yes.”

“While you were teaching at Sion?”

“I only had two classes. I spent the rest of the time growing cash flow.” He glanced at me. “And I sold Sion Academy.”

“To buy Kensington?”

“To invest in *you*.”

My cheeks rose. “You rescued me.”

“Not because I see you as in need of rescue. But rather because I see your intelligence, your extraordinary potential, and nurturing that nurtures something inside me.”

Ours was a brain-body-soul connection—all three at once at an intensity that consumed me in the most poignant way.

At the next block, he escorted me into a fancy building with gold doors and uniformed doormen. I glanced up at the awning.

Kensington Hotel.

Just one of the hundreds of Kensington luxury hotels across the world.

“You own this.” I laughed, shaking my head.

“I own a great many things.” He ushered me inside with a possessive hand on my lower back.

The busy foyer parted for him. Not because he was the owner. No one knew that. Everyone moved out of the way because he carried himself like a boss, a ruler of men, radiating take-charge vibes with a profound sense of duty and strength.

He stopped at the bay of elevators and pulled me close, bringing us face to face. “Anything else before we head up?”

Once we stepped onto a lift, there would be no more talking. Not until we took the edge off this need burning between us. That could take hours. Days.

“The last time I saw you, in the church, you told me to choose you.” I drew in a shaky breath. “I did. I chose you the best way I knew how.”

“Tinsley,” he said gruffly, sliding a hand around my neck. “I know, baby.”

“I love you,” I whispered, tasting the ache in the back of my throat.

“I love you maddeningly.” He brushed the hair from my face, tucking it behind my ear and keeping his touch there.

“I loved you then, too. So much.”

His hand tensed in my hair. “You’re killing me, princess.”

“You told me to take a leap of faith. I should’ve done that. I should’ve trusted you to take care of everything from the beginning.”

“Leap with me now.”

I hit the button that called the elevator. A ding sounded. The door opened, and I backed into the empty lift with excitement thrumming through my circulation.

He prowled in after me, the heat in his eyes feeding the physical chemistry we shared.

The instant the doors shut, he surged forward. I stumbled back, colliding with the wall. He kept coming, and the weight of his body bore down upon me. Then his mouth was on my lips. His hands on my face, in my hair, and still on the move, frantic in his quest to touch every part of me.

As the elevator shot upward, he lifted me up the wall and wrapped my legs around his hips. Our lips fused, tongues rubbing together in the updrafts of our hunger, spiraling, soaring, two sinners in love, reaching for heaven.

“Forgive me, Father,” I gasped against his mouth, “for I have sinned.”

His fingers slipped beneath my panties and found me wet.

I moaned. “It’s been six months since my last confession.”

“Tell me.” He licked my tongue as his hand glided along my drenched heat.

“I’ve had my fingers in my pussy for six months while fantasizing about my favorite priest.”

A long, deep groan resounded in his chest. “Killing me.”

“What’s my penance?”

“A lifetime with me.”

“Fine. I’ll stay with you for an eternity and not a day more.”

He angled his head, devouring my lips while sinking his fingers between my legs. Pleasure ignited. Passion blazed. The hard length of him strained behind his trousers, pressing against my core, desperate to get out.

When the elevator arrived at the top floor, he carried me out without separating our lips. I caught glimpses of a penthouse—dark woods, crystal sconces, velvet fabrics. I didn’t give a fuck about the luxurious space, only about the man who occupied it.

He had to put me down to strip our clothes. We did it in record time, stumbling toward the master suite, bumping into walls, never losing eye contact or breaking our kiss.

Then we stood beside the bed, both naked and panting. And in my veins, I felt only love. Scorching, savage, immeasurable love.

Our six-month separation hadn’t just made our hearts grow fonder. It had stress-tested our connection and forged our bond in hardship. I felt the flames of that fusion as we stepped forward together, our bodies sliding, arms clinging, lips joining, and heartbeats falling in sync.

He spread me out on the bed and took his time reacquainting his mouth with every inch of me. He was gentle at first. Patient. Loving. Then his true nature took over.

His kisses turned to bites, his caresses to stinging slaps and bruises. By the time he bent me over his lap and rained open-palmed strikes upon my ass, he was groaning, rabid, and harder than steel.

I thrashed and moaned, fighting to escape the ungodly burn. And I loved it. I’d missed it. Nothing matched this man’s voracious intensity, passion, and stamina.

For the next hour, he edged us toward release over and over and over again. When he finally tossed me onto the bed and pressed himself against my pussy, I was shivering, gasping, clawing at the claw marks I’d painted across his chest.

“Magnus.” I bucked, clutching his rock-hard buttocks, trying to work him into my body. “You hateful son of a bitch. Fuck me. Please, give me your cock.”

He thrust, and we groaned as one. Then he moved, plunging, claiming, owning. He fucked me like a beast, primal and unhinged. Then he made love to me like a defender, attentive and tender.

He gave me the teacher and the priest, the sinner and the sadist, the greatest of lovers and the staunch protector.

Our bond was eternal, and that was the grand prize, the best gift this universe had to offer.

He was my freedom.

My journey.

My destination.

My one great passion.

My choice.

My love.

My lessons in sin.



EPILOGUE MAGNUS

Two years later...

SHE WAS LATE.

Again.

I paced the kitchen in the cabin, watching the windows and growing more impatient by the second. I made Tinsley breakfast every Sunday morning after church. Today's feast included eggs, grilled ham, and buttermilk pancakes bursting with Maine blueberries.

She attended Mass with me as neither a believer nor a nonbeliever. She went as my supporter, my companion, because we did everything together.

Most things. When we returned from church, she went on a hike while I made breakfast.

I glanced at my watch and gritted my teeth.

The food was ready, but it would have to wait while I dealt with this.

Slipping on my hiking boots, I set out into the woods.

It was summertime in the mountains, and the loamy air strummed with a chorus of birds and winged insects. I followed the pebbled path through the trees, **listening for my infuriating wife.**

The property looked different than the first time she'd come here. Small buildings and aviaries scattered the hillside. From the day we moved here two years ago, she'd been rescuing wild animals. Bats, raccoons, falcons, foxes, deer, opossums—she took in every size and species, predator and prey.

I started building sanctuaries for her. She hired and contracted veterinarians and wildlife experts to tend to the sick and injured animals,

and soon, everyone in the White Mountains knew to bring all the unwell critters here.

She had plenty of help. Her friend, Daisy, visited often. As well as all her siblings, and of course, Crisanto, who still ran St. John de Brebeuf an hour away.

When Tinsley and I married last year, our combined assets made us disgustingly wealthy. We could live anywhere and do anything. But we loved it here. We were blissfully happy.

Beyond the bat house, the mountain trail jogged on ahead toward the expanding vista of greens and golds amid the white light of late morning.

I sensed her before I saw her—the hum in the air, the scent of lemon drops, and the rasp of softly moving limbs.

Veering off the path, I spotted her crawling through the leaf litter. She still wore her church dress, a strappy little blue thing that matched the pale shade of her eyes. Her hair was every hue from white to gold, all tangled and married into long flowing locks down her back.

She rose, turning toward me. Behind her, the mountains stood sentry to the biggest, bluest eyes. And that smile. That sexy little body. Stunning from head to toe. **She took my breath away. Every. Damn. Time.**

“Hey, handsome. I saw a chipmunk.” Her gaze returned to the shrubs where she’d been crawling, reluctant to let it go.

“You’re late.” I pointed at my watch as if it were the most important thing in the world.

“What’s that?” She leaned toward me, cupping a hand behind her ear. “Oh? I look absolutely ravishing today?” Her fists went to her hips as she smiled innocently. “Why, thank you, dear husband. You always say the sweetest things.”

I bit my lip as blood surged to my cock. **“I’m going to fuck the shit out of your pussy.”**

“Why don’t you? We’re all waiting.” She gestured to the surrounding habitats, indicating her menagerie of animals.

That grin, though. It was infectious, mischievous, crinkling the sides of her nose in an enchanting way. The flutter in my chest became a full-on palpitation.

Goddamn, I loved this woman. She was the perfect kind of quirky. Bold as hell. Full of life.

But a promise was a promise. I'd told her if she was late for breakfast, she would be punished.

"Remove your dress and everything underneath." I lowered my hands to my belt and released the buckle.

Not even a hint of hesitancy or fear in her eyes. The little minx ripped off the dress with a smirk and a sigh.

No panties.

I breathed deeply, reining in the intensity of my need for her, and gave her my sternest glare. "Did you go to Mass without underwear?"

"Yes." She blinked. "I was reminiscing about old times."

"You want me to fuck you in the church?" I pulled the belt free.

"I want you to fuck me everywhere, Father Magnus." She put the tip of her finger in her mouth, looking all innocent while sliding her other hand between her naked thighs.

Christ, what a vision. Her ethereal white skin raised other hues to greater brightness. All around her, greens were greener. Blues were bluer. But nothing could touch her beauty.

Nothing would ever bring me this much joy. She was home, hearth, and happiness. Life without her would leave my soul without breath.

"Turn around and hold on to something." I tightened my grip on the belt, embracing the cruelty inside me.

I was no longer the monster I'd been in my twenties. But I was no saint, either.

As my gorgeous wife stood naked amid the alpine trees with a death grip on a branch, I reared back the belt and unleashed my nature.

With each strike, I savored her screams, her heaving groans, and her glowing red ass. I flogged her until neither of us could breathe. Then I fucked her in the dirt with my hand around her throat, eyes locked.

We were indecent, immoral, and madly in love.

Sinners together.

Soul mates forever.



Thank you for reading! We hope you love Pam Godwin's scorching hot story. Tinsley's brother, Keaton Constantine is in a different prep school.

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The new girl doesn't belong here.

So why can't I stop thinking about her?

The daughter of the headmaster wants to ruin my school year before it's even begun. Iris Briggs gets under my skin. I'm Keaton Constantine. My duty is to my family. At least, it was until I started unbraiding the good girl and realizing there's more to life than duty.

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Money can buy anything. And anyone. As the head of the Constantine family, I'm used to people bowing to my will. Cruel, rigid, unyielding—I'm all those things. When I discover the one woman who doesn't wither under my gaze, but instead smiles right back at me, I'm intrigued.

Ash Elliott needs cash, and I make her trade in crudeness and degradation for it. I crave her tears, her moans. I pay for each one. And every time, she comes back for more. When she challenges me with an offer of her own, I have to decide if I'm willing to give her far more than cold hard cash.



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Outside a glittering party, I saw a man in the dark. I didn't know then that he was an assassin. A hit man. A mercenary. Ronan radiated danger and beauty. Mercy and mystery.

I wanted him, but I was already promised to another man. Ronan might be the one who murdered him. But two warring families want my blood. I don't know where to turn.

In a mad world of luxury and secrets, he's the only one I can trust.

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Java, tobacco, and dark romance novels are her favorite indulgences, and might be considered more unhealthy than her aversion to sleeping, eating meat, and dolls with blinking eyes.

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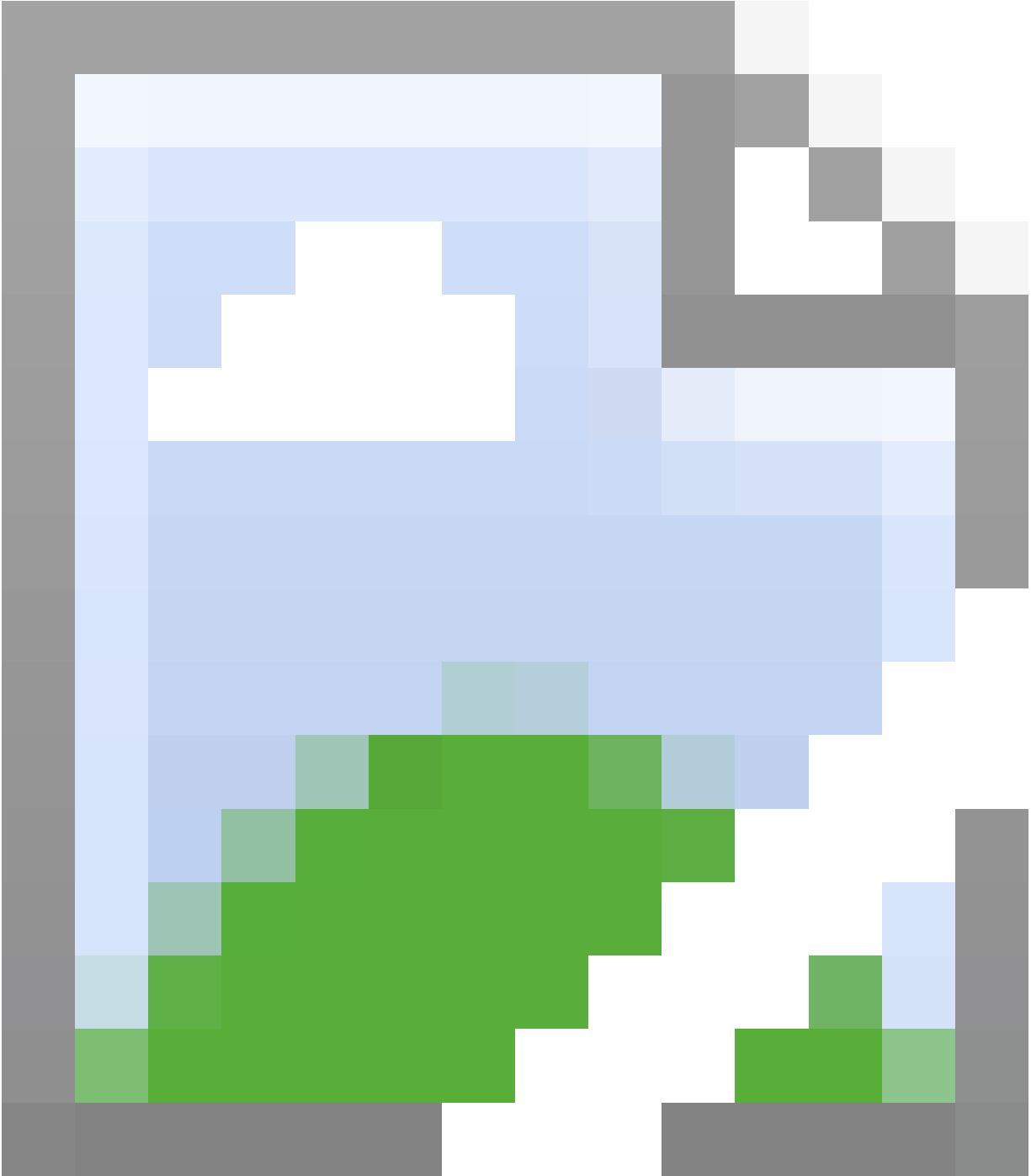
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