



THEIR BROKEN *Legend*

KIDS OF THE DISTRICT SERIES

NICCI HARRIS

their broken legend

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also by nicci harris



The Kids of The District

Facing Us

Our Thing

Cosa Nostra

Her Way

His Pretty Little Burden

His Pretty Little Queen

Their Broken Legend

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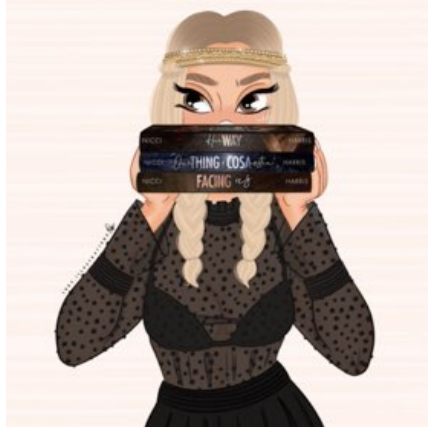
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For my street team...

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I'm an Australian chick writing real love stories for dark souls.

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song list

Kids of the District

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Dark Times - The Weeknd, Ed Sheeran

For You - Staind

Break Stuff - Limp Bizkit

My Way - Ava Max

Build a Bitch - Bella Poarch

Overwhelmed (Ryan Mack Remix) - Ryan Mack

Sweet but Psycho - Ava Max

Save Myself - Ed Sheeran

Somethin' Stupid - Frank Sinatra, Nancy Sinatra

Fly Me to the Moon (In Other Words) - Frank Sinatra, Count Basie

Messed Up - Once Monsters, Chloe Adams

Trauma - NF

The Night We Met - Lord Huron

Keep Your Head Up Princess - Anson Seabra

Painkiller - Ruel

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the kids of the district series

This can be read as a standalone but it is the final book in a greater narrative that spans 6 stories.

For even more context read Xander's brother's books first.

Four brothers

Mafia Heirs

Controlling & possessive men

Loyal & intelligent women

Grumpy/sunshine (Our Thing & Cosa Nostra)

Second chance (Her Way)

Age-gap (His Pretty Little Burden & His Pretty Little Queen)

Boxing romance (Their Broken Legend)

Trauma bond (Facing Us)

Start with [Our Thing](#)

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their broken legend

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sensitivity warning

This book has been sensitivity read by a palliative care doctor, a palliative care nurse, and others for accuracy and sensitivity.

While this is a WORK OF FICTION and should be enjoyed as such, if you are sensitive to issues surrounding impulsivity, aggression that manifests verbally and physically, and mental and cognitive health, please do not read this book.

It's okay to protect your emotions. That does not make you soft, and it does not mean you don't enjoy Dark Romance. It means you have a limit and that's fine.

[For Details & Spoilers](#)

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CHAPTER ONE

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xander



AGITATION GATHERS IN MY FOREHEAD, so I rub my temples. I'm dying for a wank or a fight or a fight, then a wank—

Focus, Xander.

"I know this is a bad time, Mr Butcher." Anderson squirms in his chair. "But I have no one else to turn to." Across the desk from us, my brother Clay stares Anderson down. Most men shrink a few feet in Clay's presence. He's the Don of the *Cosa Nostra* in a Mafia-ruled city, so when speaking with him, it's best to take it seriously. "My daughter has been getting some unwanted attention from..." Anderson tugs at his collar.

"From?" I press, and he looks over at me for a moment before braving Clay's line of sight again.

Spit it out, Anderson.

My brother can be reasonable. On occasions, such an opportunity has presented itself, but Anderson is fucking right—this is a bullshit evening to be asking for favours. Our mother's wake continues in the adjacent room.

We have an open house for the evening; most of the District worth knowing is here, including the owner of a popular tavern who sits across from us now— That's the only reason he's been granted an audience with my brother.

He goes on, “The son of Daniel Young. The banker. His younger son, Grayson, has been harassing my daughter. Taking pictures—”

I lean back in my chair when I hear that name. Grayson *Young*... My headache flares as the image of a red-headed man with a face like a bucket of smashed crabs comes to mind. *Dipshit*. I crack my knuckles as tension builds within them.

Daniel Young has two sons: Grayson, who I have heard is a princess with a cock, and *Charles*. Charles Young, better known in the boxing circuit as the Young Chuck Norris, is a seasoned boxer. And he’s been chomping at the bit to fight me, but he’s midweight, so he fucking can’t.

Desperate to be taken seriously, Anderson spits out, “She’s underage! She’s only twelve, Mr Butcher. He’s twenty-five. It’s not right. What he’s doing. I tried— He laughed at me when I spoke to him. He said he’s above the law.”

“And?” I press, knowing Clay needs to hear the exact request leave Anderson’s lips.

I want this over with. The funeral was enough. I’m not in the mood to play this role after that, my skin crawling over my muscles, muscles twitching over bone. I’m on fire. Get me to the gym. Get me something hard. Fast. Real. So, I can box this bullshit day from me.

Box the lies out.

Feel *something*.

Pain and pleasure.

I need something *real*. There are secrets surrounding last week when my mother overdosed, but I must trust in the infallible nature of the *Cosa Nostra*, of Clay Butcher—the Don. What was done, needed to be so.

Accept.

Just trust...

Like Max and Bronson do.

Unlike me, my brothers bear no ache from her suspicious passing as they shared no affection for her—she was a narcissist. I know this.

But I feel I'm to blame...

Clearing my throat, I remind myself that my mother was an alcoholic who abused many drugs, and under these great loves, she eventually suffocated.

Just accept.

Impatient, I grow restless.

Patiently, Clay smiles.

My brother's smile has always awed and annoyed me. It reminds me of how different we are. How a perfect one can form effortlessly on his lips amid the worst events. And, well, all my emotions are far more honest. Jarringly, so. Just like pain, pleasure, blood, and cum—*honest*.

My favourite things.

"And what would you like me to do about it?" Clay asks, drawing me away from that simulated smile, chilling to view on a grieving son's face.

As Anderson mumbles his answer, I look down at my fists, the skin of my knuckles ripped and raw from boxing. My gaze moves to the empty whiskey glass I poured when we entered this room ten minutes ago, then to Clay's glass which spins on the desk in his fingers, nearly untouched.

My big brother is 'on.'

Always on.

Not me.

"Speak up, Anderson," I state. "I won't ask you again."

"Well..." Anderson begins shakily, "you know."

"No. I don't," Clay states, an effortless warning carrying his words across the desk. "Do I look like the kind of man who asks questions not expecting an answer?"

Anderson pales further. "No, Mr Butcher."

“Then”—Clay raises his hand from the desk— “give me my answer, se?”

“I want someone to speak with him,” Anderson finally admits. “Scare him. Threaten him. Whatever it takes for him to leave her alone.”

There we go.

You can't ask for favours without asking.

And my brother loves to watch them squirm.

The clock ticks.

Time stretches between us. Clay stares contemplatively at the man across from him. Anderson's neck gathers beads of sweat, and I watch the red fear on his face rise like water filling a glass cup.

Minutes after silence, Clay rises to his feet, smoothing down his black tie. “I accept.”

Anderson looks startled, his mouth flapping with words that don't quite form.

Clay continues, “Xander will get the details. If you don't mind, I have people to see.”

The door to Clay's office opens before he reaches it. Que, his first assistant, stands on the other side as Clay exits the room.

Now, I'm up.

“Where does he usually take these pictures? At his house? Yours?” I ask Anderson as he runs his sweaty hands down his thighs and breathes hard with relief.

I can't help but smile this time—a real fucking smile because that's me. “Calm down. What did you think would happen? You're in our home. Taking up our time. Just answer my questions so we can both get the hell out of this room. You look like you need a drink.”

He nods. As he talks about Grayson's perverted interest in his twelve-year-old child—he follows her to the restroom and corners her at the shopping centre—the discomfort rushing beneath my skin intensifies.

I hum. “But he’s never touched her?”

“I don’t know,” Anderson answers sadly. “She says no, but she’s my daughter. She won’t tell me.”

“Tell me about these pictures?”

Disgust tightens his face as he begins to describe the images he’s witnessed—some taken down her jeans, others up her skirt, and a few simply of her blushing.

It’s not my job to enforce. I’m supposed to get the details and organise our soldiers to complete the job.

In fact, Clay would hate it if I left this sham wake and went straight over to Grayson Young’s house to complete this job, but I can’t imagine anything more therapeutic than using Chuck’s sick little brother’s face to beat some candour into my day—yeah, Clay would fucking hate it.

My smile widens.

“That’s enough,” I state, cutting him off mid-sentence. “You’ll have a visitor tomorrow to collect fifteen thousand dollars in cash, and Grayson will stop bothering your daughter.”

“Fifteen. Just to talk to him—”

“Yes. That’s a lot cheaper than my big bro would have asked for, mate. Trust me. The Youngs aren’t just any normal District residents. They are wealthy, influential, and well known, which means high risk.” I lean in and lower my voice, done with him. “And they could offer us double what I’m charging you and not bat an eye. Just take the deal.”

He looks at his hands. “Okay.”

“It’ll be alright, mate. Go home,” I say, standing up.

I see him out the front door, and despite wanting to escape, I dutifully walk back inside. As I head into Clay’s hall, I’m met with sober expressions. To be expected. After all, I’m her youngest. Brightest.

“I’m really sorry, Xander,” a lady says to me, her name a mystery, but she smells like my mum—Armani and blame.

I nod stiffly but don't pause to chat, my stride remaining steady all the way to the bar. My mother's favourite place. It eventually became her. And now she is dead, in a coffin, looking beautiful as always and no colder than when alive.

After I pour myself a drink, I stand behind the wooden counter and watch the spectacle. That is what this is, after all.

My heart beats hard.

My brother Max sits in the corner, his usual mask of displeasure suited to the occasion—he may even pass for a grieving son. Beside him, his wife and daughter talk politely with guests.

I rub at my chest, feeling restricted.

Across the other side of the room, Bronson hides his madness well for the event; his psychotic alter ego, though, screams in the vivid tattoos that lick up from beneath his black collar and stretch the length of each finger. His skin is a complete canvas. A manifestation of his madness.

He eyes the party like a hound, always watching us, studying Max and then Clay and then—me.

Lifting my chin at him, I acknowledge his green-blue gaze. His dark brows raise with a question—he knows I'm uncomfortable, offering me company in that simple gesture. And he'll be over here any minute to shoulder me, hold me, make a joke, or insist on a bear hug. Basically, he'll do anything I want or need apart from letting me go.

They think they know what's best.

Before he can corner me—as pure as his intentions are—I walk from the room, using what small amount of time I have to jog down the steps to my car, a sense of urgency pulsing through my body.

I have one foot in my Jeep when the front door opens. I freeze. Looking over the hood, I see a sad brunette in all black hovering on the top steps. Elegant as fuck. Curves like a damn cartoon pin-up girl manifested in real life.

My best mate, Stacey, stares at me, tears swimming in her brown eyes. She's not crying for my mother. She's crying for us. For me and my brothers. And she knows what is happening inside me right now and how it won't let me stay.

All I can offer her is a shrug and a careless, "Dunno, Stace, just gotta bolt."

Reluctance weaves her brows, but she accepts with a nod and closes the double doors. The bullshit event is locked inside with her—she has my back. She's had my back since the first year of high school. I don't see her as much these days. I box. She works. But she's family—a constant.

Wishing I could be the type of man to stand with his brothers and wear a sad, practised smile at his mother's wake, I climb into the car.

I can't be that man.

So, I drive over to Grayson Young's house in the Connolly Hills.

CHAPTER TWO

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xander



WITHOUT INVITATION, I stride through the front door. A sea of wild partygoers writhe against each other in front of me—college-aged students who are high, drunk, or both. Bloodshot eyes and red-faced, losing their inhibitions.

Same.

It's been a while since I went to a party like this, years, in fact. Big modern house, too. Four-storeys of straight, arrogant lines adorned with pompous artwork and frivolous statues—pointless expressions of wealth.

Not my Family's style.

And, well, our empire has more money than sins, which is funny, considering the way we earned our fortune is sending us straight to Hell to cash them all in.

The music pulses around me.

Had I known they'd be partying, I may have ditched my mother's wake earlier. Ditched that fabricated room of grieverers who never knew her, and those who did and didn't like her. I may have avoided the current simmering guilt—the blame—inside me that it might be my fault she ended up dead on my big brother's couch. Avoided the need to cry for her when she never once cried for me— *Did she?*

Did she ever cry for me?

Fuck.

I snatch a beer from the counter, already open and half-empty, heading through the crowd. I doubt the *Young* Chuck Norris is here, he'll be at the gym, not downing booze, but my muscles fill with anticipation just at the thought of seeing him.

They part for me—lads all casual in their Converse and jeans, as opposed to the girls who are dressed for attention and anything but casual. They all separate down the centre as I search the crowd. Listening to the conversation.

Listening for a name—*Young*.

I'm used to the District kids moving from my path. The name Butcher forces their feet to shuffle, to scatter. Once, it was because of my brothers, the enforcers of this corrupt city jungle, but these days... The city parts for *me*.

Their legend.

Xander—The Butcher—Butcher.

First time in my entire life that people want to speak with me and not with one of my brothers.

I swig the beer in my fist and feel the dried split in my lip stretch like worn leather. Hitting my teeth with the bottle in my effectively inebriated condition, I empty it.

I use the booze in my bloodstream, the grief and discomfort rolling along my skin, the adrenaline already firing through my veins in anticipation of that first sweet knock to the head. I hope he fights back.

I loosen the knot of my *black* tie, the matching piece to my sombre black slacks and shirt. The colour of a mourning man, the colour of sin.

Welcoming the alcohol and hormone-fuelled movements of the crowd, I smile, mocking my situation as I add a little rhythmic shuffle to each step, in time with the bass beneath my shoes. Why not? It's a party.

The girls smile at me.

The lads avoid eye contact.

Hitting a staircase, I bound up it. Halting at the picture frames halfway up, I notice two red-haired boys standing with their parents in a park. The thicker of the two is Chuck, so I'd bet my arse the other is Grayson.

I continue up the stairs. Passing a few cute girls, I acknowledge each with a wink, with an exaggerated perve that is forced. Not absorbing anything, barely noticing the colour of their hair, needing a beating first, a fuck second.

When I hit the next level, a carpeted hallway stretches ahead of me with several doors. I bet he's in one of those rooms getting a rim job. Lucky dipshit...

Here comes the fucking cockblocker.

Opening each door, I search the vast top level. People pass me but peer over their shoulders to watch as I explore without regard for anyone's privacy.

Door one: empty.

Two: a girl and a guy making out. "Hey, man, get out."

Three: a bathroom. A girl gapes at me with a half-freshened face of makeup.

Four—

CHAPTER THREE

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kaya



STARING AT THE WHITE CEILING, I try desperately to enjoy Grayson Young's tongue... I laugh—Grayson Young's *tongue*.

“Am I tickling you?” he suddenly asks before lifting his head to see what's amused the girl who doesn't crack a smile for anyone, but five minutes alone with Grayson Young's tongue and the world is a massive joke.

I spread my thighs wider, glaring at him between my knees with impatient expectancy, liking the black balaclava over his face, which makes it easy for me to separate myself from the person within. Not that I dislike him. I just enjoy the balaclava. “Nothing. Don't stop. You're doing really good.”

No, he's not.

I'm bored shitless.

He smirks, lopsided and irritating because I can see it even with the balaclava on, which means he's not neck-deep in my pussy. “Good. I've been practising.”

Not sure what that means.

Don't really care, either.

He's just a tongue to me.

I drop my head back to the pillow. Grayson goes back to frenching my pussy like he's at the orthodontist and his mouth is drunk from a misplaced sedative needle, and I gaze at the white recessed ceiling again, my mind wandering. I remember a conversation my bestie, Chloe, had with me about the categories of pussy-eating men.

There's *The Timer*, this guy eats pussy on the clock, with the perpetual breaks in rhythm for "Are you close?" or "Is this working?" Chloe has had a lot of *Timers*.

Then there's *The Talker*, but where his mouth has game before the act, spouting pussy poetry, it flounders around on the pussy prose at lick time. Reminded of high school, I groan. I've been the unlucky receiver of many *Talkers*.

"Yeah, you like that, hey?" Grayson says against my skin, presuming my groan was thanks to his skilled urethra lapping.

I hum for *his* enjoyment. "So good."

And then there's Grayson.

He's *The Dreamer*...

As in, I feel kinda comfortable and warm, but my mind is drifting to other things as his tongue drifts in every direction except the one that leads to my clit.

Wanting relief, I help him out, grinding on his lips, when suddenly, the bedroom door flies open, and the sound of the party floods in through the opening.

I shoot up.

Grayson flies off the bed, ripping the black cover from his head to confront our intruder. "Hey! This room is taken!"

Reaching for the sage-coloured sheets to hide beneath, I scowl at—

Xander Butcher?

Standing in the doorframe with the face of an angel but with the scars and bruises of a monster who crawled his way up from Hell is Xander

Butcher. All the girls in the District know about the youngest Butcher Boy, whose cute, wholesome vibe gets him out of trouble and into knickers. With his floppy dark hair the colour of onyx and blue eyes like topaz, he's the boy-next-door, cliché-cute Casanova type, who somehow manages to beat every challenger in the District's weekly boxing matches.

Xander-goddamn-Butcher who can charm a girl—a girl like me—and make her come until her bones dissolve, pass out without expecting the favour returned, then leave her the following day with no goodbye or contact number, and, *ugh*, no anger towards him either because the oral was so...*sublime*?

A gift.

His category is rare and elusive, fittingly named '*The Gift*.' 'Cause I'm pretty sure I thanked him after he was done with me.

I almost melt into a puddle at the mere reverie of it. If only Grayson's limp, sedated tongue was still fondling my urethra it'd be enough to force an orgasm to the memory and phantom sensation of the way Xander's found every spot, even in his drunken stupor.

Yep, Kaya.

That Xander Butcher.

I pull the sheets higher at my chest as Grayson pulls his clothes on, huffing and grumbling, "What the fuck, man? Get out of my room!"

I look from Grayson to Xander and then away just as fast because Xander's eyes. Are. Studying. Me.

Does he remember that night?

"Grayson, buddy," Xander says humourlessly. I remember that voice, too. Perfectly deep with an organic roughness that isn't too harsh but still sends shudders through me—and I look back just as Xander's topaz eyes shift to Grayson, now squaring his shoulders in defence. "I need a word, mate. Let's go."

“Fuck off,” Grayson barks, but it lacks bravado. He’s unable to hide the nervousness as he shuffles, wary because he knows better than to argue with a Butcher. Just thank his lucky stars it’s Xander and not... well, any of the other Butcher Boys.

The memory of a few months ago flashes behind my eyes. Tied to a chair in a warehouse by his big brother Clay after I accidentally—on purpose—lit a fire that spread way too far and— Well, Daddy Butcher wasn’t happy about the bad press. But he let me go with a ‘warning.’

It's no secret that it's his city. The District is owned by the *Cosa Nostra* and run by the Butcher Boys. All wealthy residents have been stuffing dollar bills into the *Cosa Nostra*'s pocket for protection and dodgy tenders since the seventies. Wealthy families like the Youngs. Like mine—the Lovits.

Unless... Xander knows...

Oh shit, is this about the fire?

“I’m not asking,” Xander states, tilting his head, the ends of his dark hair touching his long lashes as his eyes drop to the balaclava in Grayson’s grip. His brows shoot up. “*Kinky.*”

“You are fucking kidding me, right?” Grayson opens his arms wide. “I have her pussy all over my lips. Can you leave and, I’ll, like, meet you outside in a minute?”

Xander stares blankly at him and then says, “Allow me.” He takes the two paces to meet Grayson in the centre of the room, looks down his nose at him, and swipes his thumb over Grayson’s moist lips.

My jaw drops. It’s like a 90s cartoon where my mandible continues along the floor like a scroll. It’d be comical if the situation wasn’t growing so serious so quickly.

Sucking his thumb into his mouth, tasting *me*, Xander taunts, “Hmm. Lovely. Lucky boy.”

Grayson is dumb-fuck speechless as Xander pops his thumb out. “Let’s go, Young.”

When Grayson doesn’t immediately comply, Xander fists the back of his shirt, lifting him slightly to his toes. “You,” he says, turning to smile charmingly at me as I gape at the absurdity of this situation, “stay right there, girlie.”

Fuck.

It is about the fire—

Wait. “What? No. I’m not staying in his bed and just waiting.” I try to stand when Xander holds his hand up, halting me halfway along the mattress with the sheets still clutched to my chest.

“I’ll be back in five,” Xander says smoothly, offering up a wink that causes my insides to come alight with need. “I’ll finish you off for him. It’s the least I can do for the intrusion.”

“What!”

I mean...

‘Least you can do.

You’re so funny.

And thank you.

I roll my eyes at my inner monologue. He turns to leave, then spins around as though he’s forgotten something, dragging Grayson like a doll. Everyone looks like a damn portable person when towered by one of the Butcher Brothers. “You taste so fucking good. Please don’t move.” He turns but double backs again in one movement, his mouth moving as though he is still tasting me. “I lied. It’s not for you. It’s for me. I need more of that.”

And that is the new standard.

From now on, if a boy doesn’t say, “I need more of that,” after tasting me, I don’t want him.

Another full three-sixty and Xander stops, caught in a constant wrestle with his feet to stay or go. “Stay there. I mean it. Don’t make me chase that

pussy through the house.” His eyes drink me in, his body frozen for a moment, no doubt at war with himself. Finally, he groans in arousal and frustration before forcing himself through the open door.

He vanishes with Grayson.

The compliment hits me, causing my lips to smile on their own accord. I ignore it. *Fucking caveman.*

“As if,” I punch into the air, to the closing door. *Not gonna happen.* The words are so strong and sure of themselves, but my body duels with whether to leave or lay back like a wanton slut and present Xander Butcher with an appetiser. I’m sure he’ll be hungry after scolding Grayson for whatever dumb shit he’s done this time.

Oh. My. God.

Shut up, Kaya.

Climbing to my feet, I contemplate being worried about Grayson, but it’s *Xander*, not Max or Bronson or Clay. He’ll just rough him up a bit, and what do I care? *I don’t.* It’ll be good for Grayson, a learning experience, if anything. He’s eighty-five kilograms of dirtbag.

I pull my white-wash jeans on, hopping from foot to foot as I shimmy the fabric over my arse, paired with a black tank top and nude stilettos that add five inches to my five-foot-three frame.

Scooping up my Gucci bag, I stride from Grayson Young’s room—no less satisfied than when I entered—before heading down the carpeted hallway, weaving between sweaty, gyrating bodies.

“You taste so good.”

That sentence comes to me unbidden. I clear my throat, trying to snuff out the sound of his voice purring those words, words I’ve heard from him before, but I don’t know if he remembers or if he just wants another meaningless round. He is scandalously loose with women. I can’t remember any reports of him ever having a steady girlfriend, but he’s also never without a girl on his arm.

Chloe is going to love this. I scan the top of the crowd, searching for her dark-brown hair sprayed flat to an almost concrete consistency. She's six-foot, taller than most girls, so she is typically easy to spot.

"I need more of that."

I growl as the words caress my mind, and catch sight of Chloe, who is waving at me excitedly before her face falls, noting my contempt. I get to her and scrunch my nose.

"A Talker?" she asks.

"No. A Dreamer."

Her blue eyes widen. "That's got potential. You just have to do a bit of the work for him, Kaya. Sit on his face, use his chin, ya know?"

Girls overhear her unapologetic advice, lifting their noses in revulsion as though they don't fumble around between their folds late at night, fantasising about being gorged on like pudding.

"You'd like it," I say to a mousy looking one standing close to me. She darts away with her friends, far too poised for us heathens.

Sneering at them, I reach for Chloe's champagne and sip the golden fluid from the flute glass—no doubt snatched from Mrs Young's fine china cabinet. "You know..." I swallow a mouthful. "The entire District thinks we're sluts."

She smiles proudly. *"I am a slut."*

She's not. She just enjoys men, as I do, for one thing: orgasms. "No. We like orgasms. What's wrong with that? Our dads fuck around with every pin in a skirt, gifting them diamonds to subdue them while our *corporate-wife* mothers forgive them and continue to claw at unattainable beauty standards hoping one day they'll stop straying."

She groans. "Here we go."

"I don't want that. I'll never be that. I'll be the one buying the damn diamonds in exchange for their tongues and fingers." After I've finished her

champagne, I hand it back to her. She accepts it automatically. “And I’ll look however the hell I want to look, and it’ll be for me. Not for them.”

Staring at the empty champagne flute, her Nike-tic brows rise at my audacity. “*Excuse me? You’re not a slut, Kaya. You don’t put out.*” She waves the glass in her hand in feigned offence, and I grin. “You’re a selfish lover. You’re *The Taker.*”

I roll my eyes. “I get too tired.”

“Classic *Taker-talk.*”

“Anyway, I would have tonight,” I lie and she knows it. “But Xander Butcher interrupted us and dragged Grayson away. I swear. Said he needed to have—” I make bunny ears with my fingers. “‘A word with him.’ Do you think I should care? Or worry?”

“No.” She shrugs, nodding towards the sliding doors to the patio, where girls scream excitedly at the boys doing dumb flips into the glowing pool that sends water splashing around the polished decking.

We head outside, and Chloe adds, “‘Cause you’re a *Taker*. Takers don’t concern themselves with lesser people.”

The manicured area is lit up by solar lights boarding the garden beds. They create a small glowing perimeter around the lawn and poolside. It’s edging towards being too cold for a swim at night now, but the alcohol works like a furnace in our veins.

We sit on a cushioned lounge, before we are greeted by beer-spilling boys and giggling girls wanting to chit-chat.

The night does *not* pass quickly while we switch from dancing and sweating our hormones out against each other and sitting to catch our breath and talk. But as time ticks over and into the early hours of the morning, the party clears and calms, leaving only a few stranglers, Chloe, and me.

Still no sign of Grayson...

CHAPTER FOUR

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xander



DRAGGING GRAYSON OUTSIDE, I haul him into the bushland behind his house with that girl's distracting taste rolling around my gums. I use my tongue to catch more of her flavour, humming, my mind drifting to the chick with the thick caramel-coloured hair and the chip on her shoulders.

I smile to myself, the night panning out just right. Pain. Pussy. Pleasure. Perfection.

Grayson snivels as we trek. The trees are thick, branches and twigs scratching us, some snap to allow us passage further into the dense organic enclosure.

"I'm sorry. Whatever I've done. I'm sorry."

I don't respond.

"Tell your brother I sometimes say dumb shit."

I raise an eyebrow.

"I know some important people, Xander." He switches his play from apologising to intimidation, which only adds to his desperation. "They'll look for me, ya know—"

I help the prick out. "I'm not going to kill you in a park outside your home, you muppet," I say through a deep chuckle. Grayson has watched one too many mob movies.

He pants. "What is this about then? I'm not gay."

"*Grayson.*" I sigh, exasperation drawing the sound out, the stupidity of this dipshit grating on me. How that stunning girl in his bed with that juicy pussy can stand to have his lips on her, I have no fucking idea. "I'm not going to fuck you, Young, but if I did..." I wink at him. "You'd be gay after that magic."

He shuffles along. "What do you want then?"

Halting in a small clearing, I gesture with my chin to an open patch of dirt. Deadpan, I order, "Dig."

And that is all it takes for his cock to spill, piss filling the fabric in his crotch, a snake of soiled denim slithering to his shoes. "God! No! You said —"

"Stop talking." I grab my phone and snap a picture of him with a pool of piss darkening his designer jeans. "Delete every image you have of underage girls," I state. "And stay the fuck away from them until they are grown-arse women."

The taste of that girl causes me to add, "What is it with you entitled, rich dipshits? You don't appreciate anything. That girl in your bed deserves better. Come on, mate? I could bathe between her legs, and she looked damn strung out. It's not right. I'm disappointed in you, Young."

That offends him. "I'm good at licking pussy! But she's a slut. Everyone has been between her legs, so she's impossible to pleas—"

"Hey, hey," I admonish, "don't fault the Dodge Tomahawk for the crash just because you can't fucking ride it."

He keeps apologising to me when really he should be apologising to her... 'Cause, without spectators, he's a cowardly prick, clasping his hands and begging me for forgiveness, swearing through tear-filled lips that he didn't touch Anderson's young daughter.

"I don't like underage girls!" he grounds, defensiveness pitching his voice. "Those pictures weren't for me. I swear."

“Who were they for, then?” I ask, not buying his shit. “Taking them for a friend?”

Looking at his shoes, he swallows his words. He’s a lying sack of shit. “No.”

Now to leave an impression and get myself some therapy from my mother’s death, from the cold acceptance of her end, and from today’s bullshit wake. From the loss of something and nothing because I never had her love. Not really.

Preparing myself, I raise my fists. “Now. I want to see what you got, mate. Your brother Chuck has a killer right jab. You break my nose and I’ll let you off with just that. But if you miss, I’ll bruise every inch of your body.”

My pulse thumps and my muscles flood with endorphins, spiked by excitement. When he thrusts his fist at my face, I lower my guard and allow his knuckles to connect with my cheek, taking that sweet jab. It was piss poor. The brunt of his fist blackens my vision for a slither of a second, but it’s enough. A memory floods me, taking me back to her without my control.

One.

“OH, MY POOR BOY,” my mother slurs when she sees me huddled in the corner of my wardrobe. It was cold last night, so I have a sheet over my legs. “You’re just so naughty.”

The light floods the space, causing me to cower from the unfamiliar brightness. Creating strobes of white and lines of pitch black, the light from outside the wardrobe is painful.

She scoops me up into her arms, enveloping me in her perfume and burning me with the fumes of liquor. I don’t know what kind, but it is the scent of motherly love.

This is when she holds me, when no one else is home and she needs to be adored. I know this, even at the age of ten, but I never turn her away. I want to adore her, and the scent and cuddles feel too good and rare to not revel in.

“I’m not to blame!” She breaks down into a howl, squeezing me against her body, both of us trembling.

“It’s okay, Mummy,” I whisper, my voice scratchy from days of no use, pulled from my chest on a hoarse breath. The words are barely audible. “I said,” I repeat, louder and stronger. “It’s okay. I understand.”

She sobs. “Tell me I look beautiful. I got all dressed up and he never came home.”

I don’t lie. “You look beautiful, Mummy.”

TWO.

Standing staunchly through the flare of pain, I groan but barely move. Then I take two steps and wail on him.

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CHAPTER FIVE

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kaya



THE HOUR BRINGS A MILD CHILL, giving Chloe an excuse to tuck her ‘cold’ foot in Brian Kennedy’s—Kenno’s—crotch, her toes fondling his balls.

This means she is one sip of champagne away from vanishing into a pristinely manicured bush to let the big oaf caress her *pristinely manicured bush*.

I groan. I’m listening to a few girls I went to high school with flex their newly acquired Marxism knowledge. I have nothing to add. I took a gap this year. To figure shit out. But they are first-year university students, spouting freshly taught philosophies is a rite of entitled passage.

When my phone chimes—

When it saves me.

Feigning an apologetic smile, I snatch the device up with utter relief, having my opening to leave Chloe with her toe-jam, and ‘the collective’ to their debates.

I pull myself up off the outdoor pool lounge and walk away, across the lawn, reading the message as I go.

MUM:

I'm sorry, sweetheart. I didn't want to call. It would be pointless with the loud music. You wouldn't hear me anyway.

OKAY...

Passive aggressive.

I ignored you, Mother.

But fine.

MUM:

Your father has been arrested. They took him into custody this evening. I wasn't going to tell you now, but the press has camped out the front of the house. So, it is better to stay at Chloe's or one of your friend's houses after your party. Call me before you come home so I can explain.

NO.

I keep walking as I stare at the blue-lit screen, my throat clogging, the words beginning to blur as I wish them away. Wish away all the money we spent at the expense of his fraudulent activities, wish away the gambling problem, this morally corrupt city, and—

I bump into something cold, the phone leaving my fingers and bouncing across the mesh of the trampoline, now blocking my path. That I walked straight into.

I know he'll go to prison. He's not a rough man. And he's sixty-nine-years-old. But he's the man who read me Brer Rabbit when I was younger while my mum focused on my sisters. He knew how much I loved how Brer

always tricked the fox, the owl, and the bear. Loved how naughty and cheeky he was.

A thief, too.

Just like my dad is, but unlike my dad, they never caught Brer. These stories bloomed my love for little woodland creatures, for rabbits, foxes, mice, and squirrels, even though we don't have them in Australia.

So, while my sisters played with barbies and makeup, I staged little scenes with Sylvanian Families—Father Rabbit and his daughter Dotty were my absolute favourite.

My dad will spend years in jail.

The blur breaks when I force my tears away. Suck them back into my body.

Absently, I kick off my stilettos and climb onto the trampoline, crawling across until I am in the centre, where I plop on my back and sigh.

Blinking, I gaze at the sky, a black sheet of warm twinkling dots, while the air is cool, fogging around each shaky exhale. It is too cold for the pool now, and the patch of garden I've ended up in is barren of people.

Thank fuck for that.

My mind drifts to the sight of an old man hunched over in a cold clinical-looking prison room with a toilet in the corner and a tiny bed. His strength has been crushed from him. His diamond smile useless in the cold cell. So, he finally decided it's easier not to smile or move and eventually wastes away, and—

My heart shudders.

I can't.

It's not right.

There should be an age limit on imprisonment or an elderly ward or—I gasp for a breath. Something! *Somewhere* for people who won't survive confinement, who are softer than their outward actions. Soft like Brer Rabbit.

Me too, Dad.

“You left, huh?” I faintly make out the words, twisting my head on the plastic weave to the sight of Grayson with his balaclava in place, possibly ready for round two with my urethra. But then I notice the ominous height, panther-like agility of muscles shifting, the powerful thighs unhidden beneath black suit pants.

Panther-like?

Really, Kaya?

Not Grayson.

Xander.

I twist back to the stars and deadpan. “I wasn’t going to wait for you all night. I have options.” I taunt, disinterest flattens my tone along with my recent life-changing news. Mostly, I hope my tone gets across just how much I don’t admire him or his tongue... Okay, him, his tongue is another subject.

“Oh.” He laughs, boyish, charming and at odds with the balaclava and hands made for strangulation. *Ugh.* His cuteness is annoying. “Left is a contronym.”

I frown. “What the fuck are you talking about?”

“It’s a word that means two opposite things at the exact same time.” I can hear him approaching to my right, but I refuse to stare at him, noting his movements in my peripherals, his silhouette framed by the garden lights. “I meant you’re still here. *You left.* But you thought I meant ‘you left the room.’ See, *left* is the past tense to leaving a place, but it’s also the present tense to still being there.”

Oh. My. God.

He’s so adorable I want to punch him.

My lips fight their way into a smile, and I’m relieved that the dark cloaks the effect he has on me. “You take too long to eat your dessert. It’s kind of excessive.”

“Come again?”

I finally twist to face him, annoyance shocking my forced apathy to outright anger. The balaclava is bunched at his hairline, his boyish good looks only slightly distracting in the evening gloom. He’s closer now, slowly advancing. “You really don’t remember.” I cringe. “That we’ve done this before?”

He stops midstride. “Have we?”

“*God.*” Pushing myself to my elbows, I seethe. “That’s even worse! You just walk around licking anything that moves or what?”

He grins with maddening charm, evidently unbothered by my crude question. “I was always told to try every dish once and then decide if I liked it or not.” His eyes study me as I internally boil from his sunshine demeanour and the memory of his tongue so utterly skilled it must have a Global Positioning System for my pussy, so not a GPS, but a CPS—a Clit Positioning System. “You’re pissed at me,” he states, a flicker of an apology carrying his tone.

Very perceptive, Xander.

He continues, “Look, *damn.* It’s not you. I’m a blackout drunk, girlie.”

Girlie?

I scowl at him. “Don’t call me that.”

“Alright,” he agrees, carefree. “I’m a blackout drunk, *Woman.* It’s not personal.”

“So, you’re an alcoholic.”

“No.” He laughs at the word. “I don’t drink every day. I don’t even drink every second or third, but when I do, I tend to... binge”—he pauses on a hum—“a tad.”

“At least you’re honest.”

“And since I’ve already tried you once and currently have your unsatisfied pussy juices in my mouth, I think I must have decided I like the

dish. Now, why don't you be a good little... *woman* and sit on my face so we can both end this night the right way."

Instantly, I squeeze my legs together, muscles fighting against the ditzy chick inside me that nods and spreads eagle for Xander-Annoyingly-Cute-Butcher... *again*. "I can't have two different men in one night."

"Says who?"

Society. I blink at the stars.

His silence causes a shift in me, in the wind, and I twist to see his mien turn severe, cast in darkness. Ominous in his stillness, he slowly raises his hand, grips the balaclava at his dark hairline and drags it down the plane of his emotionless expression until he's unrecognisable except for that finely-cut physique tucked into lush dark fabric.

"You don't know who I am."

My pussy instantly aches and contracts in anticipation, causing me to shuffle around the mesh of the trampoline. "Make it quick," I breathe out fast, wrestling to hide the airy sound and failing terrifically.

"You don't rush art."

God. I groan at his words, knowing them to be true. Swallowing past the lump of flirty air, I turn to stare at the stars, unable to hold the glistening blue eyes fixed on me from within a hole of black material. "I doubt you'll even find my clit in your current state." I'm lying, and we both know it. Last time he was far more intoxicated than he is now, and he found it just fine.

I look back at him again. The challenge rolls his fingers into his palms, and I feel that action like waves of pleasure crashing through my core.

He stalks towards me; one, two, three, he pounces on the trampoline, and the image of that goddamn panther flashes behind my eyes again.

My body bounces as his knees drop to either side of my hips, his hand ripping at the top of my jeans as though they are his enemy.

I squeal with disbelief but shuffle to help as he peels the denim off with mock disdain for the blue piece of cloth.

Before I can comprehend the rush of air on my bare legs, they are spread and his mouth is over the fabric of my underwear, his top teeth kneading my clit hard while his tongue is pressing against the fabric and into my opening.

Moaning in a carefree way I don't recognise, I grip the balaclava, bunching it within my fists as he begins to prove just how easily he can find any part of me with his pussy CPS. "Fuck."

I squeeze my eyes shut as he groans with relief, murmuring, "This is what I need." Beneath the strain in his deep timbre, there's a second meaning, but what is it? I don't know. His groans hum against my flesh as he makes every swipe of his tongue and press of his teeth exaggerated and needy, wiping all rational thought from me.

Then he stops.

And I almost bawl like a baby if not for the anger now scratching at me. He grins at me, and I return his look with a scowl.

"I can't seem to find it in my state," he taunts, then reaches for my underwear, pulling it aside and dipping to connect his hot mouth with my bare, smooth pussy.

I whimper to the ecstasy.

He mouths me, his own enjoyment evident in the sounds coming from his chest and the way his hips mimic the bucking of my own.

I shudder, surrendering to him in a way I can't with other men who can easily miss the mark and leave me *wanting*. It's trust. Utter trust he can take care of me. I don't feel the need to steer him or help. Just enjoy.

Laying, unquestioning his skills, I simply hold the back of his head as he slants his lips sideways, sucking hard on the bead. And I feel nothing now but his deep perfectly measured attention, the trampoline beneath me moving my body up and down with his reverent kiss.

I become an extension of the professional pussy pleasers between my thighs. *The Gift.*

My head swims.

My throat moans.

My mouth parts as my orgasm builds, rising, burning my ears before plummeting to curl my toes, consuming my entire body, and surging my muscles to tense. “Fuck, Xander!”

I tighten my hold on the balaclava, grinding into his face, unable to stop my hips from reacting to the onslaught of that perfectly measured tongue and lush mouth. His response to my wild thrusting is to growl into my pussy but he doesn’t move from the point of his focus.

He holds me on a plane of that building awareness as though my climax is the peak of an everlasting incline, going on and on, reaching farther, never letting up.

I begin to shake. My body twists with perpetual tension. It’s so fucking good. So good—

I lose my breath to his name.

“*Xander...*”

I come hard.

Then it *all* crashes.

Hard.

All the tension left from Grayson Young’s useless tongue, the day surrounded by entitlement, my mother’s expectations, my father’s lies, and all the crap and worry and panic and— I start to sob as my orgasm detonates through me. Engulfing my face, I’m immediately mortified by the fitful experience. My body trembling with pleasure, my mind howling in relief, while my bullshit eyes spit with emotion.

I sob so hard that I can’t hear or feel anything else.

And it takes me settling my racing heart, loosening my twisted muscles, my orgasm dwindling to nothing, to feel the world around me again.

I suck a shaky breath in.

It takes a few long moments in the aftermath to realise Xander's face isn't between my legs anymore. Instead, he's moved over me, his forehead pressing to the backs of my tear-soaked hands, his breath cascading against the skin. And it feels like we shared a moment or... *something*. I can't quite put it into words, but Xander Butcher and I just hit an emotional wall together, and it fucking crumbled around us.

Under the debris of it all, when he kisses the backs of my hands, urging me to drop the killer guard of my palms, I willingly do. I relent my shield and accept his lips on mine, desperate for them.

Not just to get off.

Not this...

To feel.

Our wet and salty mouths find more emotion, more groans, within the motion of each other. I grip the back of his neck, feeling the fabric of the balaclava with my thumb. I want to pull it off, but my emotions feel safer with it on.

His hips begin to move against my pelvis; his cock is a large tightly confined ridge that bruises the soft, tender flesh it demands access to.

I groan as he does.

His hands are everywhere.

The trampoline once again makes the rhythm perfect, and fantastical, as though we are one entity rolling and dry fucking each other through our shattering resolve.

Taking the moment together, I feel him. He's panting hard, and not merely from arousal. No— it's different. Deeper. Meaningful. It's emotion. I don't know why he's feeling it, too. I don't know why he seems *choked* with it—like I am. But we spill it all into our kiss. Share it.

I'm lost for an emotional period, safe, too, and honest and open when his hand moves between our bodies, down to smoothly unbutton his jeans.

My heart lurches.

I catch his hand at his zipper and stop kissing him. “No. I don’t do that,” I admit breathlessly into his mouth.

Fuck.

Humiliation turns me into stone. The urge to get as far away from the boy who tongued me to a soppy, wet sack of sentimental goo, causes me to shove him enough to slide out from under his large, *annoyingly* perfect physique.

“Woman, wait!”

I scramble along the trampoline, retrieving my jeans and shoes and bag as I go. I will be the one to leave this time, and I feel solid about it, too.

Wrestling my jeans on, I hop around, then bolt across the lawn, half expecting him to follow, half wanting him to, and disappear into the trees that I know lead to the outer streets. Dashing around me, dark green shrubbery cloaked in darkness. And the moon’s strobes cut like lasers through the bushy canopies.

Then I exit the bush, run barefoot two blocks under the streetlights to Chloe’s front door, and find the spare key under the ceramic Buddha statue that her mother thought was a paternity sculpture of a pregnant woman.

I am heading upstairs to Chloe’s room, my feet still propelling me fast. No one is following me, but the sense of running away from something is still keen inside my body.

Running away from what?

CHAPTER SIX

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xander



I POP two painkillers and swallow them dry as I say, “I sorted it out,” to the car speaker. I drive down the dark Connolly streets on my way back to our home—a big, modern, white construction that my brother Max designed for us when he couldn’t stand the sight of the bricks-and-mortar we grew up in. Couldn’t stand the sight of the bathtub where our mother soaked us in ice after a beating or the wardrobe that she locked me in for weeks. It’s a bullshit concept because ‘scars remind us that the past was real.’

Sir Shakespeare knew his shit.

Tragedy, sex, and mother issues.

Damn fucking right.

“During your mother’s wake,” Clay states through the speaker, his tone level as always. And I think about that girl from tonight, with the burnt-caramel-coloured hair and the best-tasting pussy I’ve ever licked. The essence of which is still lingering on my lips.

“Is that what it was?” I laugh because he adores pointing out the goddamn obvious. I wouldn’t usually mind. That’s just his way. But I’m feeling out of sorts. The moment that girl broke down, clawing at my own guard, still unsettling me. She was so open. Raw. And I’ve got a raging boner, too. “A sham is a more accurate term for what that was, bro.”

He sighs roughly, and I can *feel* the disapproval rush through the speakers. “You need to stop taking matters into your own hands. Going off on your own—”

“Yeah. Yeah.” I turn a corner, watching the black road get eaten up between my tyres. “Gotcha.”

“I involve you as much as needed. I use your strengths. As I do Bronson’s and Max’s—”

“My strength is in my fists, Clay.” I squeeze the steering wheel, flexing the muscles that rush the length of my arms and shoulders, wishing he could accept that.

“Your strength is in your damn head! Pity you don’t use it.” He lets a rare moment of emotion flare, and it slides straight through my chest. I lock my jaw. I hear the sound of his cigar crackling, and it’s fair to say the sham party is over, the other side of the phone otherwise quiet.

He breathes out the words with what I presume is smoke, “You should be taking the bar, Xander, not—”

“This again?” I smile at the black interior, shaking my head in the darkness that is only bathed in glowing displays from the dashboard. “I gave up on law the moment we lost Max’s case. You know this.” I swallow over the memories of the nights I spent scrutinising my brother’s conviction file, finding every loophole, every possible clause or exception that might bring him home early. I found nothing.

After that—I glare at the road—after I failed him and his wife and their daughter, the lecture halls made me itch. The lawyers all around me, every damn day, made my muscles want to break through my skin. I can’t be a part of a system that took over two years from my brother.

I draw myself out of those helpless feelings and say, “Is that why you leave me looking over paperwork while Bronson plays the muscles beside you? You’re punishing me for boxing instead of taking the bar?”

Except for the hum of the tyres rolling smoothly along the clean, pristine Connolly streets, the car falls quiet. I anticipate a lecture, although my brother can convey a lecture in a single sentence.

Then he finally says, “Xander, if I were punishing you for anything, you would not need to ask, you would know.”

Yep. One fucking sentence. Fucking over it, I say, “Look, bro, I broke his nose. He’s gonna leave the girl alone. You got fifteen K, and I got to avoid shaking hands with the city sycophants as they pretend to mourn a woman that her sons don’t even grieve.”

“I do grieve for her.”

That’s because you didn’t know her.

“Yeah?” I feel my throat tighten as I fight back emotion, and I think about those baby-blue eyes filling with tears, the whimpering sounds coming from behind her palms, and the way she kissed me like she wanted my soul. That girl. Breaking into tears for me. Splitting in two. A total stranger coming undone. That was mourning. That was grief. I don’t know what about. But I wish I did. “Sure. Well, I’m not sure I am.”

“And Butch mourns her, se,” he says smoothly. At the mention of my father, my chest tightens. That’s fucking true; our dad adored and despised that woman, for she stood beside him through it all. Rough times. Adultery. The *Cosa Nostra* controlling our every move. And, well, he doesn’t know just how tainted she really was. Not like I do. He’ll never know. Max, Bronson, and I could never drop that burden on him. Not while he still tackles his own inadequacies as a father.

We don’t blame him for his absence when we were children... Not anymore. We’re men now. Just men and no longer in need of an explanation.

Love and hate are far too complex to understand. He wasn’t emotionally available—it’s as simple as that. He is trying to be now, though. Clay

continues, cutting into my thoughts. “You should have been present for him, Xander, at the very least.”

“Well, I’m home now.” I turn down the empty driveway, not long before stopping outside the house. “So, I’ll go check on the old boy. Is there anything else?”

We leave it at that, my important oldest brother, no doubt eager to get back to his pregnant fiancé and me, well, I’m dying for a wank. I wander into our family home under the cloak of darkness, normality clings to me until I hit the front door and then that false state crashes to my feet.

I grip the handle.

She’s dead.

And it’s quiet like the dead.

Like you, Mum.

Did you give this house life?

Pushing the front door open, I step into a dark lobby. Every globe is off, where usually the halls are lit enough to navigate the various open-plan spaces. And while the moon usually bathes the sprawling windows in light, tonight, the wooden blinds are drawn, making the house dark, ominous, and lacking vitality.

The reason is simple and unemotional; Dad has relieved the maids. The soldiers—*Cosa Nostra* paid guards—aren’t at their stations either.

Since only two bachelors live between these many walls and passages, he has probably advised them that night shifts are no longer a necessity.

He had them all for her.

There is no movement or sign that anyone is awake as I walk toward the billiard room, but I want to check. Sensing the sadness, I’m not surprised when I see him.

Stuffing my hands into my pockets, I lean my shoulder against the doorframe and stare at my dad passed out in his chair. It’s quiet. The record

player, which used to spin tunes, with Frank Sinatra and Ferenc Hegedus, collects dust.

I gaze at the near-empty bottle of Ballentine's beside him, at the ashtray to his side, stuffed with several hours' worth of cigars, and finally, at the man slumped over, alone, and still clutching his half-full whiskey glass protectively to his chest.

I smile sadly at him. That man won't allow a drop to spill, not even in his slumber. The golden-brown liquor fuels his heart. And blinds it.

His head has dropped forward, positioning him awkwardly in a way that will surely earn him one hell of a crook in the neck tomorrow.

He's a big motherfucker. Always has been. Where he used to be lean and covered in fine-tuned, agile muscles, he's bulkier in his old age. Thicker skin. Tighter muscles with less elasticity. Still, I just see Max in thirty years, and women still see something they like to look at.

They have told me as much.

I walk over to him and lift his thick arm. Lowering my shoulder, I sling it around my neck, causing him to grumble something about 'not being a dumb fuck and leaving him be.'

I chuckle and drag the old boy to his feet. Taking nearly all ninety kilograms of ex-champion boxer onto my shoulders, it's like sliding a damn fridge along a carpet.

Manoeuvring with him, listening to him protest, I manage to get him to the sofa several feet away before dropping forward with him, pulled down by his large frame.

I unthread his arm from my neck. Sighing, I take a moment. Press my forehead to his. Enveloped by the scent of Romeo y Julieta cigars—sandalwood and peppers—liquor, and him. *La Famiglia*.

I want to whisper those condolences. The bullshit ones everyone else said tonight, but he wouldn't believe me. He knows that my brothers and I

hold little love for that woman. He is alone in his grief. That's a sad place to be.

I'm sorry for your loss.

She was one hell of a woman.

She will be missed.

But I don't want to lie.

Finally, I whisper, "I'm sorry it hurts, Dad."

As I go to leave, he reaches up and grabs the top of my arm, holding me to him. He exhales a strained breath, his hand tight on me, his breathing powerful like the air that leaves him is saying a lot, saying it all, and now he's damn breathless with the sentiment pouring from him.

And maybe he is.

Finally, I hear, "I love you, my boy. I love all my boys with all of me, se."

I laugh it off. "And there's a whole lot of you, so—"

"I don't say it enough, Xander."

None of us do.

I nod. I nod to abate the rise of tears as they scorch the backs of my eyes. I nod to accept it, to trick my mind into thinking I'm fine. "Yeah, mate. We love you, too."

CHAPTER SEVEN

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THE NEXT MORNING, I'm still alone in Chloe's bed, fiddling with her fluffy toy owl and staring at the exposed rafters on her parents' ceiling. That wood is mahogany. I learnt about fine things from the moment I was born.

Tidy isn't *fine*.

Wood is worthless without the grooves. Wine is cheap without the tannins and the grippy texture. We appreciate imperfections in some things but not in others.

Not in diamonds.

Not in people.

Definitely not in Lovit daughters.

Ironic... I think about Xander with his cuts and bruises—

I force him away.

Focusing on now, Chloe is probably naked with belt marks on her arse in Kenno's bedroom. While her mum is *definitely* here, whistling from the other side of her bedroom door, the sound of the vacuum hitting the white skirting boards is a reminder that it's morning and she deems it time to "rinse and rine." In her sophisticated cleverness, she rinses herself of the past before drinking freshly squeezed orange juice. It's too common to just 'rise and shine.'

She won't be pleased to find me in here without Chloe, although she'll attempt to hide that fact.

Chloe's mum should be used to it by now, but she doesn't like me around her husband in the mornings. 'Cause the time of day miraculously changes... something. It's not a subtle dislike. She has openly asked me to cover up when he's home, because men like him 'can't help themselves.' Such a proud piece of wisdom to share with modern women.

Thanks, Veronica.

I fist the owl, my mind wandering to last night. To Xander Butcher and—*his panting*. It shouldn't mean anything. It doesn't. It's a mechanical thing people do when they are aroused, but I'm not simply obsessed by the sound of air leaving him, but with the sense of pain in each breath, and how it seemed to mingle with mine. It was... withheld, too.

I shake my head, feeling stupid, clutching at the owl while clutching at strings. I hurl the plush toy across the room because it's dumb, and I hate owls. They have weird gangly legs under their feathers and an exorcist head that flips.

And the owl always chased Brer.

Braving the day, the press, and the scene I might encounter when I get home, I slide out of Chloe's bed, steal a pair of her flats, and decide to climb out the window. Surely Veronica has heard about my dad, and as fascinating as that conversation would be, I think I'll pass. I'll need one of my mother's morning matcha latte with a shot of whiskey before I can even consider circling *that* particular topic.

I tie my hair back, grab my things, slide out the window, and order a Cabi—same as Uber but cheaper—back to my house.

I FIDDLE WITH MY NECKLACE.

“Are you going to get out?” the Cabi man asks gently, the wash of early morning sun causing him to squint at me.

Startled, I stare from him back to the three media vans parked on my front lawn, to the ten or more journalists and photographers, to the removal truck beeping and backing, beeping and backing, followed by a calamity of strangers carrying our furniture down the driveway, and then back to the driver who appears concerned I may have fallen into a catatonic state. Which I haven’t. ‘Cause I can hear the reporters, see the men reaping our belongings, feel my hands turning to stone. But I can’t breathe.

He tilts his head. “Ah... can you hear me?”

“Um.” I swallow, forcing a response. “Yeah.”

“Is that your house?” He gazes at the devastating fascia of our once-beautiful estate. I remember when my dad bought it for my mum, she had spun in the centre of the ballroom like something out of a Disney movie. *‘Look, girls! Like from Beauty and The Beast. Please say you approve.’* And my dad watched from the doorway, his eyes always on her when she was happy. “Do you need—”

“No. No.” I shake my head, push away the memory, and tear my eyes away from what is clearly no longer my home. “That’s not my home,” I breathe, my voice airy as though it is wind slipping through gaps in floorboards. Wooden ones... Like the beautiful ones we have in that house. I snap myself out of it to look at the man. “Can you take me—”

Then I see her, a microphone in her hand, a smug smile stretched—the bitch who did this.

“*Bitch*,” I hiss.

Before I know it, I’m throwing the Cabi door open and bolting across the road towards the redheaded woman who swore to me she would keep my father’s dealing out of the media. Promised me that in return for a favour, she would hide the fraudulent documents.

“Oi!” I march towards her, my fists curling in tight at my sides. “You! You did this!”

She touches the shoulder of a cameraman, nodding politely and smoothly and unaffected, and I’ll smack that cavalier right off her red-painted lips.

“Kaya Lovit,” she coos, performing a caring tone, but I see the bubbling of excitement at my newsworthy appearance. “I didn’t leak the information.”

“Bullshit!”

“I didn’t. Your father has been under investigation by the Australian Tax Office for years. Not months. It was only a matter of time. This”—she widens her arms for the devastating scene— “has been a long time coming. They need everything, sweetheart. Full access to the house. And your belongings, well, they are being seized. I am so sorry.”

The cameras are suddenly on me.

I stop dead in my tracks, my anger turning to panic, retreat mode freezing my muscles. Looking around, I see lenses and eyes locked on me, circling me, feel them eager to catch my meltdown or possible assault on their beloved editor, Lorna Jackson. I bet they’d enjoy either.

I should bolt and call my mum, find out which of our holiday homes she’s at and go, but my body is shaking with rage. I growl at Lorna, “You swore to me—”

“Have you spoken with your mother?” she asks me, her tone professional—*newsworthy*.

Ugh.

The cameras close in.

My palms get sweaty. I think about my mum’s warning message last night. *It is better if you stay at Chloe’s or one of your friend’s houses after your party. Call me before you come home so I can explain.* I didn’t listen. I never do. And I’ll surely hear about it when she sees the news.

“You make me sick,” I spit out to Lorna and turn on my flats, my back rigid as I head towards the Cabi only— I freeze.

He’s gone.

No.

I stall, alone on the street, the sound of reporters’ footsteps approaching me cautiously as though I may spook like a dog. I’m more likely to maul. They’ll see.

“*Fuck,*” I mutter to myself. Glancing over my shoulder at the cameras focused on my every move, I consider punching the glass lens if not for the man... *No.* The one carrying my pink suitcase across the lawn right now.

Not them!

My eyes lock on the case, knowing what is inside. The silliest things and the sweetest. Worthless. Nothing important to anyone. But important to me.

“No.” I’m upon him before I can think. “That’s mine! I paid for them.” I lie. I’ve never paid for a damn thing in my life, but panic rushed the words along my tongue like little grappling hooks of hope that might allow me to keep *them*.

Just them.

The sound of Lorna narrating my volatile actions to the cameramen does not impede my mission to get the damn case from the man’s grasp.

But he fights me.

I shouldn’t be surprised by the shriek that breaks from me as I wrestle to rescue them from this stranger. He’s big. Fat, actually. His belly shakes as he tries to keep hold of the case.

“Let go, young lady!”

He shoves me. The encounter ends when I drop back to my arse, my hands bracing my fall, the tiny shards of bitumen embedding in my palms.

Then I hear, “Touch her again, and I’ll bleed your brain through your ears.”

My eyes widen.

I look up, the sun cutting lines across Xander Butcher as he approaches the man. Holding his big, bruised hand out for the case in a smooth, effortless way. He isn't requesting the item; he's damn well expecting it.

"But- but- it's my job."

"The case," is all Xander says, his voice deeper with the threat he made. Not a threat. A promise.

Xander's back is to me, his large, trim, *panther-like* body casting a shadow over my dumb arse still on the ground.

I scramble to my feet just as the fat man backs away slowly, placing the case on the grass in defeat. You don't argue with a Butcher. Not in this town. Their town.

Snatching the case from the lawn, I ignore Xander and leg it down the street. *Xander fucking Butcher.*

What the fuck?

Two roads over, I've reduced my speed to a walk, heading towards the park to, well, *park* my arse, have a full-blown scream and tantrum, and regroup, when my phone starts to ring in my pocket.

My free hand hurts from taking my weight when I fell, and the other isn't relinquishing the case, so... I let it ring.

I know who it is. The air thickens with expectation and, somehow, the scent of Giorgio Armani. So, it must be my mother. I can feel her impatience as though she were standing in front of me, clutching her necklace.

A car slows down beside me, but I square my shoulders ahead, eyes on the path. It rolls in my peripherals, set at the same pace as my stride.

"Hey, Woman."

The sound of Xander's voice brings tears to bite the backs of my eyes, but instead of crying, I speed up with my case in my fist. "Go away,

Xander,” I state without looking at him. “I’m trying to have a meltdown, if you don’t mind.”

“I do mind.” He pauses, and I fight the urge to look at him. “What was that about, *Kaya*?” His tone shifts from conversational to concerned.

I tighten my jaw. “Are you stalking me now?”

“I came to see if you were okay. Kaya Lovit, isn’t it? I saw you tagged in that dipshit Young’s Facebook photos. I’m sorry I didn’t ask for your name last night. Or... the previous night. I’m a blackout drunk. Not my intention to upset anyone. And that—” He suddenly growls. “Can you stop walking, Woman!”

I don’t. “No.”

“Fuck this,” he curses and speeds up before swerving the car over, mounting the sidewalk a few feet ahead, and blocking my damn path. He opens the driver’s door and steps out. “Where are you going?”

“To the moon.”

“Can I come?” he asks, sounding sincere.

I round the sleek black Jeep, but just as fast, Xander grabs me and pushes my back against the car. He releases me quickly but cages my body, making it hard to move with a hand placed on either side of my shoulders.

I huff.

I glare up at him, met with a face, perfectly masculine yet boyish, bruised and scarred, so beautifully damaged it seems to reflect my soul. I can’t breathe when I look at him up close. I scowl to stop from melting. “I already told you that I don’t let boys come.”

His lips curve softly. “I’ll just make you come then.”

My shoulders deflate, and I squeeze the case in my hand, considering beating him with it. “Why are you doing this, Xander? We’re not friends.”

“I don’t want to be your friend.”

“Good!”

“I want to lick your pussy until you cry.”

“Good! I mean— Fuck off.”

His brows draw together behind his floppy dark fringe. I don’t know what he’s feeling right now, but I think he swallows something painful. “You *cried*, Woman.”

I scoff. “So?”

“So”—he talks tightly around the words— “I. Fucking. Care. I felt it. And I cared.”

“Me too!”

“Let me help you then.”

“Is this your thing? Helping the downtrodden?” I punch words at him. “I thought you were fucking brilliant or something. Isn’t that what everyone in the city says? Xander Butcher is a certified genius, but he wastes it in the ring. Well, you could use some of that brilliance to learn social cues. I don’t want your help. I’m fine. Perfect, actually!” I raise my voice and almost stomp on the words. “Don’t you know how fucking perfect the Lovit daughters are!”

“You finished?” he asks tightly, every part of him exuding strength and tension, his arms and shoulders curved, a flesh-made barricade that pins me to the car.

I am finished.

Destroyed.

I glare at the concrete between our feet, at his trainers grazing the front of Chloe’s flats.

“It’s not for you, then,” he whispers, deep and hoarse. “It’s for me. Can you handle that? Can you handle the fact that when you cried last night, *I* needed to see your tears? I needed to see real emotion last night, and it was...” His head drops to mine, and that heavy pained breathing strokes my cheek. “Was so. Fucking. Real. *I* needed it.”

“You want to see my tears?” I mock softly, not feeling the taunting tone at all but reeling from his warm breath. I inhale with pain and anguish and

anger. His air. The air circles his body, lifting the scent of him around us. Man. Mint. Rubber. *God*. I focus, clearing my throat and saying, “You’re not a genius. You’re fucking insane.”

“I could be both.” There is a small smile in his voice. “All the great minds are.” He pulls back and I breathe slightly better with that slither of space, though my lungs seem to heave for more of *his* air—starved for it.

“*Finished*,” I murmur, relenting, flopping against the car and gazing up, falling into his topaz-blue eyes. “I *am* finished, Butcher. My whole family, my name is finished. Finish is a— ah... What did you call it? A contronym. It means to have completed something, right? And to have destroyed it.”

My throat thickens.

Those fucking tears start to burn my eyes again—pinpricks of bullshit and sentiment.

“I don’t want to cry,” I say in a way that carries a personal plea for him to somehow make it stop. Make it end. *Can you?* “It’s just a house. Just money.”

He sighs roughly. “Is that why you cried last night?” He’s still so close. Our souls so strangely unravelled when together, we may be the only two of the same creatures on the planet. “They are taking your house, huh? And all your things?”

“No.” I shake my head. “I’m *pissed* they are taking my house.” Then I admit, “But last night, I cried because they are taking my dad away. Locking him up.”

He stares at me, his eyes doing a long sweep of my face, considering whether to offer up advice or give me his condolences. “Don’t say you’re sorry.”

“I’m—”

“No.” I smash my index finger to his lips, forcing him to hush. “Don’t say anything. People say a lot and mean nothing. I don’t need to hear that you’re sorry for me.”

“I thought something similar last night... At my mother’s wake. Don’t you think it’s weird we both don’t want to hear a bullshit sorry right now? ‘Cause she wasn’t a good woman. I had no relationship with her. But everyone wants to give me a ‘sorry’ to make *them* feel better.”

My throat thickens under his statement. The painful panting, the suit, the intensity, falling into place.

His mum died.

But I don’t say sorry.

He doesn’t want it.

We stare at each other, his eyes narrowing on me as though confused. His lips are warm against my finger, and there is a calloused ridge on the lower one where he’s split it and it’s healed—over and over.

This must have happened many times, forcing it to harden to withstand its brutal circumstances. It’s an ode to his wins in the ring. A trophy he carries with him always. His skin adapted from silk to leather, muscles growing, becoming the sport.

Xander’s eyes are glued to mine, then they dart to my palm, and he frowns. Only then do I feel the sting of broken skin from my fall to the ground earlier.

Circling my wrist with his hand, he squeezes it, and I note that his palms are warm, too. Everything about him is torrid. Pulling my hand away from his lip, he studies my grated skin as though he can heal it under his gaze. Catching my attention, a black snake tattoo below his thumb and the words “monsters are made” on his wrist.

I shrug and look back at his face. “It’s just a graze.”

He looks strangely bothered by it. Discomfort floats through me. Such intensity isn’t right between strangers. I attempt to pull my hand away, but it’s no use.

“Let me clean your hand,” he states to my palm, before flicking his gaze to my face. He relaxes with a grin, a crooked curve with straight white teeth

and a tiny gap on either side where his smile is bigger than his jaw. I like it too much.

The moment of strange closeness breaks when he backs away and rounds the car. “Jump in, Kaya Lovit.”

Lowering my hand to my side, I scoff, “No.”

He places one foot inside the car, lifting an obnoxious dark brow at me over the shiny black roof. “Why? You got somewhere else to be?”

No. I don't.

Ugh.

I STILL HAVE no idea how I ended up at the District Gym at seven am in Chloe's flats and last night's outfit, which makes every lycra-covered arsehole turn to face me. Or maybe they're stealing glances from their workout stations because Xander Butcher has me sitting on the gym's juice bar with a first-aid box open beside me.

There is music pumping through the corner speakers, interrupted by the muted sounds of a workout instructor chanting in another room.

Glass-like mirrors chase reflections on every inch of the walls, and the pride-and-joy of the gym is an elevated platform with a mat bordered by ropes and scaffolding to the right and back with aerial views.

The boxing ring.

No one is inside it.

Xander tends to my palm with a kind of ointment, and my hand is cradled in his like the graze is a crack in the ice, ready to spread and shatter the entire sheet. I don't know why, but I fucking *let* him take care of it, too fatigued to find his attention misogynistic or belittling. Although, it is.

“Do you know where they are housing you?” he asks, the wide breadth of his hips unapologetically widening my knees, his eyes on my palm as if

it's a precious possession. "They usually put people up when they're under investigation like this. They need access to everything and can't have you tampering with evidence."

"We have other houses."

"It's not like that, Kaya." He frowns at my palm, being the bearer of bad news, but then I read somewhere that Xander Butcher was studying law. So, I listen. "They'll take the lot. Search everything. Until the investigation is over, and even then, depending on the verdict, you'll lose most of your belongings to the state."

My breath shudders out. "Right..." I knew that. I did.

"You'll be okay," he declares, his delivery wrapped in a promise that is his to offer. It's a classic Butcher-Brother tone. Entitled, but rightly so. It's seamlessly authoritarian. "You won't be homeless. The state will put you in a motel or something. And you'll adjust. A change is as good as a holiday."

I curl my nose, unable to control the rush of anxiety that inflates in my chest before filling my throat.

"A motel?" My voice sounds like a petulant child's, but it won't abate. Dirty. Strange smells. Weird people loitering around the doorway.

Tobacco clinging to the walls.

Carpets marred in odour.

My breathing turns shallow.

"Xander." A blonde girl wearing pink workout gloves and next to nothing else beckons from behind him.

On cue with my building panic attack, my phone rings in my jeans, so I wiggle my bum on the counter and retrieve it.

Absently, I lift it to my ear, blasted with, "I told you not to go to the house," and immediately, I wish that I'd hit decline.

Mum.

I nod at the girl over Xander's shoulder, indicating for him to *tend* to her, but he doesn't move. His eyes are set on me, his forehead tightly etched

in pensive lines, brows weaved into a small peak as Amber Lovit barks loudly down the phone. “You are all over the internet in last night’s clothing!”

Shock horror.

I roll my eyes so hard I stare at my brain as she goes on, “And you attacked Lorna Jackson! Have you lost your mind, Kaya Alana! Do you know how this looks?”

Yes, Mother.

Like I’m insane.

“I’m sorry if I don’t look good on the news, Mother!” I use the title *mother* with a snap of disdain.

“I was trying to protect you from all that, Kaya!”

My planned, contemptuous response goes unheard as Xander plucks the phone from my hand so quickly my fingers hang in the air, curled around the phantom object.

“Hey!” I try to wrestle it from him, but he’s stronger than me. Shocked, I still and blink at the outline in Xander’s jeans. He’s wearing torn blue denim. I don’t know why I note the type of pants he is wearing...

He was in a suit yesterday.

For his mother’s wake.

Drawn to his jeans, I can’t believe I didn’t notice before because they sit so low on his cut hips that his yummy Adonis belt muscles flashed at me when he lifted his shirt to place the handset in them.

“Mother issues... *Same*,” is all he says, releasing my palm and leaning back onto the island bench, crossing his feet at his ankles, folding his finely defined arms casually over his muscle-ripped torso. “So, *Kaya Alana*, what’s in the case?”

None of your business, Xander I-wish-I-knew-your-middle-name Butcher. “Do you have any body fat at all?”

He allows me to avert the conversation and drops his tone, “Maybe that was uncalled for. Go on. You can grab your phone if you want it.”

Ignoring the grin that curls the corner of his lips, I pretend I’m impervious to his allure and step forward. Daring him with my gaze, I slowly dig into his front pocket. He grabs my wrist, stopping me inside the denim and holding me there.

And I immediately know why as he presses himself into my hand, so my fingers bump against the rock-hard shape beside my phone.

He groans, and I gape at him.

“There’s my fat,” he states, deadpan. “Being between your legs when you haven’t showered was torture. Your sweat smells so fucking good, Woman.”

When he releases my hand, I tug it from his pocket. The air crackles under those words, because I want nothing more than to shower last-night Kaya and this Kaya away, whereas Xander wants nothing more than to bathe in her. In the dirty parts of me. The tears. Weakness. The truth. The sweat. Not cover it in perfume and poise.

His breath rolls down my cheek, minty. I want to kiss him. Lift my chin to encourage it; he’ll dip a few inches and take my lips.

Dammit, Kaya!

I’m crushing on him.

“Xander.” The blonde is unrelenting, and he smiles at me before turning his head to acknowledge her.

“Molly,” he calls as she approaches, still relaxed in his position. “What can I do you for?”

A blush hits her neck, and she’s eschewing me. “I was wondering if you could spot me. I know you’re usually busy with your trainer, but since you’re not doing anything, I thought—”

“I am doing something, actually.” He tilts his chin at me while I study her, from her pink Sketchers to her white-gold earrings. She’s pretty. Trim.

“Kaya, this is Molly. Molly, Kaya. We were about to hit the ring.”

My attention snaps to him. “We what now?”

“What’s wrong, Woman?” He flicks me that lopsided grin, and I suppress my reaction to its leg-buckling power. “Only fight when it’s a street scrap with a public servant?”

Ugh.

He’s annoying.

Wiggling his brows at me, he walks backwards with that effortless stealth before spinning around and sliding his shirt over his head.

And. I. Nearly. Stop. Breathing.

His lips may have some kind of pussy pleasing CPS technology, but that body—*Fuck*. That body was not created, nothing so common, but crafted instead. He’s the perfect combination of thick, defined muscles and lean, agile limbs.

I stare at him.

Gawk, actually.

Across his ribs are four tattooed sentences scrawled in parallel rows. They are in another language—Italian, I think.

Up his back, a massive, complex family tree grows from the roots up his spine to the leaves that envelop his flanks and shoulder blades.

Stop staring.

Rounding the ring, he removes everything, socks, shoes, until he’s down to those hip-hanging jeans that tease every girl in the gym with a sweeping view of the two thick Adonis belt muscles at his pelvis. They pulse when he moves... *God*, I didn’t know that they pulse— That seems indecent.

He ducks under the knotted rope with grace, bounce, and confidence; all the while, his skin shifts menacingly around each dense muscle. He’s stunning and predatory all at once. He’s a damn panther.

Good one, Kaya.

“On the canvas, Woman.”

Fuck. I shrug. What the hell.

I shoulder past Blondie, kick off my shoes, climb into the ring, and I'm hit immediately with a surge of endorphins. Just standing between the ropes is exhilarating and nerve-wracking.

I press my foot into the mat. "It's not made of canvas."

He laughs warmly. "It used to be made of canvas. I'm old school," Xander says, fitting me with gloves. "They fit nicely." He slides two pads on his own hands.

There is a storm of pure intensity in his gaze, which cracks with passion. That seems to be him, though. Xander Butcher—intensely passionate, passionately intense.

He claps the pads together twice before bracing them at head height for me.

His eyes lock on mine. "You're lefthanded so—"

"How do you know I'm lefthanded?"

He smirks, boyish. "I do this for a living. So, *one*, is a jab with your right fist. Like this"—he demonstrates with the pad, making a perfect cut through the air. "Slow. Controlled. Two: a jab with the left. A powerful jab. Throw"—he emulates the motion for me once more— "your body into it. Three: is a hook with your right." Jab. "Four is an uppercut with your left." Jab. "Okay? I'm going to call, and you do as you're told and show me how well you listen."

Ugh. Patronising Butcher-hole.

I smirk. "Aren't you worried about my palm, Dr Butcher? You were so concerned about it before."

"Underestimating me, Woman. I knew I was going to get you in here. Now, you're wearing gloves. You've got a numbing agent on it. The sting will have mellowed some by the time it wears off."

"You just want me to sweat more."

His eyes darken and he leans in. As his hot breath cascades across my neck, my shoulders rise. “I want that more than you know. I’m aching for that. But if you get some of that anger out here, it’ll help out there. So, be a good woman, and then I’ll let you shower in the gym after. Deal?”

The way he calls me ‘woman’ feels intimate, personal, although the term couldn’t be more common. Then I hear the rest of his sentence. I picture a public shower, suddenly swallowed up by revulsion that purses my lips. “Gross.”

“They are damn good showers.”

He claps with the pads again, the smack of vinyl on vinyl summoning something inside me to shock my heart.

Presenting the plane of each pad at eye level, he waits for me to respond.

Nodding, I hold my gloves up like I saw Hilary Swank do in *Million Dollar Baby*. My heart gallops up my throat, my pulse fluttering under my skin as I jab into the opposite pad with my right fist.

“Whoa.” He laughs, and it’s beautiful. I try not to smile at the way it sails around the room. He loves the ring, his eyes shining under neon lighting. “Ease up. Wait for my instructions and then jab on my command.”

“Sorry.”

His eyes narrow. “One.”

Jab.

“Good,” he praises me, and I smile uncontrollably. “Two.” *Jab.*
“Three.” *Jab.*

“Three. Three. Three.”

“One. Three. Four.”

And with each jab, I feel my anger dwindling, but something far more potent and uncontrollable building between my thighs.

CHAPTER EIGHT

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kaya



THE SHOWER IS HOT, and the steam rises around me, fogging the stall and clinging to the tiled walls before making snake tracks to the floor. Xander's right. It's seriously good. The pressure hits my chest hard. The temperature is just below scolding, pinkening my skin.

I breathe deeply through the dense air. I've heard that a workout can make you feel good. Not just your body, but actually affect your mood. There is a contented feeling in the aftermath of a workout, and it's peaceful.

I'm washing myself, the water lapping the walls and floor when I hear the door to the changing rooms open.

Steps move across the floor confidently, a steady rap that awakens my contented pulse.

They stop outside my stall.

I turn to face the door, running my hands down my body and gazing at Xander's feet below the stall's door. The changerooms are unisex, but he's not moving.

Finally, he says, "What's it gonna take to finish what we started last night? Your legs wrapped around my waist. Your husky moans and emotions falling into my mouth."

My palms knead the soap into my skin. "I'm clean now. I'm about to get out," I say through deep pants, fighting against the thick steam and the

overwhelming effect his deep timbre has on me.

A sound of contemplation leaves him, but it's strained and hoarse—a hum laced with a groan. “I’ll take you clean. I’ll take you dirty. Just let me take you.”

“I don’t let boys come,” I remind him, sliding my hand south, resting my palm between my thighs to ease the building sensitivity. Against my hand, I feel my pussy muscles working, wanting. It’s his voice.

“Is that some kind of feminist stance?” he asks. “Or did something happen that’s put you off? Some dickhead did you wrong? Fucked around on you?”

“Not *one* thing has happened. But if they don’t come, I’m never used.” I don’t lie. I’m a virgin, but I’m not about to admit that to him. I just refuse to behave like my mother or one of my father’s sluts, yet I enjoy coming as much as the next red-blooded person, so I made a rule. They don’t come. I do. It’s worked fine until now. Most of the guys I use are happy to get between my legs in any capacity. Then I make an excuse.

Still cupping between my legs, I say, “The pleasure is for me. I am happy with the arrangement.”

I watch his feet shuffle, hear his hands meet the cubicle door and a groan soar over the stall. Maybe he heard the strain in my voice. “You’re killing me, Woman. There is pleasure in giving, too. Let me show you.”

Are you begging me, Xander?

Holding myself to relieve the ache, I say breathlessly, “That sounds like some patriarchal crap. Let me guess. You’re in pain. Blue balls. I’m physically hurting you. And I can’t possibly understand what that is like for a man.”

“That’s some chip on your shoulders, Woman. Blue balls are real, Kaya. But no, it’s not your job to stop the ache you’re causing, but you’ll enjoy doing it.”

“Will I really?”

“Have you ever seen a man come?”

“Of course I have.” I dip a finger inside my pussy, the digit playing easily within the slippery valley. My lungs strain as they draw in the hot, moisture-laced air. “I’m nineteen. I’ve watched porn. I’ve watched men come on women’s faces. Piss on them. Spit on them. *Use* them.”

He groans; it’s full of intensity.

But then he purrs, “Have you ever seen a man come while he’s staring at *you*.” My mouth opens to gasp through the fog. “Like you’re the most delicious thing he’s ever laid eyes on, Kaya. Like he could eat you. Ever seen a man falling apart, groaning your name, and spurting cum across his abdomen so hard his entire body shakes and convulses and— It’s. All. Because. Of. You.”

Fuck.

No, I haven’t seen that.

Staring at his feet, I hold my breath, wanting him to say more while I leisurely slide my finger in and out of my pussy. I don’t talk. Can’t. It might break whatever spell I’m in, and I don’t want that. I can practically feel that torrid, intense energy burning through the door, hot tangible waves that find me, beat into me.

Open the door, Kaya.

Then he moves away.

I listen to him pad into the stall beside mine, the shower switches on, and that familiar sound of water lapping as he begins to wash himself. He’s naked. I wonder what *it* looks like.

Is he smooth to the touch?

They look smooth.

Are you hard, Xander?

I continue to touch myself, imagining his skilled lips and trained tongue where my finger slowly plays. My pulse flutters through my veins, sensing him close, hearing him beside me while I casually finger myself.

But then the sound of the downpour in his stall changes. It starts to slap the tiles with more rhythm and purpose. My hand freezes between my thighs.

No. He's not.

God.

I groan when I realise what he's doing right next door. What I'm doing, too. The intensity of the water slaps become violent, interrupted suddenly by a deep groan that rushes from my temple down to my curling toes.

"I'm thinking about how you moved beneath me when my lips sucked on your pussy. Your soft thighs and arse bouncing against my face." He groans again from somewhere deep, somewhere inside. "*Fuck.*"

I pull my finger from between my folds. My hands meet the wall that separates us, and my fingers flex against the wet tiles, brimming with need. To touch him. Wanting to dig through the ceramic and board, and wrap my hands around the source of all that pleasure. To feel its thickness. The way it pulses.

Breathless.

I'm breathless.

"My cock is throbbing in my fist, Woman. You should feel it. Like. A. Fucking. Drum. It hurts." He gasps in a deep feverish way. "Fuck. You're killing me. With that body. Those tits. That no-bars-held scowl. With that sweat. I want to lick your spine. Take you against the shower wall."

He starts to grunt—each burst of sound draws a gasp from me as though the end of that bruising sound batters me inside. The sensation causes me to press my body to the wall and rub, receiving no ebb to the intense phantom fucking he's so loudly giving me.

"And you'll spread your legs for me. Offer me that juicy pussy because you'll *want* me to come."

I close my eyes. Listen to him fuck his fist.

See me.

And him.

Together.

He goes on breathlessly. “I’ll take a fist full of your caramel hair. You’ll arch your back like you’re made of rubber, and you’ll take me deep. You’ll scratch at the tiles because you’re a fucking fighter. You’ll scream my name. Beg me to come inside you. Want to feel me lose my sanity, lose my fucking vision, over *your* body.”

It's too much.

“*Xander*,” I pant against the wall.

“*Kaya*.” His groan is tight. “I’m gonna come for you, Woman. And you’re gonna.” Grunt. “Love it.” Grunt. “My dirty. Pretty. Little scrapper. *Fuuuck*.”

Moaning to his dark promise, I slide my slick body against the slippery tiles as he delivers on it immediately.

A slap. A grunt. A long groan that seems to settle in my core where it vibrates to the long, guttural melody of his orgasm, where it twists me in tight knots. The sound of him wringing his cum from his cock becomes agonisingly *pleasurable*.

Fuck. Me.

And he wins. That was a whole new sense of gratification. Of excitement.

He’s annoying.

As his groaning softens into hums, the electrified air parting around me, I roll my head against the misty wall.

“You did that,” he says, lust deepens each word. “Just the image of you on the other end of my cock. Did. That. And if that’s not dominant, if that’s not part of your feminine power, your strength, I don’t know what is. Nothing fucking patriarchal about it, Woman.”

I want so much more from him in this moment, to talk to him, to hear his thoughts on life—to watch him come while he thinks about me—but I

remind myself that Xander Butcher doesn't do commitment or girlfriends. It's well known. So, that's not what's happening here. We are strangers stumbling along, our paths colliding due to circumstances and hormones. That's all.

His shower shuts off.

Silence gathers now, but for his breathing. The figurative moment over, leaving me feeling swept up and uncertain. I can't be the one who hopes this interaction is more than just casual. I can't be left behind.

Anxious to beat him out of the stall, maybe I can leave the gym before he has a chance to catch me, I turn the tap off and reach for the towel.

Rushing, I pull on the District City gym shirt and shorts, that have *Home Of The Legend* printed across the bust and thigh—Xander gave them to me after our spar. I stumble out, hopping to get the shorts all the way up my arse—

I bump straight into that hard, scorching wall of muscles that climb for miles. My gaze pans down the shredded plane of his naked torso, to his low-hanging jeans.

Still reeling, I steady myself against him by placing both palms on his chest, and he hisses when my fingers flex on the smooth hairless surface. He shaves. Or waxes.

I brave a glance at his face.

He's got what can only be described as an *orgasm expression*—jaw pulsing like it wants to lock onto flesh, eyes hooded with dirty intentions. "So, you didn't get any pleasure from that?" he says with a crooked grin.

"No." I can feel my blush. "You're a pervert."

His eyes darken. "Liar."

We are so close. But then he walks away, my hands slipping from his pectorals, instantly colder and mourning their warmth. Now it's time to wake up.

I follow him out, and watch him unlock the changing room door, having not thought about spectators to our blind, touchless fuck.

When I see my case, I quickly retrieve it and head straight for the exit.

“You’re gonna be alright,” he calls out from behind me. It wasn’t a question. “I know that your new life looks hard.”

Sighing and without turning, I say, “It looks shit.”

“New shit.” His voice makes me jump because he’s right behind me. I deflate, knowing I have to brave my mother, sisters, a motel, and a whole new... lifestyle. I don’t know. I stiffen when his breath touches my ear. “A few years back, I was pretty depressed.”

I turn to face him, hovering by the door, having nearly bolted, so I don’t crush on him any harder. He looks fresh, with a mist of clean shower water still clinging to his skin. And his eyes, a shimmering blue again, roam my face caringly. Concerned, even.

“For my brother,” he goes on. “You remember. It was all over the District news for years. When they put Max away. I wasn’t in a good place, and I couldn’t stay out of my own head. And everyone thought I was nuts when I dropped out of law and started boxing.” He sweeps a piece of my half-damp hair over my shoulder, and I soften under his tender touch. “It was just recreationally at first. It was just for tension. But I was good. *Really* good. And my dad needed a distraction, too. You know he was *The Legend*. Not just of the District. He was champion in Sicily. In England.

“So, he started coaching me. With my dad engaged and both of us focused, everything got easier. My habits changed. I was outside running instead of in a dark lecture hall. I felt better. A big change, cold turkey from my old lifestyle.” He looks pensive—I’ve got intensely passionate Xander in this moment. “It can be a good thing, Kaya.”

I sigh. “We have a certain way we live.”

“Not anymore.”

My throat burns. “But it isn’t my choice! We have... *habits*. We have rituals and traditions. I do things a certain way. My hair. My nails. My— It might sound shallow, but it’s all I know. And what my dad knows is *work*, gin with his juice, and cannabis with his air because he has chronic arthritis. He won’t cope in prison. He drinks. He smokes. He gambles. He’s old. Pull him from everything he knows, and he’ll *rot*.”

Xander nods, his dark expressive brows tight in contemplation. When he goes to speak, I nearly silence him with my finger again, not wanting to hear bullshit lines of sympathy, but he doesn’t do that.

He knows better, and says, “You know, they studied habits in Vietnam vets. Not many people know this, but a massive percentage of them became heroin addicts while they were serving.”

“Xander, what does this—”

I stop talking when he cups the side of my neck in a way that suggests his hand needs to feel me one last time, but he doesn’t know where to put it. “*Listen*. It was easy to get. They did it as a unit. It was *what they were used* to for years, but when they came back, most of them got sober with very few relapsing. That blew doctors’ minds. Like, what? That’s a damn addictive drug. But ya see,”—his thumb makes circles on my neck— “the addiction was connected to their way of life, to serving, to the other soldiers, and to Nam. New life. New environment. New habits.” He dips his head, blue eyes drilling into mine. And his lips are close, too, as he says, “Stay away from toxic people and places, Kaya. You have a new lifestyle. And I promise it’ll be easier than you think to adapt. And your dad will adapt, too.”

Tears swim in my eyes. “He’s... I *dunno*... soft.”

“No such thing”—his hand squeezes the curve of my throat with gentle authority— “We’re all built with the ultimate goal to survive.”

I like your brain, Xander.

His hand leaves my neck, a solemn gesture to end the conversation—end *us*. End whatever we were for twenty-four hours. I have to leave.

Nodding a goodbye, I turn and walk to the sliding glass doors, before saying to him, “I’ll see you.” I needed to say something. “It’s been real.”

“Yeah,” he agrees, that one word carrying meaning and significance that I don’t quite understand. “It really has.”

Then I notice his jeans are wet, the moisture from his undried legs seeping into the fabric as though he rushed to get dressed.

Wanting to catch me?

No.

I glance away. I’m overthinking it.

The automatic doors open, but he stops me, calling out, “Hey, Woman!”

I peer over my shoulder.

“Go get the world.”

I smile.

See ya, Xander.

See-ya. That’s a contronym phrase—if there is such a thing. I know there isn’t, but it’s still strange how language works. *See-ya*: See you. It means to leave someone and to find them.

As I exit the gym with my case, entering my *new* world—my new shit—I secretly hope that our “see ya” involves finding each other.

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CHAPTER NINE

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“CAN YOU PULL OVER?”

“Are you feelin’ sick?” The older Cabi man says, his tone hoarse like he chain smokes although the car doesn’t smell of tobacco but of salt. Before I can answer, he throws the car to the side, mounting the grass quickly.

My navy Maddison day dress catches the wind as I jump out of the old white Mazda. My lashes fan against the sun’s brilliance, my eyes locked on the bright-red picketed sign.

I stand there, just staring at it.

A picketed sign?

It has an obnoxious arrow that points to the *off-road*. The wooden stake is buried deep in the earth and the board has Clover Hill Remand in big block letters—a warning and a directional guide, I assume.

What the actual fuck?

Google Maps not enough?

I frown hard. Hating it. I’ve never seen a directional for a permanent structure before, least of all for this kind of business. For like, food trucks and display homes and—

Roll-in.

Roll-out.

Mobile businesses.

It's an advertisement.

That's a cruel joke.

Surely, the government would prefer the general public, whatever, to just coast by completely unaware that there is a cage filled with human beings who have family members at home that cry themselves to sleep every night.

That worry about them.

Some of the incarcerated are innocent. I mean, that is what a remand centre is. It's pre-conviction. Not that my dad is innocent...

Will he adapt?

Will I?

I muse in front of the sign until a car honk pulls me from my thoughts, the sound of a stranger wolf-whistling as they rush past stokes my contempt to outright anger.

Growling, I clutch hold of the plastic board and shake it, rock it, twist it, and fight to loosen the dirt around the stake.

It's.

I try to tug it out.

My fingers slip from the plastic.

Not.

It's stuck hard.

Fair!

Fuck it.

Losing my mind, I kick the stake hard with the bottom of my shoe, over and over and over, panting as I work.

What the fuck?

Defeated and out of breath, I stumble backwards, all the while glaring at the steadfast sign as though it is the reason I can't bring my dad home.

Suddenly, someone blocks my view of it. When the Cabi man appears in front of me, I ready myself for a lecture.

“Just don’t—”

My words stop on my tongue as he puts his big, black boot on the board and steps down. The stake splinters in half, and the board now lays in the grassy dirt beneath the weight of his solid body.

I half expected him to leave me high and dry like the last driver did outside my house. I’m making a habit of meltdowns in front of the Cabi community.

Startled—thrown, actually—I watch Cabi man grab the snapped directional and hold it out for me.

I look up at him, noting his appearance for the first time since I climbed into his car twenty minutes ago. He’s weathered by sunblasted skin; despite that, he’s more youthful looking than my dad. Maybe he’s in his 50s? Greying blonde hair and wise raisin-coloured eyes that seem to stare off into space instead of directly at me. I could see him surfing, scolding the groms when they drop on his wave, shaking his fist at litter on the sand. An old beach-bum.

“Here ya go,” he states roughly. “Now, get in the car before you end up locked in the place you’re visitin.’”

Reeling from his actions, I simply nod and take the picket as though it’s my prize—a picket for a meltdown—and climb back into the clean white Mazda.

When the car takes off in silence, turning into the *delightfully* unmissable off-road, I gaze down at the stake resting between my shoes. The carpet beneath is clean but still has a shimmer. I use the pointy end of the picket to flick at it, seeing a sprinkle of sand rise from the mesh.

He *is* a beach-bum. I stare at the beach-bum Cabi-Man and say, “Why did you do that? Help me back there?”

“I’m on the clock,” he answers plainly. “Got another pick-up, that’s all. You weren’t gettin’ anywhere with it.”

I don't buy it. It's an acceptable answer, I suppose, although I get the feeling it's straight-out bullshit.

He keeps his eyes on the road, squinting slightly or maybe his face is just set like that—deep eyes, wandering mind, a perpetual expression of reflection.

The white Mazda rolls down the hill to the *cleverly* named Clover Hill Remand building.

It looks like a school.

An old 90s school.

To further stress the mood, the outside is rendered and painted in grey. The entrance is through the middle of two single-storey buildings with three sets of gates leading down between them.

Is the left side murderers and rapists?

The right for... everyone else?

Along with my purse, I claim the splintered stake that represents all that is wrong with my life, and I exit the car. I go to close the door but stop. Leaning down to face the beach-bum Cabi-Man, I say, "Thanks for the picket."

"You're welcome." He nods stiffly, his profile to me. "Don't go hurtin' anyone with the pointy end, now."

I actually smile. "I'll only use it if I have to."

"Well, if you have to, then you definitely should."

I like him.

After I close the door, he drives away, and I find a patch on the vast lawn out the front of the building. Slumping down on the grass, I fold my legs to the side. I place the picket on the ground beside me and plonk my black Gucci purse in my lap to hold my dress down at my crotch. Dumb choice of attire; I just wanted to look nice for my dad.

Around me, there are picnic tables for visitors, *I guess*. Normal people, who do not steal and carry pickets around.

Or maybe the benches are for school students on an excursion.

I vaguely remember going on an excursion to a prison when I was little. It was exciting, I think. The dogs sniffed around my legs as the guards talked us through a day in the life of a prison warden.

I had giggled.

Now, though, that I have a family member detained inside, my sixty-nine-year-old crook-of-a-father, my own Brer Rabbit, it seems in poor taste to flaunt the facility.

That picket on the side of the road says it all, really. The world doesn't care. If you break the law. You mean nothing. It's... nauseating. Inhumane.

Crushing my teeth together, I unzip my bag and pull out the three little Sylvanian Families figurines and the grey fencing I brought for the occasion. I run my finger gently down the fur, a twitch of a melancholic smile wants freedom. In my own company, I don't even feel silly.

I used to do this.

All the time.

I set the fencing up, fluffing the grass around it so it looks natural and overgrown. Like it's been there for years. I use the pointy bit of the Remand Centre picket to break the dirt beside it and dig a hole. Then, through a long sigh, I place Father Rabbit in the ditch.

A tear rolls down my cheek, but I wipe at it with the back of my hand and keep setting up the prison escape scene.

I put the little girl rabbit on the grass above the hole. Father Rabbit is climbing out, so I position his arms up, reaching for her. He's in an orange shirt with a pumpkin on the chest. I found that shirt in my Halloween Badger set; I'm not sure if that is the colour my dad will wear, but I saw *Orange is the New Black* on Netflix, so...

Then I grab the black-and-white dog from within the silk-lined pocket, placing him on the other side of the fence. He is holding a small plastic chain—I couldn't find handcuffs, but I did have a small chain from the

Sylvanian Families Limited Edition Horse-and-Cart my dad bought me for my ninth birthday. That was in the case, too.

I saved most of my families.

With the prison break set, I pull out my iPhone. I curse my dumb dress and lie with my stomach on the grass, propped up with my elbows so that the remand centre walls are the backdrop. I snap a few pictures from different angles.

The sun cuts across the scene in a really sharp, aggressive way, creating the feel of Father Rabbit's first encounter with its intensity for many months.

Years.

I flip onto my bum, my fingers sliding over the digital display. Adding my favourite filter, *Sierra*, first, I double check the account I made when I was five—@SylvanianDiarys—is still set to private, once, twice, and breathe out hard, hitting the post button.

I spelt diaries wrong.

The prison break scene appears on my Instagram feed, and the chip in my teal-coloured shellac catches my eye as I run my thumb over the new post, then the scene I last staged, which was three years prior, titled: My First Kiss. A little mole and a little rabbit kiss beside a cream-coloured locker.

I never kissed anyone that day. That was the first day of year twelve when I watched Tracy Smith kiss the boy I was crushing on all summer.

My Sylvanians don't experience my version of events; they experience the better version. The one I want.

A few moments pass before I decide it's time. I stand, wipe the grass from my backside and stomach, and head toward the remand centre.

Hiding the picket behind a bin by the rear wall, I glance around before walking between the two buildings, through two gates, keen for fifteen minutes of *quality* time with my dad.

After a guard sits me at an empty table across from a single chair, I place my hands in my lap and wait. The room is empty but for tables and chairs and a little rug with toys.

I stare at the toys, then at my bag with the Sylvanian Father and Daughter Rabbit safely inside.

A smile plays on my lips. This might be the first time— *ever*—that my dad isn't pulled away from me. No business meeting. No calls from other women. I wonder why I like that notion. Like that he's all mine for fifteen minutes—we don't have to split our time with greedy hands.

It's not long before my dad walks towards me. He's not in orange. Instead, he's in a blue shirt that enhances the smiling ocean-like eyes that settle on me before bouncing expectantly around the large, staged space. "You're alone, sweetheart. Where is your mother?"

I roll my eyes. "She's unpacking everything. You know, she has to have everything"—I motion with my hands— "Just. Right. Each meaningless thing, each uncandid portrait set just so. Even in a motel. Oh my God, *Dad*, you should see it." I laugh just once. "We all have a different single room with a tiny bathroom. Shower over the bath. Mum's fussing over everything like normal. Like her stuck-up friends are going to come into our rooms and check the beds are made."

"She was here yesterday but forgot my records," he says, sitting down, suddenly looking disappointed and having nothing to say about the motel.

Did you hear about the motel, Dad?

He schools his expression quickly, transforming that mien into a cool and level grin—his sales smile. I've always adored it. Everyone seems enthusiastic to absorb his words when he smiles just. Like. That. "So, tell me," he says through that pleasant curve, "have you read my book yet?"

I look at his fingers, clasped together on the table, massaging each other in a way that suggests it is uncomfortable for him to hold them stationary.

Maybe they are shaking?

I look at his face again. “It hasn’t arrived,” I admit, thinking about how his autobiography is probably being scrolled for evidence, lessons in corruption hidden in the brilliant prose. “Do you need anything? Can I get —”

His face is tight again, but smiling—I swallow, uncertainty sitting in my stomach as he assures me, “Your mother should bring me these things.”

“She told me that she came yesterday?”

“She did. She did. She just, ah...” He glances around, his eyes hitting the clock for a brief moment, before saying, “Forgot that I wanted my records. I asked her twice.”

“Okay.” I lean in, wanting to help. “Well, I can bring—”

“No. No. It’s her job.” He gives me his attention again. “I’ll call her, Kaya. You have more important things to do. Like, deciding what to study next year. You can’t take another gap year. What degree will you get?”

I don’t know.

How will we afford it now?

He leans back into the plastic chair, and without his suit, his golden watch, and his diamond-like smile, he seems... *less rosy*. This place is already changing him... “Dad, you don’t look very well.”

“Daddy is feeling a little out of sorts, actually.” Then he reaches across and puts his hand over mine. It’s cold. “Do you mind if we cut this short? I’ve got some very important things to organise.”

I nod, happy to give him whatever he needs, ‘cause I’m his buddy, but my stomach stirs with insincerity. *What does he have to do in here?* “Okay. Well, we only have—”

He rises quickly, saying, “Thank you for understanding, sweetheart. You are wise beyond your years.”

—fifteen minutes anyway.

Then he gives me that look—the admiration, the praise-filled curve that shines less remarkably today. “You know, you’re the thing I’m most

impressed with. Your existence.”

I smile, my heart like a balloon, one with a little leak that I ignore.
“Thanks, Dad.”

I watch each step he takes from me, assessing whether they are sad or hesitant, forcing meaning into his gait when I know it’s the same as always.

Maybe a little slower...

Maybe a little pained...

No. It’s the familiar walk that leads him away from me and to other more important things.

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CHAPTER TEN

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I SQUINT into the sun from under the shade of my large white floppy hat as Kenno backflips into the motel pool, the mass of him splashing water onto the brown pavers.

I'm in my favourite red bikini, iced tea by my side, normality so close, and yet—I glance around, seeing the overgrown bushes littered with discharged beer bottles—so fucking distant I can't even squint to catch a glimpse of it.

When will I adapt, Xander?

It's been three days.

A week? A month?

The sound of Chloe slurping her iced tea through the stainless-steel straw she brought from home is enough to carry her displeasure through the warm air, reminding me that this is not home and not where I should be.

Chloe is still eyeballing the communal pool with the same disgust she might a toilet bowl. As though all the germs within its blue depths will form an alliance, create a monster from their individual bodies, and emerge from the deep to find her on the sun lounger.

"It's clean!" I say for the umpteenth time, although I have no idea if that's true or not. It looks clean. There was a maintenance man out here,

poking around with a stick and a net, but I haven't convinced myself to dip a toe in yet.

And I *love* swimming.

Chloe stares as Kenno breaks the surface, her pinched expression making it obvious she now wants to pour a bucket of bleach over her almost-boyfriend/most-nights-balls-deep-inside-her/bickering-partner's shaggy blonde head. Cleanse him.

"If Brian gets an STD from that water," she warns, "and then I get it..." She clicks her tongue. "Girl, I'm rubbing my infected vag juices on your face."

"Sharin' is carin,'" Brian yells from Chloe's watery nightmare, wading over to the edge. Lifting himself from the pool with the athletic dexterity all the football boys have, he then plonks himself down on the lip. His legs sway in the water while he tilts his head and slaps the top ear. It appears he's trying to drain water from his lower ear.

Not the sharpest tool in the box.

But one hell of a football player.

Chloe twists to face me. "You should stay with *me*, Kaya." She sounds simply appalled by my circumstances. *I hate it.* "I mean it. How long are you stuck here?"

"You should stay with Grayson. He's in love with you," Kenno calls over, but we ignore him.

"We can't afford my dad's bail." I can't even look at her as I say that. "We..." I take a big breath and slowly force the words out, the same ones I'm coming to terms with. "Don't. Have. Any. Money." I can't get him free.

"Stay with me! I'll be your sugar daddy!"

"And Fred?" I mention, reminding her of her dad's predisposition to eye fuck me in front of her mother dearest. "Veronica would be okay with that?"

Disgust transforms her face. She slumps back, returning her tight gaze forward, eyeing the pool. "Eww. Dad."

"Yeah,"—I nod— "eww."

"It's not Fred's fault. You don't know what you look like, do you, Kaya?" Brian yells from the other side of the pool, now towelling his legs from his ankles to his thick footy thighs. "You act like you got no clue what it's like for us."

Chloe rolls her eyes. "She knows she's pretty."

"Fucking hell." He shakes his head with a deep chortle. "*Yeah-nah*. There's pretty, and then there's Kaya Lovit."

My jaw drops, and I pointedly dart my eyes to Chloe. "Brian!"

She sucks her tea harder, absolute do-not-give-a-fuck etched across her puckered lips. Then she goes, "Excuse me?"

"She's not *my* type." Brian arrives at Chloe's side, slouching down on the edge of her lounge, shaking his germ-infested hair all over her sleek bikini-clad body.

She kicks him off the lounge. His big body thumps to the pavers, as he laughs the words, "Every guy knows she's hard work, honey. I want someone who'll cuddle me."

Chloe deadpans, her blue eyes narrowing to mocking slits. "But you think she's prettier than me, *Kenno*?"

Whoops. He freezes like he's seen a ghost, and that ghost can't get him out of the hole he's digging. "Well... ah... there's... I mean—"

Chloe and I look at each other, and then crack up laughing. "Just fucking with you," she hollers. "I love Kaya. You can't be her bestie and not come to terms with the fact she's a goddess. I'd tongue her vag for no payoff, too."

I grin hard. "Say, *Kenno*," I start, his masculine prowess conjuring panthers to mind, and that particular animal raising my pulse. "Why do

guys let me use them?" I mock. "Like a bunch of dirty, little sluts. Don't they have any dignity?"

Chloe scoffs through a chuckle with the straw still between her pink-painted lips. "Little hussies," she talks around the straw. "Like using a worn-out piece of leather to polish a Porsche will ever award you an orgasm. Kaya deserves better than them. All except Xander, that is. He's more than Kaya's usual *débutant*."

My heart double taps in my chest. His name, somehow, does that. I remember how much I wanted to join him in the shower, just to watch him stroke his cock. To touch it, maybe. Feel it pulse. I mumble under my breath, "Like using panther furs."

Brian darts his eyes between us with an ape-like expression of confusion. "Are you guys comparing dude's tongues to pieces of fabric? That's like—I don't know, kinda *objectifying*. Don't you think?"

I'm surprised he knows the meaning of the word.

"That's, like, kinda, the fucking point, Brian!" Chloe suddenly twists her body to face me, her legs scooping up to the side. "Hey, I can give you money from my trust for a room somewhere. You can stay somewhere nicer than this." She cringes at the red brick motel behind us. "With *less...* randoms everywhere."

I love her, but she's clueless. "It's not the room, Chloe. It's not—" I groan and rub my temples. "I mean, it sucks—the room sucks. But it's *Dad*. I need a lot to get him out. Like, a *lot*. And he can't—" I bristle. "I can't leave him in there."

"Kaya..." Her brows draw in, and she places her iced tea on the ground. "*He* did this to you. He lied."

"*Chloe*,"—I mimic her position, twisting so our knees graze—" *He's* my *dad*. No matter what he did. He's still the man who told me I was better than beauty. The one who read me Brer Rabbit. Who let me eat ice cream

when I put on two kilograms and my mother banned it from the premises like a lethal toxin—”

“Sell your virginity.”

At Kenno’s utterance, Chloe and I both slowly turn to face him. Chloe’s glare could tear a man limb from limb.

“Excuse me?” she drawls.

I can’t believe my ears. “Digging a hole there, Kenno.”

He has that Neanderthal-like confusion etched on his forehead again as he says, “Oh, not to me... but you’re a virgin, right? Chloe told me you’re a virgin.”

Dammit, Chloe.

Unable to reach for the words, my mouth is open and flapping, my tongue a shocked muscle in my jaw. Finally, I say, “You’re kidding, right? Do people really do that?”

He shrugs his bulky shoulders, nonchalantly saying, “Yeah,”—darting his eyes from Chloe’s glare to my wide gaze— “they do. And you need money.”

No.

Wait...

Is that?

Could I?

He goes on, “You know my buddy, Chase? Well, he found this website his dad uses to purchase one-of-a-kind gifts for his overseas investors. You need the password. It’s only for members. And you need a VPN and an onion login. Like you have to for SilkRoad.”

I scoff. “I’m sorry, an onion what?”

“A Tor browser. The icon is an onion? Don’t worry. But it, like, lets you log on anonymously. These sites can’t be seen unless you have a Tor. And there is cool stuff on there. Good drugs. But also, weird shit, ya know? Chicks selling all sorts of stuff. Underwear. Pictures. Vials of blood. It’s

true,” he states with confidence, like my furrowed brows are a rebuttal to his insight into this seedy online store. “They sell everything. Anything. A night with them. And, yeah, a virginity. Some of them were selling their V-cards for like hundreds of thousands of dollars. A million—”

“Kaya’s not some trashy girl,” Chloe cuts in with an adamant punch, flicking her gaze to me, expecting a mirrored look of revulsion plastered across my features.

That’s not what she gets. In my peripherals, I make out the O her mouth forms when she sees my state of contemplation.

A million dollars is what I need.

What’s a virginity, anyway?

Nothing. It is literally not even a thing.

I’ve done worse.

I lit a fire that nearly burnt down homes.

I did that for him, too.

They can purchase an invisible concept if it gets my dad out, then who is the real winner, here?

As though she can hear my internal debate, Chloe outwardly gasps while I mull the whole notion over. “Kaya, don’t even think about it!”

She leans forward, getting in my face, while I slide back into the motel lounge, putting some space between us. I don’t need her damn judgement.

I steady my pulse with even breaths, the warm air filling my lungs in a soothing way.

Ignore Chloe.

This could work...

Pondering this unique revelation, the words slip through my lips. “It’s just a virginity.”

Chloe gapes. “It’s just a—” She talks nonsensically, spluttering half words, vows, in an animated way. “Not, what? Just. No. What the fuck am I

hearing? What happened to ‘I’ll use them. I’ll buy them the damn diamonds?’”

“I can’t afford a fucking zirconia now, Chloe!” I bust out, then straighten and run my palms down my bare thighs, nerves firing, causing me to fidget. As I roll this around in my head, seriously considering it, I level Kenno with a serious stare. *I need more information.* “Do you have access to this site, Kenno? Can *I* have access? Can you show me?”

Chloe’s head slowly shakes. “Stop it, Kaya.”

He shrugs in a no-big-deal way. “Yeah. Easy.”

“Don’t you dare, Brian,” Chloe warns.

Ignoring her, I continue, holding Kenno’s hazel eyes, so he doesn’t glance at the withering stare Chloe has struck him with. “You can’t tell anyone, Brian. Can you keep this secret for me? This has to stay between us. I can’t have this leaked to the media. To fucking Lorna Jackson. She’ll have a literal field day with this. How confidential is this site?”

“No one will say anything, Kaya,” Kenno assures me. “Then, they’ll be stingin’ themselves. The site’s illegal. And the people who run it are high up, ya know? No one’s gonna talk about what’s on it.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

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xander



I'M STARING at the media footage on Clay's laptop. Footage of Kaya Alana Lovit scrapping for that case. I try not to laugh because she's so fucking feisty it makes my dick hard. With those heated blue eyes set off by cascading caramel hair and that bold attitude compensating for her petite frame, she is like a fucking wet dream.

My little scrapper.

My grin dissolves when the camera pans to me, charging towards her and the dipshit with the case.

Clay further reminds me why we are here when he says, "So, what were you doing at the Lovit estate?"

My older brother, Bronson, sits beside me in Clay's office with his ankle resting on his opposite knee, oil stains from working on bikes across his tattooed hands, and an unkempt shadow around his resting grin. The wild Butcher.

"She's got some fight in her, hey?" He laughs, and I nod at him, proud as if she were mine. He continues, "She must weigh no more than fifty-five kilograms soaking wet, and she's making that hefty prick pull his back out to keep that damn luggage. Yew, look at her go!"

That's my girl.

Woman, I mean.

It's been three days since I saw her. I've barely poked my head up from training, but both nights when it slams into the pillow, exhaustion dragging me quickly into slumber, for a moment I wonder where her head is lying.

Not on satin sheets anymore, Woman.

Not in her house.

And she has no car.

Just a damn case.

Filled with God-knows-what.

And I didn't drive her home.

I damn well should have.

Staring at the screen, I struggle to rip my eyes away from her burnt-caramel hair and the perpetual scowl that hides all that rare emotion. "She's got a good hook, too," I say, unsought pride coasting through my tone.

Clay pauses the recording. "Are you quite finished?" He leans further into his wing-back chair, serious as always, and I wonder how long Bronson and I can continue to engage before he loses his shit entirely.

Finished... that's a contronym, Xander.

Completed or destroyed.

Keeping my eyes on the paused frame, I say, "You'd like her, Bron. She's smart and raw as fuck."

"Let's get her round here, eh?" Bron nods at me, knowingly taunting Clay with our evasion. No man, not a single police officer or politician, ignores Clay Butcher. But— We're his little brothers. This is good for the old boy. "Feed her a steak or two, work those spaghetti arms a bit, then—"

Clay clears his throat, and we both chuckle before returning our attention with feigned innocence to our dark, stoic older brother.

And if Clay Butcher ever rolled his eyes, he'd be doing it now, but he's not that kind of man. He's a boss. So, he's brooding in his disapproval of our perceived *insolence*.

He smooths his charcoal tie down his black shirt and goes on as though we never ignored him. “Her father is under investigation for fraud. Decades worth. Why is a Butcher on the news threatening members of the city for Kaya Lovit?”

I grin wide. “You know me. I saw a damsel in distress and just couldn’t help myself.”

He clasps his hands together on the desk between us and states, “I don’t see a damsel.”

No, you wouldn’t.

Something bothers me about that, a niggle of irritation tightening my mouth as I say, “Well, *I* do.”

He hums. “Perhaps you’d like to know that Kaya was the arsonist. The fires burning all season were because she decided shopping wasn’t stimulating enough this month.”

What?

I hear his words, but they didn’t make sense. It’s bullshit. His informant is a liar.

“Kaya wouldn’t do that,” I defend her stiffly, although Clay wouldn’t lie, and men wouldn’t dare lie to him, or they’d be eyeballing the bottom of Storm River, which can only mean... it’s true.

“She did. She was blackmailed, to be fair. But she did it. Do with that information what you will, but I thought you should know before you decide to put a Butcher in the media again for the likes of Kaya Lovit and her father.”

Bronson chuckles deeply, displeasure towards Clay’s tone playing with his madness. “Ah, but beautiful brother, look how handsome he is on camera,” he says, softening the conversational tone as is his usual stance.

He hides how much he cares deep within an armour of tarnished ink and clinical madness brought about by years of servitude to the *Cosa Nostra*—and to us. He doesn’t talk about his madness, but we know. We see it.

I stand to leave. “Anything else?”

Bronson stays still in his seat, probably awaiting a private audience with Clay to tell him to back off *little* Xander.

“No.” Clay pauses, blue eyes focusing on me, the fact he’s being a controlling arse like a ghost moving through them. “Thank you for taking care of the Grayson matter,” he offers.

A slow grin moves across my lips. That moment of reluctance to his mannerisms is undoubtedly a result of having Fawn in his life. His fiancé is a gentle, compassionate girl, and up until her presence in his calculated, unemotional world, he was stone-cold and narrow-minded. I see him, well, I see him trying to be better for her.

I salute my oldest brother as I sing, “Sure thing, bro.”

Bronson says, “He’ll leave Anderson’s daughter alone, then? I’d hate to have to pay him a visit.”

“I have collateral. A photo of him pissing himself.” I smirk, and Bronson grins with green flames set ablaze in his blue eyes, liking the sound of that. “He’s got a broken nose.”

Clay nods. “Very well. You can go train.”

I toss the information about Kaya and the fire in my mind as I leave his office and stride to the Jeep. Shovelling down a banana and downing a few painkillers as I drive, I head straight to my sanctuary, to my gym.

I warm up with a run, then strip down to my shorts, pull on my boots, tape up my hands, and hit the canvas to shadowbox myself into a steady sweat. Loosen my muscles. Get that thrust, jab, hook, and muscle memory underway.

Bouncing from foot to foot, my mind drifts to Kaya. To the fire. To the entire ordeal. And, fuck, I’m just not able to invoke the vision of her lighting it. Not with those manicured but effete nails. And for what purpose? Clay mentioned she was blackmailed, but I was too thrown to ask to what end, and by whom?

Who fucking blackmailed her?

“Your fists are open.”

My father’s voice carries severity, reaching me in the ring as he strides across the training room floor, the eyes of other boxers tracking him as he moves with a confident, powerful gait.

He’s a legend—*The Legend*.

Luca—The Butcher—Butcher who remains undefeated in his weight class, so, of course, they gawk at him with boxer boners.

I lower my fists to my sides, my skin slick, glistening with beads of perspiration. Using my forearm, I wipe at the beads that track lines of sweat down my brows.

“From now on,” he adds, grabbing two blue rubber dumbbells from the gym floor, “you shadowbox with one in each fist. Keep your hands closed, my boy.”

He’s right. I hadn’t noticed, my mind on my scrapper and that fucker who forced her to do something she wouldn’t usually do. My forehead is tight, my teeth ache from being clenched, and I realise that I’m pissed about that. More pissed than is rational, given she’s practically a stranger.

Not a Butcher.

Not a priority.

That’s how it goes.

Dad places the blue bells on the canvas, and I unquestioningly retrieve them from the edge but observe him as he moves around with his back to me.

I haven’t seen him since the night I carried his heavy arse to the sofa. Since he murmured that he loves me. He’s usually in the gym with me each morning before dawn...

Frowning and uneasy, I still in the centre of the ring. I hadn’t expected to see him for a while, even prepared myself for his absence. Thought he’d

leave the country, which is his usual way of dealing with sentiment too large to conclude in one afternoon.

I lift my chin at him. "How you doing, Dad?"

He busies himself, grabbing pads and rope for my next training set, not looking my way. "Back to it, my boy."

"You just want to focus on this, then?"

"On *you*, se."

Righto. I nod, wipe my brow again, and continue to shadowbox a phantom opponent across the canvas, grasping the dumbbells in each controlled fist.

Working myself hard, steady jabs, ducks, I still keep my dad in my peripherals, unable to ignore that he's here.

Jab. Jab.

Here, *with me.*

Jab. Jab.

Instead of trudging around Sicily, getting fucked or drunk or whatever it is that my old man does when he leaves us for months at a time. Used to, that is.

Jab. Jab.

I remind myself he *used* to leave us behind, but he's a changing man. He'd miss his grandchildren too much to be that version of himself again. Nevertheless, it must feel strange for him to be in the District while carrying all that grief and emotion. Like a Butcher, I say nothing more about it, because a Butcher man would rather die with his pride than live and show his vulnerabilities.

All Butcher men.

Except me.

I'M UNWRAPPING my gloves at the end of the day when he strides over to me and cups my face. I stiffen, my eyes shooting around. I can feel the press of his eyes as they inspect every dent, bruise, and healing gash.

"Your last fight"—he roughly turns my cheek to better view the bruising under my right eye— "you had a knockdown. Did you blackout?"

"It was a flash." I shrug under his intense gaze. "My knees barely hit the canvas."

"But they did. And that blue below your socket is not from an abrasion to your eye, my boy. That's inside. That's from higher. You should have an MRI before your next fight."

"Yeah. Yeah. You want me to have them more than necessary. Don't think I don't know that. If I was a dumb shit, you wouldn't care if I got punch-drunk."

"But you're not." He releases my face. "So, I do."

The sliding doors to the gym open and the wind carries aggression as someone barks, "Butcher! I saw my brother's face!"

Gnawing at the bit to share a few swings with Grayson's older brother—midweight champ in the District and a complete douchbags—I turn to acknowledge Chuck Young who is storming across the gym, scornful eyes unwavering from mine.

I curl my lips, his fury charging him towards me. Then I watch in almost slow motion as his homed gaze hits the back of Luca Butcher's head. Slowing his aggressive stride, he realises I'm not alone. *Too late, dipshit!*

I don't smile at that.

My pulse races. His disregard for me then hesitation around my father, forces red-hot anger to the tips of my fingers, driving them into my palms, making tight fists by my sides.

What?

I'm not scary enough for you, Young?

Heat hits my ears. Unable to stop myself, I round my dad and take long, meaningful strides over to the dipshit in *my* gym. It says *Home Of The Legend* on the banner, fucker!

I growl. “What was that, *Charles*? You have something to say to me?”

Chuck and I collide an inch from each other, bodies pulsing with aggression, a slither of space parting us, air practically hissing between our rage-fuelled torsos.

“You broke my brother’s nose, Butcher,” he grounds, his hazel eyes drilling holes through mine. And I can feel my father’s presence, but he’s not coming for us, watching and waiting. Judging me. I don’t give a shit. I know he’ll want me to rise above it. To walk away. Smile, even. That’s not me.

“I’ll break yours,” I hiss, more pissed off than I should be, but *I* deserve his damn fear. I’ll prove it, too. I’ve fucking earned the fear in this city, in this gym. “If you like, you can match each other! If you like, I can make you piss yourself, too.”

“I’ll fight you one day, Butcher.” He grins with perfectly maintained teeth, white and glistening, straightened to artificial perfection—rich-boy teeth. “And the city will see you drop. Tap out. And give up!”

“No, Young.” I laugh cruelly. “You’ll swallow twenty thousand dollars’ worth of pearly whites Mommy and Daddy paid for.”

“You don’t scare me, *Xander* Butcher.” He grins, and the taunting curve is at odds with what I deserve from him. Is he really not the slightest bit concerned I could crush his skull with my bare hands?

I twitch, edging closer, barely restraining myself from acting on that vicious imagery.

He goes on, “Now, your brothers might stand behind you, protect their little brother, always getting in trouble, always misbehaving. I remember you in high school. You’re still the same little boy trying to be like them.”

I see red. Hide it barely. “Pretty sure you’re the little one, mate!” I hiss. *He’s not my mate.* “You’ll need some extra kilograms to fight the legend.”

He laughs. “You should be taking some time to prepare yourself there, *Legend*. In the ring, you’ll be mine.” He leans up, slightly shorter than me, until I can feel his sweat mingling with mine. “Maybe, I’ll make you piss yourself. Maybe,”—his smile widens—“I’ll kill you in front of them. And they’ll fake grieve you just like they did your bitch of a mother. They’ll be happy to have rid themselves of the burden that you are and send you off for a cuddle with her.”

That’s enough.

Wanting to reach in and draw out his heart, wanting to thrust my fist into his abdomen and spill his guts, fuming he’s challenging me in my own damn gym, I jab him low, deserving a groan and getting a wicked howl. He curls inward. But not for long. He comes at me. Thrusts right.

I duck to the side, my ear taking a graze from his knuckles, but I’m back and centre before he regains his stance. I study him.

His steps.

His pace.

A thrust.

I dodge.

Ready for that chance to bleed his teeth, I drive my fist into his top jaw, spilling blood through his lips as I promised. *I keep my promises, Chuck.*

The blood is my catalyst. Grinning menacingly as his mouth fills with the thick crimson fluid, I roar my victory attuned with the man I become in the ring—the monster they made under my skin. Wanting more of him, my pulse is a beat between my ears pushing me to reap more pain.

But then the sliding doors open again, and the colour of caramel swirls in my peripherals, dragging my gaze over to catch a glimpse. And where I would never usually see, feel, or acknowledge anyone else during a fight, I can’t seem to control myself this time.

She is standing in the open doors, freshly washed hair silky and long framing her face, black designer jeans hugging her lean, perfectly formed pins.

For a moment, she smiles at me. And fuck me.

Do that again, Kaya.

Smile again.

She is striking, and my lungs suddenly burn with a message to breathe. But then her expression falls, her blue eyes slicing across to movement in front of me.

I follow her focus just in time to see Chuck's fist hurtling towards me, feel it connect with my right eye socket, hear a grunt rip from my chest—

I see black.

"THIS IS YOUR FAULT!" Mum screams, the bottle of whiskey leaving her hand, hurtling towards me.

What's my fault?

I cower and cover my face and head, like my brothers taught me to do. 'That's where your brain is, Xander,' they'd say to me. 'Your clever brain.'

Max steps in front of me, raising his forearm to shield my face, the bottle beating his young arm. A grunt falls reluctantly through his lips, though another person would be wailing in pain, but any sign of displeasure in front of her means he felt it. And he felt it bad.

She just laughs at us. "I was placed beside Betty Harold today at lunch. Can you believe it, Betty? Susan McKane got my seat, and you want to know why?" She opens her arms wide, her pink robe wet from spilling her drink earlier. "Because I am your mum. Because you make me drink. And she is sober now. Every bad thing that happens to me can be traced back to you!"

I make her drink?

I didn't know that was my fault. I wonder what I can do to stop her from needing to drink. I could bring her water in the mornings... I could do more for her. I could.

I should.

Hiding behind Max, I feel like a coward, and she hates weakness. I look at Max's arm, swelling immediately, blotted around the muscles, the skin busted open in cavities like a bloody moon. It's probably broken.

Max's arm is my fault.

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CHAPTER TWELVE

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kaya



HE GRINNED AT ME...

He grinned and then—

He is knocked out cold...

I watch Xander's dad check the pulse straining along his unconscious son's throat. Feeling for a rhythmic beat, Luca studies the second hand as it circles his graphite Rolex watch. I think he's counting in his head. His expression lacks any emotion, while waves of panic claw at me.

Is his heart not racing?

I clutch at my chest, the thrashing of mine evident beneath my skin. There is blood from Xander's nose leaking down his cheek, and one of his eyes is already beginning to swell and bruise.

Luca lowers his hand and leans in, lifts each one of Xander's eyelids, and inspects the vacant topaz-blue orbs within a fan of black lashes.

Nothing.

Oh. God.

Xander.

My palm pressed to my frantic heart becomes wet from perspiration, so I rub my hand down my jeans.

"Shouldn't we wake him up?" I gasp. "Isn't it bad to let someone sleep in case they are concussed?" I wish I could swallow those questions. I don't

know why I even spoke, as if Luca Butcher wouldn't know the best possible practice for a concussed man, given that he is a legit boxing legend.

"No." Luca leans back, eyes trained on his son, shifting around the plane of Xander's beautifully broken features. I wonder if he feels each abrasion like they are drawn into his own skin. If he does, he hides it like a lion. "There is no evidence to suggest waking a person from a knockdown is beneficial. The body knows what to do. Sleep protects. It is why we put people in induced comas. It's best to leave him. Check he's all right when he wakes up."

I glance over my shoulder at the door, remembering Charles Young had bolted from the gym the moment Luca advanced on him. I clench my teeth. I have it in me to go after the coward myself.

I'll take my stake.

Go Buffy on his arse.

I look back at Xander lying on his back, a sleeping beauty with a tale of brutality written in stains of crimson gloss and veins of blue marble.

Here *I* am. Again. With Xander Butcher and no place else to be. I just came for my clothes—I left them the other day—and felt a thrill, the sight of him incandescent with that damn slow grin, but then Chuck was there.

Seeing Xander's head snap back the way it did, the strength, the panther-like muscles, all crumble as though the bones that held them dissolved in an instant, hurt me in a way that didn't make sense.

A deep groan snatches my attention.

I twist back to find Xander rolling his head on the rubber mat. My heart leaps. I drop to my knees to get closer to him, and Luca rises, giving his son space.

I want to touch him. I reach to place my hand on his shoulder, but freeze an inch away, in case he's hurt, in case he's concussed, in case he—

"Put those hands on me, Woman."

I laugh, but I'm not sure where that sound comes from. Hit with relief he's still a cocky arse, I feel the sting of emotion rise, but I manage to control it. "I thought you were *good* at boxing," I breathe.

"Yeah," he says, strained. He has one glossy-blue eye open, but the other is ballooning. "Same."

The mood darkens when his gaze shifts over my shoulder, his expressive brows furrowing, the memory of what happened falling into his injured gaze like shattering blue glass. He tenses and mutters, "It was my fault," so quietly a ghost may have spoken, so subtly, his lips barely moving around each word as the swelling takes hold.

He's still beautiful, though.

He's locked on his dad, his jaw working hard. "I fucked up. I should have walked away." He shrugs, but it seems defensive and not nonchalant in the slightest. "I fucked up," he punches out. "So what?"

I twist to face a stoic Luca, towering over us, dark clouds of energy brewing around his large body like Zeus—a distant father, patriarchal, clouds, thunder, lightning, yep. That seems to be the vibe.

I hold my breath as he speaks, "You're a damn hothead." His gruff timbre is stressed with disapproval and with something raw, like concern, fear, maybe. But Luca Butcher isn't afraid of anything, surely. "MRI," he orders. "Book it tomorrow!" Then he walks away, barking over his shoulder, "Don't drive. I'll send someone. And ice that damn eye!"

Just like that, Luca Butcher is gone, but his ominous energy lingers. He ran from this scene, possibly untrusting his actions had he stayed.

That was private, that moment between father and son, and I feel awkward having witnessed it. He wants Xander to have an MRI. *Is that a normal boxing thing?*

Hesitantly, I twist back to Xander, who is climbing to his feet. "What are you doing?" I scold. "Slow down." I'm still kneeling when he walks to

the juice bar and grabs a box of tissues, snatching the thin sheets out and stuffing two up each nostril.

Avoiding me, he walks away, so I climb to my feet and march to him, gripping his forearm, finding tightly rivulose veins protruding from the scorching hot flesh.

He stops. Staring ahead, he breathes out hard. Without looking at me, he says, “You have a ride home?”

What? By some miracle, I manage not to school him on sitting down, taking it easy, being a prideful asshole, and instead I force the answer, “I’m going to Cabi.”

“How did you get here?”

“Chloe...” I round him until I’m at his front, forcing him to meet my gaze by squaring my shoulders in a pointed display. “You’re bleeding through your tissues.” He’s a lot taller than me, so until he lowers his chin, it’s hard to see the damage, but the tissues stuffed in each nostril have blood spread through them like dye in a white shirt. The skin around his wounded eye is thickening, inflamed, and burgeoning over his lashes.

“I’ll take you home first.”

“No. Luca said—”

“Don’t start with me today, Woman,” he states through a bark and then growls at his own outburst. “Sorry. Just let me drive you the fuck home, okay?”

“I. Can. Cabi.”

“*Christ*, Woman.” He grabs my throat, and I gasp when he lifts me to my tippytoes by the column of my neck so that my lips share his air as he says, “That’s what I want to do, Kaya. I should have done it the other day, but I had to let someone else take you home or I wouldn’t have let you leave me that day.”

My heart swells. “Are you concussed?”

He laughs, but it's dark, even though the amusement seems genuine. "No. I'm fucking tired, Kaya. And looking at you after that blackout, seeing you over me, smelling you, I'm fucking *throbbing*."

He releases my throat but stays close. I replace his hand with mine, holding my throat, dazed by what he just did and also...

Dammit.

Hormones.

Fuck. Right. Off.

My heart is thumping like a kick bass, the skin on my neck feels cold without his palm, my toes and ears tingle, and all the circulation is channelled between my legs.

"Don't touch me like that again," I whisper weakly, needing to hear my voice protest his dominance while my body hums in its wake.

Despite my words, we are locked together with tangible waves of energy, my blood pumping to be closer to him. I lift my chin. He lowers his, his lips skating along mine, and I'm going to kiss him, bloody nose and all, then—

His phone buzzes.

We freeze, before looking down, the energy fizzling out, like a released balloon rocketed through the air. The opportunity disappears, but he doesn't move, and I feel and hear his hard breath on my forehead.

When I take a small step backwards, I find enough sanity in that slither of space to part my lips and inhale deeply—freedom, freedom from his scent.

I like his sweat, too.

Feigning nonchalance, I look at my chipped teal nails, finding their condition just as nausea-inducing as my current thrashing heart. He pulls out his phone, not hiding the display from me, and I quietly watch him open a message that I read upside down and on the sly. A skill I acquired when I first discovered my dad was cheating on my mother with hussy number one.

Stacey:

Stay at the gym, Xander. Luca told me to drive you home.
Don't be a stubborn arse.

He texts back immediately, punching the screen with a vigour that goes unseen by her, but not by me, and I get a small tingle knowing he's not leaping for her company.

Xander:

I don't need a lift, Stace. I'm cool.

Stacey:

It's me or he'll send one of his men.

He curses and grips the phone with force, shaking his head through a curt laugh of derision, muttering, "Unbelievable."

He was just here. They sure do like to tell Xander what to do and how to behave. I look up at him, seeing his expression mirroring my thoughts. *Expectations...*

Bossy family members.

I know them well.

Boldy, I say, "I'll drive." And I wish those two words didn't have envy wrapped around them. I know Stacey isn't someone to be jealous of.

Do you?

Do you know that, Kaya?

She's a family friend of the Butchers, the entire city knows that, and he's not mine anyway, so there is absolutely no reason to feel anything. At all. About this situation...

Still, the way her name sits on his display—*Stace. Ugh.* The confidence she addresses him with, the familiarity, reminds me of acupuncture. It

doesn't hurt, per se, but it's annoying and unsettling, and I want to rip her, erm, *them*, out from under my skin.

Jealousy is acupuncture.

His wounded blue gaze meets mine, and I shrug as if it's no big offer, just doing my civic duty for the city's new boxing legend. "Tell her I'll drive your car. Then you don't have to leave it here."

Nice.

He texts her too quickly for even me to read and pockets his phone, staring blankly into my eyes, shocking my heart back to a frantic level.

I straighten. "What?"

"I'm driving you home."

"I'm driving *you* home," I press. He holds himself with such gravity, even with tissues stuffed inside each nostril and one bloodshot eye while the other is in a tunnel of his own swelling skin. "You look like shit."

He closes the gap between us, and I hold my breath as he says, "Liar," in that deep timbre with daring notes.

I gasp out a breath. I *am* a fucking liar. Dragging my eyes over him, he looks like a beautiful warrior, primal, feral, sex-on-legs, and I'd let his CPS lips between my thighs even in this state, soggy tissue plugs and all.

While I hold his stunning but battered gaze, I feel his fingers thread through mine. He pulls me along with him as he collects his things, my shirt and jeans, and scoops his car keys up, before heading out the staff exit to his Jeep.

He opens the passenger door for me, and my brows weave in tight. "Are you *sure* you're okay to drive? I don't want to be like everyone else and tell you what the hell to do, but I also don't—"

"I'd never put you in danger, Woman." He nods to the seat. "If I feel disorientated at all, I'll let you drive."

How do I argue with that?

“I’m at the Willow Motel.” I nearly choke on the words, accepting his hand into the car. “Just for now.”

On the drive, we sit in silence, but he’s not quiet at all. He’s pissed. His hands have the steering wheel in a vice-like grip, his jaw works at an agonising tempo, and his breaths remind me of a bull readying itself to charge.

I’ve got passionately intense Xander right now.

“Talk to me,” I say, staring at him. “An MRI? What’s that about? Is that something all boxers get? Is it because of today? Why did Chuck hit you like that? Was it...” I pause and look at him fisting the wheel like he wants to snap it. “Xander?”

As his aggressive silence continues, anger simmers inside me.

I can’t believe this.

“Seriously?” I scold. “Now you have nothing to say to me? You’re fucking mute all of a sudden?”

My outburst is met with further silence, and it feels unnatural for both passionately intense Xander and intensely passionate Xander to be so quiet.

When we arrive at the motel, the flickering neon-green sign, reminiscent of a 90s horror movie, flashes as he parks. He looks straight ahead, his narrowed eyes drilling holes across the single-storey building, scrutinising the run of doors along the veranda—judging it.

Judging me.

“It’s just for now,” I repeat stupidly before escaping the car with my clothes, slamming the door to make a point and striding towards the seedy motel veranda.

I leave my broken beauty to his own devices. He doesn’t need to be coddled. Well, guess what, buddy? Neither do I.

The sound of a second car door slamming forces me to roll my eyes as heavy footsteps make a confident rap along the path behind me.

Slow.

Steady.

Heavy.

I get to my door, slide the key in and jiggle it around the tight fitting, but it doesn't turn. My cheeks burn. Mortified, I scowl at the inanimate object for so easily adding kindling to the flames of my embarrassment.

A gang of burly men leave the room a few doors down.

Throw another log on that fire, universe. Go on!

The stench of tobacco and the sound of deep chortles surrounds me as they slow their struts. I keep my head low, but glance sideways through my lashes to find Xander shouldering between them. Forcing them to part for his body, he breaks their formation in a way that suggests he didn't even notice them. Too focused on me.

They keep walking but turn to sneer. That's all they can do, though—a pathetic show of pride. Xander is their counterpart in overall size, but where they have round curves and clean faces, he presents finely cut edges and a bloody complexion that matches his unsmiling demeanour.

Casually, he leans his shoulder on the wall beside my door as I curse the damn lock. “Fucking. Stupid.”

“Where are your sisters?”

“In a different”—I shove on the door with my side— “*room*. You can go, Xander! I just wanted my damn clothes. And. I. Have. Them.” I growl and then gasp when the door jolts forward, tugging me into the musky-scented room. I fight the key from the hole.

“There's no chain.” He yanks the soaked tissues from his nostrils, ditching them to the pavers. He barely looks at me as he says, “Lock the door, Woman. Do it now before I leave. I want to hear it lock.”

Wrenching the silver key free, I spin to face a stone-faced Xander Butcher. Hurt by his cold front, I force my lips to speak, “Goodbye, Xander.”

He is deadpan as I close the door on him. My palms cup my face and I breathe into them.

No “*See ya*” this time.

Goodbye is *not* a contronym.

It’s the most definitive, unquestionable word in the English dictionary.

Goodbye!

I hug myself, thinking about the day, the beating he received in exchange for a moment where we were pleased to see each other again, the twenty seconds of blackout panic.

Suddenly, the motel door is kicked open and the thud of it hitting the plasterboard echoes through the tiny motel space.

I look at the wall dusting plaster from the crack he just made, and my hands fist at my sides.

How dare he!

I said goodbye!

That means goodbye!

“Goodbye is not a contronym,” I growl at him. “You punch-drunk hothead.”

His body fills the opening and then the room as he strides in and slams the door, pain painted across the brutal plane of his face, but the agony is not from a fight.

“I said to lock the damn door, Woman!”

I ignore the need in his voice, barking, “Get out!”

He advances. “Why do you do that?”

I back away. “Do what?”

“Take!” he spits out, jolting me with that word. *You’re a Taker, Kaya.* “You want me to give and give. You want my words, my tongue, but you just fucking shut down, turn on me as soon as the moment arises that I’m not perfectly accepting of what your needs are.”

What the fuck? “My needs?”

“Yeah. You’re spoilt. What do you need, Kaya? My tongue? My attention? For me to talk about my dad? My bruises? Want me to take your mind off your mum, convince you that your dad will be okay, give you affirmations, praise, and when I don’t, you just fucking crack.”

My heart hurts, his words sliding into the frantically pumping organ like knives of a thousand truths. “How did I crack?”

He shakes his head. “You wouldn’t let me just *be*. Deal with it *my* way. Just sit with me in the car. Hold my fucking hand or something. Just be near me and let me brood!”

“How much nearer do you want to get,” I growl. “You’ve been between my legs!”

“So have a hundred other guys!”

Anger pummels me. I gasp, lifting my hand to slap his tragically breathtaking face, but he thrusts out a powerful limb, possesses my throat in his hand and holds me away.

My eyes widen. Then he drags me forward, mashing our lips together, his tongue diving between them, claiming my mouth as its own playground, as its emotional aid.

I grip his forearm, accepting all he has to give and take, as he walks me backwards.

My calves hit the bed and we land on it.

I should stop him...

He uses the hold he has on my throat to drag me beneath his scorching body up the bed; the struggle to breathe between his desperate kisses only sends my pulse soaring.

“*Xander*,” I pant into his kiss as his lips slide across my face, gnawing at my jawline, hungry in their pursuit to relieve more than his tension.

I hold on to his waist. His body thrusts me into the mattress, taking pleasure through our clothes.

Helplessly, I mewl as he growls, “I want to do dirty things with you.” Lifting onto his elbows, he takes a hold of my face, thumb and forefingers dipping in to pry my jaw apart. His gaze crashes with mine, and he says, “Let me.”

I shake my head with feeble adamance.

“No?” he challenges. “Why? You don’t want me inside you? Because some asshole broke your heart? Cheated on you? Because you gave yourself to someone, and they fucked up and made you feel used? Or because you saw some shitty porno where *actors* fuck and spit and use other *actors*. That’s not what it’s always like, Kaya. It goes both ways. You’re inside me. You’re already in so fucking deep.”

God. I can’t accept those words. I won’t. “You *are* concussed,” I breathe, my mouth struggling around the sentence, his grip still firm.

He continues strongly, “I would never use you, Woman. I want more with you. I want to be inside you—”

My lips are forced open further by his fingers while he stares down at the pink entrance. “Like this.” Then he spits into my mouth, and the feel of his wet, warm saliva jolts pleasure through every nerve, an erotic exchange that gyrates my hips upwards toward him. “And this,” he grinds against me. “Let me *near* you.”

Writhing and rolling along the bruising rod between his thighs, I lose myself in the feral action.

He smirks, revelling in my obvious arousal. “Want my spit, Woman? In your mouth. In your pussy? Where else? Do you want it to drip from my lips to your face? Slap your cheeks? Do you want me to drool for you?”

Seduced by his gravelly voice and hooded eyes, I swallow and nod.

A warrior’s face, painted in blues and reds, he opens those skilled lush lips, slowly letting his saliva drip from the tip of his tongue down to my lips.

A stream of it connecting us.

It's wet on my skin, across my panting lips and flushed cheeks. And it keeps coming until he lowers his mouth and drags his tongue along my face.

Then he's all over me again.

He drives his tongue into my mouth, his hand digging between our writhing bodies, his lips talking against mine, begging, "*Kaya*, let me feel you. My sexy little scrapper. Let me feel this juicy pussy cling to my fingers." Tucking his hand down my jeans, along the smooth skin of my stomach to my pussy he finds me as wet as my face.

He pushes his thick thumb inside me, his forefinger and middle locking around my pelvis, the control he wields, flaring warmth up to my neck and ears.

I spread my thighs. He works his thumb around my clit, the perfect pressure to rub the sides and circle the sensitive tip but not bear down on it. He teases. Builds.

Panting into his kiss, I reach down and grip his erection through his jeans, earning myself a groan from his throat.

He stops working me, dragging his wet fingers from within my clenching channel.

One second, I'm pinned beneath him, and the next, I'm yelping, flipped to my knees. He is tugging my jeans and knickers down until they restrict my legs, bunched at my shins.

On all fours, my arse and pussy are exposed to the air, the evidence of it cooling the wet mess he crafted with those wicked fingers. And I've never allowed myself to be this vulnerable with a boy before.

"Fuck. Me. This is so fucking lovely. I want so much more of this."

I brace on both elbows, my shirt riding up my back. My head spins when his hands knead each arse cheek, parting them so his lips can lap at me. It's a whole new angle. It feels dirty. But I think that's what he likes—rawness. No bars held. No places unexplored or tasted.

Moaning into the sheets, I squeeze them on either side of my head. My hair is a blanket of dark caramel around my back, down my spine, and curtaining my face. Then Xander leans back on his heels, and the moment I knew was coming does. He starts to unbutton his jeans.

I groan at my forthcoming outburst, spitting out, "I'm a virgin, Xander!" He stops. "What?"

Horried, I wriggle on my stomach to pull my jeans over my backside and then flop back face first, burying my admission into the sheets. "I'm a virgin," I say, my words muffled. "You know that, right? That I'm a virgin. That's what I meant when I said I don't let boys come. I don't let them do anything except please me, don't let them fuck me, not even a little, not ever."

I make myself stop talking, gasp, and then hold my breath to his silent contemplation.

God... Say something.

His knuckles suddenly slide down the sheer fabric over my spine, the tiny hairs on my skin rising in their gentle wake. I roll within the cage of his kneeling legs and brave his eyes through my lashes.

His legs are on either side of my hips, his body hovering over my thighs. I wish I could disappear into the mattress beneath me, but I'm braving Xander's intense gaze instead.

There's deep consideration etched on his brows as he says, "I'm sorry. What I said about all the guys you've been with, and, ah, *fuck*—" He thrusts his hand through his dark hair, gripping his neck for a moment, his bicep round and defined, bracketing his face. "I just spat in your mouth! I don't usually hook up with inexperienced chicks, Kaya."

Don't look at me like that!

Dropping his hand to my torso, he straightens my shirt for me, stroking it smoothly down my belly, a pained expression rolling over him. "I thought

maybe some dickhead did you wrong once, but I didn't think for a second that you've never had sex. Not for a while, sure, but not— Not at all."

"Nope." I shrug, needing him to stop talking; not a fan of the way he's softening and coddling. *Ugh*. "No penile penetration. I'm still me, though. This is my choice. I own my body and my sexuality. I'm not a blushing flower or frigid or coy—"

"This isn't good."

I tense. "Why?"

His jaw pulses. "Because I knew this would happen."

"What would happen?"

"I'd want to keep you."

My heart sings, but I clench my jaw on the dreamy notion. I'm not a romantic. "Keep me?"

"I can't have something to myself, not all to myself, I won't be able to share..." He falters, his eyes rolling over my face, then down the length of my body with longing that steals my breath. "I can't share." His stare snaps back to mine. "No chick has ever been mine, so it's never been a problem."

"Get that look off your face." I roll my eyes, an exaggerated and entirely conflicting gesture to the emotion brimming inside me. "It's just a pussy." I school him on my ideals, on the way I've *always* considered sexual activity. "Folds. Muscles. Pleasure. Anatomy for childbirth. There is no significance to the first time it's used."

"Used," he says the word with hatred and grips my hips through my jeans. The pressure is intense. "You're a feminist," he presses, "who doesn't believe in the value of her own body?"

"No," I retort with a single laugh. "I'm a feminist who doesn't believe in the value *you* put on my own body."

I'm selling mine.

Don't make it mean something.

“Well then, maybe it’s not about you. Not all things are, Kaya.” *Ouch.* He squeezes my hips and breathes hard. “When a girl gives herself to a man for the first time, it means she’s picked him.” His expressive brows draw in, his intense blue gaze holding me like a Siren. “*He* is her *first* choice. That’s a lot. That *means* a lot.”

“No, Xander,” I say, needing him to agree with me, but he almost winces as I talk. “It means absolutely nothing. It *is* nothing. A virgin is not a real thing. It’s just a girl who hasn’t had a cock up her yet, and whether she has had a hundred or one, your affections for her shouldn’t revolve around that.”

“Goddamn it, Kaya! His affections don’t revolve around that, Woman! They are cemented by that. His affections didn’t grow from that. They were set ablaze by that. Maybe it means nothing to you, but it would mean something to me—” I watch his throat bob. “To be someone’s *first* choice.” But then he adds, “Which is why I can’t do it.”

I ignore the way his words make my hands shake, my heart soar and scream, and my eyes begin to well up.

He stands, and the bed springs squeak with the same mournfulness I feel as he leaves. “I’ve got to go... Ice this eye.”

Taking a hold of the door, he studies the lock, handling it, checking the mechanism, the deadbolt, testing it several times before he grips the frame hard and says, “Lock the door, Kaya. I’ll wait outside until I hear it.”

With his back to me, he glances sideways at the case on the floor by the single chair that I refuse to sit on because there was blonde hair in the green fibres. “What’s in the case?” he asks me for the second time.

I’m startled by the turn in the conversation, still feeling my stomach knotting up and my eyes fighting the flood of tears. My hands flex to reach for him, to say it *does* matter, that it matters to me if it matters to him, but instead, I mutter, “Just some silly things that my dad gave me when I was a child.”

He nods stiffly—sadly. “Just something silly, huh? Like a virginity is silly? You’re such a fucking liar, Kaya. Goodbye, yeah? Good luck.”

Then he leaves me with that, closing the door behind his back. And his words aim true, right into my chest.

Goodbye is definitive.

My eyes spill over.

Good luck is a kind of contronym, because it’s used to wish someone genuine happiness, but to also leave them with a reluctant note that sings they are beyond achieving it.

Good luck with that.

I lock the door.

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

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xander



IT'S ROCKING PAST MIDNIGHT, and my eye socket is frozen beneath the ice pack I have pressed to it.

I only left Kaya a few minutes ago and the way I spoke to her... *Fuck. I feel like shit about it.*

The bar is near empty down this end, and our booth is isolated in a corner, but across from me, Stacey's displeased gaze screams loud enough for a tavern full of rowdy patrons.

"So..." She leans back, folding her arms, suspicious. "Who is the girl?"

"What girl?" I feign nonchalance, not wanting to discuss Kaya while my brain wrestles to carve her every detail into it. Her face, her lips, her sweat. Nah, I don't want to think about her. "The one from tonight?"

"The one who has been keeping you occupied. The one who was more important than seeing me tonight, than icing that fucking eye which clearly hasn't been iced until now?"

"I called you, didn't I? I told you I was having a drink here, and I called you. So, give it a rest," I say, using my free hand to lift my beer, sipping it as if to prove my words. "I was fine, so I found a girl to kiss me all better."

It's not entirely bullshit, but I couldn't let her kiss me all better like I really wanted her to.

She's a liar.

And you told her as much!

Fuckhead.

Don't think about her.

She'll fucking destroy me.

From the moment I saw her again—the memory of the first incident completely absent—she has been all about taking what she wants. I thought she was worldly, experienced, adventurous, and— Not a virgin. I would have never guessed she was a fucking virgin.

The image of Grayson's smirk, his lips glistening from her pussy, carves into my brain, making the ice pack in my hand bleed with water under the pressure of my white-knuckled grasp.

I want to rip the echo of her from his mind, beat him until that part of his brain flickers out, and the memory of her juicy pussy and the smell of her sweat vanishes.

Don't think about her!

I've never cared about sharing a chick before this... before her. I fuck experienced girls who like it rough and hard and dirty and leave me the hell alone afterwards. Because I don't get attached, because they aren't *mine*. I don't care what they do or who they do it with.

But she isn't experienced.

She could be mine.

And I care.

Can't stop thinking about her.

This is dangerous. I never wanted the intensity of love because I knew I'd fucking struggle with it. Obsess over it. Drown in it. Bury myself in it.

My father's love for another woman destroyed my mother, fuelled her hatred for me and my brothers, and ruined our childhood. I saw her pain in every action.

I never want that kind of love.

My eyes scroll the bar, landing on a man leaning over the wooden top, beckoning the staff. He's around Kaya's age. He could have licked her. She likes to get off.

To use men.

She could have used him.

My brows knot tightly, the tension of my frown, of the punch, of the headache that is Kaya Lovit, a throb in my temple. And Grayson's words taunt me to its blunt tempo: *"I have her pussy all over my lips."*

The water from the pack rushes down my face as more leaks from it within my fist.

Absently, I lift my beer, and Stacey starts talking about the fight this weekend. "You should back out, Xander."

Her words are quiet.

She is far away, but she is right there. I'm in a tunnel, my eyes on this dickhead bothering the barmaid—and accompanied by Grayson's words. *"I'm good with licking pussy! But she's impossible to plea—"*

The image of Kaya's naked spine darkens my vision, and now I see Grayson knelt behind her. The way her smooth skin curves around that elegant as fuck frame of hers. The perfect amount of fat on her thighs, on her hips. So fragile. So feisty. So soft. My cock gets hard to the reverie, and I don't even care as I consider beating one out in the toilet.

I clench my teeth until they ache.

In my mind, Grayson flips her over and then it's not Grayson, it's the unruly dipshit across the bar.

He bothers me.

Kaya's breasts meet the pillow, her mouth opens, panting, her pussy exposed to him like an offering just for him. She chose him, and I'm losing my fucking bearing with reality and the present and— She's going to choose someone one day.

And they will be her first.

Fuck. I don't like this.

My pulse becomes rampant.

Feels like I like her.

Before I know what is happening, I'm on my feet. I'm striding across the bar, my dark gaze locked on this dipshit by the bar, and I'm fisting the back of his shirt, dragging him to his feet, out for fucking blood.

"What the fuck, man?"

"You're fucking distracting me," I growl, shoving him to the floor, his body sliding along the greasy vinyl before hitting a table filled with shocked patrons.

"Get the fuck out," I bark, hissing through the gaps between each letter as a warning—I want to hurt you.

My body feels huge, muscles tense and painful, my heart rattling off like a damn machine gun. Out of control.

You're out of control!

My consciousness, though, is slow and confused and lethargic, sluggishly watching my actions as a recluse, stalling as my body mindlessly leads the way to carnage.

Detached, my muscles move on their own accord. I know this guy hasn't touched Kaya, but that doesn't stop me from advancing on him.

Or has he?

How will I ever know?

If I keep her, how will I know which dickhead has had his tongue inside her? I could be standing right there, claiming this girl, all smiles and bursting with affection, while across the way, five guys stare at her, trancing as they recall her juicy pussy.

Upon the mouthy dickhead on the floor, my shoes hit the ground hard and thunderous, but then a hand seizes my bicep. My body pulses to a stop.

I whirl around, ready to finish the person holding me back. But my mind catches up just in time. My anger comes to a screeching halt as

Stacey's face appears.

I widen my eyes. Slowing, I follow her fearful stare to my raised fist that tremors mid-air.

Fuck.

I lower my arm, fist the shakes away at my sides, squeeze my hands together, pump blood into them, gain control... but I can still feel them, shuddering up the entire length of my arm, and that's—*new*.

I breathe hard, evident in the strain that for the past five, ten, twenty-minutes, I was suffocating, desperate for air to replenish my stalling mind.

"Xander." Stacey cups my face. "You need to sit the fuck down. You're not thinking straight."

I know. Unsure what the fuck is happening, I allow my best mate to lead me back to our booth, where I grab the beer, craving it like medicine, lifting it to my lips and—

I kiss air, my hand suddenly empty.

Then a smash sounds.

Blinking, I stare at the floor, at the bottle of beer that slipped right through my trembling fist and exploded.

I stare at it. "Stacey," I murmur, eyes on the pool of foam and beer, on the tiny floating fragments of glass. "I'm fucking pissed. I think. Will you drive?"

"What just happened?"

"Boxer fracture. A tiny one, Stace. And I'm pissed. It'll be fine," I lie, but it's a common enough injury that she might let it slide, a specific one to the fifth metacarpal bone, and boxing rules state you can still match with one on the mend.

"You need to sleep." She nods in the corner of my eye and walks with me outside, her body straight and rigid with uncertainty. Confusion curls around us, but I sure as hell don't know what to say or ask. I don't really even know what just fucking happened.

I climb into the car and fold my arms over my chest, focused on the people smoking on the verge, moaning carelessly—commonly—about their nine-to-five.

The engine hums to life, lights flick on, and Stacey begins the trip home. What just happened in the bar is ominous, causing suspicious energy to brew between us.

My head floats from the booze, the nerves along my temples and at my lower neck that pulse from dehydration or lack of sleep—I don't know which.

Tucking my hands beneath my arms, I keep them there as they vibrate—I *hide* them there as they tremble.

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

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kaya



THE NEXT MORNING, I'm asleep on my stomach when I'm roused by giggles outside my stale motel room.

Recognising the high-pitched cadence belonging to my sister, Natalie, I groan, awaiting her knock on the door.

The night before with Xander hammers into me, hitting me with images. Him and me. His touch, his taste.

"I want to do dirty things to you."

"It would mean something to me."

"It means nothing."

"You're such a liar, Kaya."

"Goodbye."

I engulf my face with my palms, and wait for Natalie to knock, to snatch me from this brutal reverie, but then she giggles again—no knock proceeds.

What is she doing?

I sit up, the single sheet bunched around my waist. Frowning at the closed door, my eyes momentarily catch on the small cracks in the plaster behind it.

Caveman!

I climb to my feet. Rubbing my eyes, I wander in rabbit pyjamas across the single studio space. Preparing for the daytime light to suffuse my sleepy room's space, I seem to squint in preparation before opening the door to—

Natalie is blocking the entrance, her arse to me, flicking her mousy-brown hair around, hips slanted to the side, a little rock to her pelvis. And Xander's standing on the other side of her, a backpack over one shoulder. Somehow, the blue in his eyes is enhanced by the flare of multi-coloured bruising across his features. His eye is swollen, but it's not ugly.

"Oh,"—Natalie peers back through a curtain of her short hair, the glimmer of disappointment at my early awakening merely a flash before she turns back to Xander and beams— "she *is* home. I thought she would be at some random guy's house—"

"Natalie!" I groan.

Ugh.

Bitch.

She sways past Xander, long fingers sliding salaciously across the curve of his muscles. "I'm two doors down."

"Thanks, girly," he says, eyes glued to me, a soft smile on his luscious lips, the calloused lower corner visible as a hardened pad that weakens my knees. I don't know why.

"Hey, Woman," he acknowledges me.

I don't smile back at him, crossing my arms over my breasts, supporting the parts of me that hurt, yearn, and hammer away for his attention. For that calloused lower lip to do '*dirty thing to me.*'

I clear my mind by clearing my throat. "I thought you made yourself perfectly clear last night."

"I'm not here for a social call," he states, rounding me and welcoming himself inside my room. He pulls the bag off his shoulder and riffles through it, saying to the contents, "I was an arse last night, Kaya. I was shaken from the blackout, okay? But I woke up this morning. Felt normal. I

just needed to sleep, but that doesn't excuse the way I spoke to you. For that, I'm sorry."

Damn him. His voice is deep and honest—deliciously, so. But I stay strong. Straightening, I turn my back to the veranda and watch him remove an electric drill from his backpack— *What? A drill?*

"What the fuck are you doing?"

"These rooms are required to have chain locks. The maintenance guy I called last night—"

"Last night?"

"Said he would fit one to your room and your sisters' rooms within seven days." He presses the drill bit to the wall, leans into it, and starts drilling.

When he's finished the first hole, he draws the bit out and blows inside the cavity to remove the wall dust. "Seven days isn't good enough."

He continues to work with the drill, the noise cancelling any potential to have a conversation with him.

Confused and trying my damndest not to swoon—at all—over this unreasonable and controlling and caveman kind of action, I sit on the edge of the bed.

His presence here changes nothing. *Goodbye. Good luck.* Those words left me with a concrete impression. A virginity *is* a silly thing, and I'll damn well die on this hill. I need a million dollars. And I know exactly how to get it.

Pulling out my phone, I go to my Cabi app and swipe to find past rides. I find my Beach-bum-Cabi-Man's name and details—Mac.

White Mazda.

Covered in sand.

His name is Mac.

Sounds about right.

Thinking about Father Rabbit and our prison break scene, I request Mac for an hour from now. I've never done that before, but the Cabi terms and conditions state that he can accept or decline, and in the event that he declines, they will send me the nearest driver.

Seems fair.

I could be crazy.

Or ask him to commit a felony.

Like stealing public property.

The drilling stops and I look up, meeting Xander's beautifully brutal gaze. He's staring at me and sliding the heavy cordless drill into his bag.

Tugging the strap over his shoulder, he seems torn. He grips the strap hard with one hand, and the other he tucks into his pocket. His body is stiff, dark brows tight, and a message on his lips that isn't quite rolling through them.

I understand that because I want to speak to him. Be honest. I feel magnetised, tugging at the seams to be closer to him, but I resist and resist.

Can he feel it, too?

I inhale courage and—

"I should go." He nods. "I've got to do the others. Then I got to train. I've got a fight this weekend."

"Cool." I shrug stiffly. *"Good luck."*

Ugh.

He groans, dropping his head through the sound. *"Fuck. Just tell me one thing, okay? Did you light that fire last season?"*

The question knocks me, but I nod stiffly. "Yes."

He breathes hard. "Why the fuck would you do that, Kaya? Be honest with me."

Because I was blackmailed by Lorna Jackson to light it, because she had dirt on my father, because the fire got her a promotion and a front-page article.

“Didn’t your brother tell you?”

“I want to hear it from you.”

I bite the inside of my lip, the sting a tangible companion to the hatred seeping through my veins as I blatantly lie to him—*again*. “I was bored.”

He shakes his head—my bullshit response is the nail in our not-a-relationship-relationship coffin—and I want to die for uttering it. Holding my breath, so I don’t leap to stop him from leaving, I watch as he forces his feet through the door, once again shutting me inside.

And it’s Groundhog Day with a stubborn-arse-Butcher on one side of the door, and a stubborn-arse-woman on the other. And *yearning*.

Absently, I gaze down at the phone in my lap. A Cabi notification is pinned to the top of the display with the word, *accepted*, beside Mac’s profile along with a message.

Mac:

No pickets this time.

A smile tugs at the corner of my lips, so when the sound of Xander’s drill and Natalie’s giggles starts again, I hold my phone tightly, because I’ve more pressing things to monopolise my mind. Getting my dad out on bail is the priority, not at all how Xander Butcher is outside securing my sisters’ rooms.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

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kaya



AS I RUSH to Mac's Mazda, my mother's voice soars across the parking lot. I pretend I can't hear her, opening the front passenger door and dipping just as a hand grips my arm.

I stop.

"Kaya, where are you going? There was a young man here before adding chains to the doors. I, for one, am very pleased the motel considered our safety."

Because we are so very fragile, Mother.

My shoulders sag, and I spin to face her.

Rolling my impatient gaze over her, I should be impressed by her self-preservation, but I find myself infuriated by it. She is flawless, even standing outside a cheap motel she shares with fifty strangers and her four daughters. In black Gucci pleats and a white cardigan that would cost more than Mac's car, she hasn't adapted in the slightest.

She looks just like me, too.

'Spitting image,' everyone says.

My temper sits just below my skin, thinking about Dad in remand, waiting for his vinyl records while she fusses over our décor and hangs photos.

I lean on one hip. “Have you taken Dad his records yet? They are all he wants in there.”

Her hand is still on my arm, so we both look at it, and she retracts her touch under my gaze. She knows I’m not a fan of the touchy-feely mother-dearest moments, and she at least doesn’t make me pretend to be.

“I took them yesterday. You didn’t tell me you were going out.” She has her breathy, polite voice on today. She smiles charmingly, eyeing Mac through the window, her uncertainty turning her nose up further than her Botox did. “I can call someone to help you get around, Kaya.”

I throw my arms up. “I like Cabi.”

“Why? Aunty Jul—”

“I don’t want to rely on everyone around me, Mum,” I say, lifting one foot into the car. “That’s not me. That’s you.”

“I rely on people?” She sighs hard like I’m missing some huge elephant or point or whatever. Abruptly she chuckles just once. A short, defeated sound that I will myself to ignore. “Well, I wish that were true, Kaya. *Christ*, how I would love to rely on you once in a while, but you’ve already made your mind up, so at least tell me where you are going so that I don’t have to worry all night that you might be in a ditch.”

Resentment snarls along my tongue. “We *live* in a ditch.”

Her eyes soften. “I know you’re upset—”

“Has Dad’s mistress visited him?” I blurt out, straightening even as her shoulders deflate. I did that—hurt—her, but I keep going because I can’t stop. This is how we interact. “Maybe she has some money we can borrow.”

I know I’m being a bitch, but I can’t help it. It’s her fault for turning a blind eye to them, for focusing on bullshit displays of wealth, for finding the diamonds a suitable substitute for his loyalty, and a new car the reason she smiles at him every day.

For being so fucking weak!

Gah. She's a shit role model. Chloe's mum and mine both, dragging their daughters, clutching their pearls, singing the man of the house is home, back to the 1950s.

I swallow as she slowly shakes her head. She looks down, then up, still shaking her chin slowly, and it's so theatrical. I pretend not to buy it. "Why do you say such hurtful things to me?"

"You let him have affairs," I say with a shrug. "I just presumed you'd be used to the other women by now."

"I let him, do I?" She presses her palms to her chest, her thumb and forefinger dancing around her gold-looped necklace that vanishes between her designer breasts. "*God, Kaya. You're mad. I know. I should—*"

"Look,"—I slide into the car and buckle myself in— "Mac is on the clock. I have to go." I close the door on her face, just as she squeezes her eyes shut, holding them like that with the same aversive tightness she displayed the moment she caught my dad with the receptionist bent over our kitchen table.

I stare straight ahead as the car pulls away, avoiding Mac's gaze, embarrassed that he witnessed that.

The road shoots between the tyres, the houses a stream of concrete in my passenger window. Twisting my knees up to the side, I lean on the door and sigh.

I'm not an arsehole.

There is history there...

"I'm not a bitch," I mutter to the door.

"I didn't say you were."

Twisting to face Mac, I look at his sun-touched skin and dishevelled hair. Greying. A distant gaze that hums of a carefree, wild life. Unapologetically so.

"You don't understand," I press. "We needed her to show us what it means to be a woman. And instead of empowering us, she raised her four

daughters to be perfect little models of poise and manners. We might as well be chattel for a man's gaze. Like she was. Her main goal was to make sure we looked good and behaved perfectly. She didn't have fun with us. Play. She didn't let us get messy."

"Ooof. Four daughters," is all he says, spinning the wheel to take another road, leading towards the coast.

I raise an eyebrow at him. "She wants us to be just like her. And I'm not! I'm nothing like her. I would never let a man cheat on me."

His expression is lax, chilled. "Let him?"

"Yeah. She forgave him." I blink at Mac, noting a strange smile on his arid lips. "Time and time again," I ground. "What does that say about her?"

"Hmm."

My brows bunch. "What?"

"And what'd happen if she left him?"

"She'd be fine. She'd get half of everything."

"Hmm."

"Stop with that *hmm-ing*."

"Where would you live?"

Adamantly, I say, "I'd stay with my dad."

"Not her?" he questions pointedly.

"No. God, no." I laugh but feel as though I'm alone on this anti-mother-dearest hill. "I have far more in common with Dad," I announce proudly.

He hums again. "Two peas."

I smirk at him, getting the hint. My picket procurement is akin to my dad's current living situation. Both of us are crooks. I go on, suspicious of Mac's easy gaze and loose wording. "He worked his butt off and never stopped for anything."

"I'm surprised he had time for ya. Man must be like Superman, then, ey?"

I blink at him again. “He tried his hardest, and I’m going to as well. I was distracted in high school, but that’s why I’m having this gap year. Next year, I am going to focus and be *just* like him. ‘Cause money speaks, so when he speaks people listen. *He’s* one of the richest men in the city...” I trail off, my heart sinking, our reality a weight inside the hopeful pumping organ. “*Was.*”

“*Hmm.*”

“Stop. It.” I groan. “What?”

“Sounds like your dad would be the right pick for ya, then,” he states, traces of dubiousness dancing through his chilled tone. “I’m sure he’ll have fun with ya like you always wanted, right? When you live with him, that is?”

Ugh. Who is this guy? “Well, no.” Twisting forward just as we roll down a hill, I say, “He’d be working—”

“Shh,”—he points— “Look at that.” His gaze meets the ocean, marrying it immediately. Out the window, as the stream of concrete becomes a vast blue smudge—the ocean now chases the car down the rolling road. “They call the earth mother, ya know? But *earth* is only 30% of the planet. The rest is *her*. She’s like a blanket for her children. She is always *on*. Settin’ up the perfect environment for them to grow, blockin’ out the sun’s harmful rays, takin’ all the hits from the outside world so they don’t see how harsh it can be.”

I laugh. “That’s a bit of a stretch, *dude*. My mum is nothing like your concept of the ocean.”

He grins, crinkles that denote his age and lifestyle cut lines beside his eyes. “I was just talkin’ ‘bout the ocean.”

Sure. Sure.

I stare out the window, watching the ocean roll and crash in a wavy blue succession.

When we arrive at Kenno's, I immediately feel smaller, the sheer size of his estate shrinking this motel dweller. The lavish modern home is bordered by budding roses and bright green vegetation that perfumes the air. All the houses along this street have a lavish plot size and soaring fences to keep the riffraff out on the streets where they belong.

It reminds me of what I used to have. How I enjoyed our entitled isolation. Gates. High walls. Privilege. I think about the Vietnam vet story that Xander told me. How they changed their habits because they changed their lifestyle. I'm not a heroin addict. But I'm a socialite junkie.

Used to having it—whatever *it* is.

I could have it.

Sighing it off, I remind myself the mission is to get my dad out on bail, and from there, we can work on his case.

Baby steps, Kaya.

I wave goodbye to Mac, who watches me as I cross the gregarious porch and up the five marble steps that look similar to the ones in our holiday home in Cairns.

Still, I never noticed that before.

The French doors swing open as I approach, Kenno beaming with his arms holding each door wide. "Ready to sell that hymen?"

"Seriously?" I glance over my shoulder, the frontage still and empty. Unimpressed, I find him again. "I rode horses, Kenno. And I have a dildo the size of a horse's cock, so I doubt I still have one." I don't. I have a clit suction stimulator because most boys can't fucking find it—I need a machine.

Or a boy with CPS...

Ape-gape—his wide eyes drop to the delta between my thighs questioningly, my satire lost to him. "A horse's?"

"A stallion." I deadpan, strutting under his outstretched arm as his eyes dart around while his brain considers whether that is even possible. It's not.

It would rip me in two.

“Where is your laptop? You got that onion thing set up for me?” I ask, heading up the staircase to his room on the second floor.

Kenno follows me to his room, and we sit down at his laptop. He has already accessed the dark web, and on the screen is *the* website.

“Well, that was easy. Clearly not that hidden.” I laugh, though I have no idea if it was easy or not, but I always thought Kenno couldn’t pour water out of a boot with instructions on the heel.

“It’s not easy.” He moves in beside me. “You have to activate the Tor first, then find the exact URL link, which constantly changes. You can’t just Google it. You hav—”

“I don’t need to know,” I murmur as I pan my eyes over the content, bile scorching a path up my throat when I see porn with tabs and ages ranging from newborn to eighteen.

My hands shake. “*Kenno*.” I sit back, wanting away from the laptop now and the vile site. “Newborns?”

“You have to pay to see it, Kaya,”—He glides the mouse around the pad, the arrow flying across the display— “it’s not just right there. You’re not gonna see anything you don’t want to. And pay a shit ton for.”

“This site needs to be shut down.”

“Yeah.” He nods his head. “It probably does.”

He continues to navigate the site, selecting words and moving through the interface until a digital registration form appears. This is it.

We fill it in, and I try to place my mind on autopilot. Calculated. In control. No one is making me do this. The image of my mum standing by Mac’s car with disapproval painted across her face spurs me on.

Answering the setup questions, I pretend I am the profile avatar—GirlX—not a living, breathing, hymen-potentially-owning person.

Then we get to the payment section. I gaze at Kenno, saying, “Payment? But it’s anonymous, right? How do we do this? Bag of money on a

doorstep. A diamond necklace worth the price asked?”

“Bitcoins, Kaya. They’ll pay you in bitcoins.”

“I don’t know anything about that stuff.”

He leans over the keyboard and types a long number into the field. “I’ll have them put the coins in my wallet.”

I arch an eyebrow at him. “As if.”

He looks offended, and taps save. “Hey, I may be a lot of things, but I ain’t gonna steal fucking money from you, Kaya.”

Studying his ape-like face, I see a glimmer of something new, a nice boy within the buffoon. *Fair enough*. I nod, still unsure, but I want to get this part done. The entire thing, really. We move to the next screen where there is a template for sales relating to different products.

Porn.

Drugs.

Puppies? *Weird*.

I skim the categories, my gaze landing with a groan on *prostitution*. *Ugh*.

I must outwardly sneer because Kenno pipes in with, “It’s the oldest profession in the world. Don’t mock it.”

“Which means, in theory, we placed value on *fucking* before we did farming. Aren’t we a clever species.” I sigh, my hands trembling, adrenaline moving despite the lack of any present danger.

I got this. It’s just a lot right now, but it’s also nothing. An exchange. I remind myself of that. I’m in control of my body now, while I sell it, and every day after. I say when and who and how and this is *my* damn decision.

I click on prostitution.

The questions:

BDMS?

Safe words?

Toy play?

Anal?

All the blood leaves my cheeks. It feels like an ice waterfall cascading down my face. I glance at Kenno, who seems trained to the questions. “Turn the other way, Kenno.”

He laughs. “Yeah, *righto*.” He turns his back to the computer, leaving me to spill my guts. I swallow—not literally, I hope to God.

Water sports?

Blood play?

Spitting...

Steeling my spine, I begin to enter the finer details and post my first advertisement. *GirlX* has to describe everything about herself because she is ‘the product.’ All the way down to the nitty-gritty little bitties.

It asks for descriptions of *everything*. All my—erm, her—*parts*. Shallow breaths soar through my lips.

This isn’t Kaya.

This is GirlX.

With golden-brown hair and blue eyes.

Fifty-four kilograms and five-foot-three.

Who is going to let a stranger fuck her for the first time for a million dollars.

GirlX is now answering the question: *Are you naturally wet or is lubrication needed?*

I’m not typing naturally wet—GirlX is.

“You need a photo, Kaya.”

I exhale hard, Kenno’s statement throwing me reluctantly back to the present, on the chair, in his house. I freeze up and think. He’s right. There is a section to upload *evidence*. “Do you have a mask?”

“A balaclava.”

I wince, Xander’s blue eyes throwing me into despair, his words from last night, the way he reverently smoothed my shirt down my stomach... ‘*It*

means something.’ ‘It would mean a lot to me to be someone’s first choice.’

I groan as I stand. *Why did he need to come into my life when it was falling to damn fragments?*

I press on, saying, “Can I have it, please?”

“Please?” Kenno’s brows weave. “You know, maybe this is a bad idea. You’ve gone kinda white.”

“I am white.”

“No. Like zombie-white.”

“Best put a balaclava on, then. I doubt I’ll get a million dollars if I look like a zombie.”

Now, Kenno, before I change my mind!

Waiting for him, I idle for a few moments, and Kenno shows me his reluctance through his slow actions. He sighs as he retrieves the balaclava from his wardrobe and holds it out to me stiffly.

“Thank you,” I say, grabbing it and staring at him with expectation. “Can I have some privacy?”

He edges towards the door. “You need to stop using manners. It’s weird. And it makes me think you got Tourette’s or having a stroke or something.”

“Get the fuck out.”

“Better,” he approves, shutting his bedroom door and GirlX inside to take photos of her body. Back on autopilot, I do what needs to be done. This is not Kaya.

Not Kaya’s naked body.

Click.

Not Kaya’s breasts.

Click.

Not Kaya’s pussy.

Click.

Not Kaya who has a crush on a boy.

Not Kaya who wants to choose him, who wants it to mean something to them both.

Upload.

Submit.

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CHAPTER SIXTEEN

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xander



MY ELBOWS MEET MY KNEES, my fingers entwined below my chin —not shaking today, thank fuck—as my eyes track the action on the home-theatre screen in the billiard room.

My fringe flops forward over my vision slightly. I let it grow longer when I'm between fights.

A hateful smile curls my lips.

I should be watching Davos' past fights in preparation for this weekend, but instead, his clip is minimised and expanded on the screen is Chuck's last fight.

Dipshit gets to me.

Here I am, agonising over Chuck's form and pace as he throws his opponent, Theo, across the canvas like a ragdoll.

They are both past and present midweight champs, but the *Young Chuck Norris* makes Theo look like an amateur. The pace is all his own; he doesn't lean to break. He ducks and swerves. In control. He looks like a fucking performer, with much less power than me but far more control.

Dammit.

When Chuck throws a gazelle punch, bending slightly before exploding upwards with the use of his legs, throwing the jab while mid-air, catapulting

Theo backwards into the ropes where he lay limp, I lean back and sigh roughly.

“You’re not fighting Charles, Xander.”

I glance up to acknowledge my dad as he ambles over to sit beside me, whiskey in his hand, cigar balancing between his gritted teeth. “I know,” I say.

Turning back to the television, I watch the referee lift Chuck’s fist. He’s won, and Theo hasn’t regained consciousness yet. I pause the television. “But I want to,” I admit.

“You never wanted to before.” He butts out his cigar three times in the crystal ashtray on the coffee table, the smoke dancing upwards from the extinguished ash. “You never cared who challenged you. You’re not that kind of fighter. What is this all about, son?”

His attitude.

Kaya Lovit.

I dunno.

“He wants to. I want to,” I state plainly.

In the corner of my eye, I see him nod slowly as he measures me up. “You’ll have to agree to a catchweight. Do you want to do that? Lose the weight needed?”

I look at him. “I can do it.”

Unapologetically, he states, “Chuck is faster than you.”

I sneer, saying, “Yeah, well, I’m better.”

He doesn’t disagree, but returns with, “Maybe next year, son. This year you need—”

“No. This year.” The words come out hard, stern, curt, and I wanted them to. “Now. Hook it up with his trainer.”

He rises to his full height and heads towards the double doors, unassuming in his slow stride but power in his presence. He simply says, “No.”

Just like that.

'Cause he's the damn head.

Clay's the Don.

Max does what he wants.

Bronson rules his own world.

And I fucking follow...

"Do you miss her?" I blurt out, because in that second, hurting him seems a fair trade for his blatant dismissal. And being silenced is my condition while not sharing is his, so I'm simply reminding him where we fit.

"Cut your damn hair," he barks, leaving the room under dark silence.

Rage gathering, I turn back to the screen and hit play, my eyes drilling holes through the flickering images of Chuck. I'll text his coach and the head of the City District Boxing Association in the morning and organise the damn pairing myself.

I don't need Luca Butcher's permission to face off a worthy opponent. More than that, he has a fan base and sponsorship. I have, too. There is money in this fight. They'll see that.

It'll be a showstopper.

A fight to remember.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

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kaya



I'M cross-legged on the mattress, my Sylvanians sprawled across the bed like a critter bomb went off on the sheets. I check a bear's little outfit over. It's worn and dusty, having been in the loft up until recently, when my phone buzzes with a message. I pick it up from beside me and—

I swallow over a lump, my eyes jumping to the plaster wall behind the door that has little flaps of paint curling around the crack Xander caused. I stare at it before I read the text from Kenno, hoping it'll somehow bring me comfort.

I brave the message.

Kenno:

Nothing yet.

Fuck.

Exhaling hard with relief *and* disappointment, I go back to removing fluffy grey fibres from the little bear's clothes like some kind of fucking weirdo.

A knock drags my gaze to the door, widening my eyes and quickening my heart to the possibility it's Xander. He's one of the only people who knows I live here.

I jump to my feet and fly across the space, twist the handle, cracking it to the restraint of the chain, ready to make a joke about my safety and strangers when—

It's not Xander.

An older man with a pitch-black beard, wearing jeans and a white shirt that is too short, scowls at me.

I peek through the gap, readying myself to slam it on his way-to-close face. “Yes?”

“What the fuck! You have a chain?”

Blood rushes from my cheeks.

Was this his past room?

Maybe he knows I'm an easy target?

“Ah.” My nerves are set ablaze. *Is he here to rob me, break-in, hurt me? Did he plan a heist? I only have little woodland creatures.* “What?”

“I’m here to put a damn chain on this door, but you have one.” He curses, and I sigh, relief riding my breath. “I swear, Peterson is still paying for this. This is,”—he disappears from the gap, his words dwindling in volume as he storms down the veranda towards the motel office— “just like him. If he hired another maintenance man, he could have damn well told me first. I drove all the way from...”

I close the door but hear, “That wasn’t seven days.”

And I beam. It comes unbidden and unapologetic, and is thankfully hidden behind the door.

Forcing a schooled smile, I slide the chain across to the sight of a beautiful, cool-blue gaze that snatches the air from my lungs. Like it owns it. His gaze owns my oxygen.

“Your impatience just cost that lovely man his day’s wage,” I say, shaking off the strange, distracted state.

He grins out the corner of his lips. There is something different in his eyes. Whatever it is, it finds a place inside me, nestling into a secure space

that I didn't even know existed until now. One that might mean we like each other. A lot. Maybe even, *more*.

"You're smiling at me, Woman. Did you know that?"

"Shit." I gasp in mock horror. "I better stop."

His eyes drink me in, his floppy dark hair hanging in his lashes. "*Christ... do that more for me.*" He presses his palm to his chest, over his heart. It's an exaggerated gesture but the words don't feel teasing—they feel real. "Smile more, Kaya. You make a man ache."

"That poor man," is all I can say before turning to allow him to follow me inside. My cheeks pinch, with what my mother calls a 'boy-smile.' They can't be controlled. Those damn 'boy-smiles' just run rampant. I palm and rub my cheeks, hoping to release my lips.

Sylvanians!

My eyes land on them. Quickly, I lunge for the mattress and shove them to the floor on the other side of the bed, but it's too late— I know it is. I can't look at him.

Fuck.

Slowly, I glance up from the children's toys scattered across the green carpet, to find him staring, straight at me. And I groan as he walks around the bed and scoops up a critter.

A black shirt wraps around his muscles. And he's wearing grey sweatpants, the style that throws girls into a kind of mating heat, with the outline of his cock a thick, forearm-sized curve that bounces with obvious weight.

I force my eyes away. Holding a baby deer in his hand, he turns it over a few times. "I know a girl who would like this."

"You're not gonna ask questions?"

"That depends."

"On what?"

"On whether you'll go out with me."

My mouth drops open. “What?”

He lowers the toy to his side and looks up, his blue gaze marrying mine. “I want to try again. With *you*.”

Closing my eyes on his sweet utterance and the hopeful spark in his gaze, I will the strength to block the way his words find gravity in my heart. “Stop it, Xander.”

“I’m serious.” He moves over to me with that agile gait, the kind that seems at one with the elements. “Let me take you out. Let me do this right.”

I look at the floor between my feet, at the chipped teal nail polish above the faded green carpet. “I’m moody.”

He drops to his knees; his arms bracket my hips on the mattress. His hand still holds the little deer, while his gaze finds mine through my lowered lashes. “Is that all?”

I lift my head, fiercely holding eye contact with him. “I’m bitchy, Xander. Like, seriously.”

“I can handle it.”

“I’m spoilt. Selfish. Jealous. Vindictive. A liar!” I clench my teeth, and his brows furrow above pained blue eyes. “Isn’t that what I am? *A liar?*”

He looks at the little deer in his fingers, moving it slightly in contemplation—intensely passionate Xander.

And I’m twisted with nerves that he’s thinking, ‘Yes, you are. Forget it. I don’t need to date a moody, bitchy, Sylvanian-loving liar.’ But then his eyes search mine, falling in deep. “Stunning,” he gushes.

My breath catches. “Shut up.”

“Self-assessing,” he begins, each word sailing along a deep, gruff, sexy timbre, carrying meaning—awe and adoration. “Real. Sassy. Interesting. Can we kiss now, Woman?”

A short laugh leaves me, and I give into the giddy girl sensation I get whenever he’s nearby. Inching slowly towards his lips, I take my time but he’s not that patient, pushing up, sweeping my mouth with him.

Under his spell, I fall backwards to the bed with him crawling on top of me, his hand tucking below my back to slide me until we are comfortable, his lips soft in pressure, exploratory in motion, and tough from that damn callous I like so much. And they are on me the entire time, air a trivial thing when we are kissing.

This is our first *real* kiss.

His hand slides up to the curve of my neck, resting on the arch, his thumb tracing the muscles of my throat as he keenly enjoys my lips. His other hand feeds gently through strands of caramel and umber in reverent dominance.

He's slow with me.

It's different.

I slide my fingers down his torso, lazily caressing the muscular ripples all the girls swoon over when he's shirtless in the gym. His abdominals somehow purr against my fingertips, a rolling motion in my wake, and he groans when I get to his waistband. The sound begs me onward.

I follow his hair down to his cock, finding him half-engorged. My world tilts, ruling the forearm comparison no joking matter, but a very realistic size comparison.

And—

With a gasp, I still my hand on something strange. I feel his smile against my lips, taste his satisfaction in shocking me. I expect him to stop and explain, but it's like he can't bear to separate our mouths, so our bodies talk instead.

"Here. Let me show you..."

He slides his hand down to meet mine, urging my timid fingers along the underside of his shaft. My forefinger and index roll over one, two, three piercings like a ladder.

"Touch me."

When his hand covers mine, he squeezes and guides us up and down the long length of his cock, slow and controlled. Immediately, we are swallowing each other's moans in time with the steady, firm strokes.

"God, that feels good."

I feel his pleasure like waves of energy beating into my body, somehow flooding *me* with desire far more potent than my own. It's unbearably erotic to feel my soft, comparatively fragile body, smothered in this man's wall of muscles while they tighten and contract.

Whether it is like this with all guys, I don't know. But there is nothing more sensual than making Xander Butcher pant into my mouth, groan, and hum uncontrollably from his throat while his lips refuse to break from mine.

It is perfect.

Our kiss.

His enjoyment.

"It's perfect."

I squeeze harder. His lips start to fumble, the building of his climax overwhelming his pace, his rhythm, his breathing.

"Fuck," he moans into my mouth, yanking his hand out of his pants to push them down. Rushing to get the cotton out of the way, his lips slide over mine carelessly, but he doesn't stop the attention they offer me.

He manoeuvres himself and pushes my shirt up my abdomen as I pump him harder, faster, feeling him jerk and grunt. With my mouth mashed to his, I can't see what his erection looks like, but if it's anything like every other part of him, it's the kind of perfectly formed that seems designed.

Then he breaks our kiss, his face tensing. His head falls back, his breath rough as he comes on my stomach with a primal growl, pumping, hot, powerful, the cum slapping my skin. He shakes, then stills.

Fatigued, he presses his forehead to mine until he's empty, but his cock still throbs in my palm, wanting more.

Panting, he says, “Not what I was expecting. I just wanted to kiss you, Woman. And you jerk me off to damn near blindness. You trying to drain me?”

“Of sanity.” I laugh.

“Too late,” he says, and we smile at each other. He smells like a gym—sweat and man and rubber. It’s perfect. How a man should smell.

Dragging his eyes down my body to my belly, a provocative curve forms on his lips at the sight of his cum painted across my bellybutton. “I wish you could wear me all day, Woman.” He straddles me, up on his knees, his bulk is enough to crush me, but his thick quads bear the mass.

Taking the opportunity while he’s admiring his claim over my stomach like a damn Neanderthal, I glance down at the top four inches of his cock, peeking out from his sweatpants. It’s still hard. The smooth crown exposed, the foreskin bunched below, and two piercings skewing the skin underneath. And there is another bar that I can’t quite see.

When I look back up, his eyes are dark, and it makes my hips lift off the mattress. “Like what you see?” He pushes his pants down to display the entire thick length. I clutch at my heart like a woman being proposed to... I was right, it’s the Sistine Chapel of cocks.

Magnificent.

Fisting his cock, he strokes himself, showing me how quickly he can make himself hard again. “You’re stunning, Kaya,” he says roughly, stroking his cock in long, lazy pulls. “Tell me this means no more pushing me away. No more lies.”

A lump fills my throat.

I try to sit up, but he puts his hand around my throat, holding me down, pinned to the mattress. “Say it. No more lies. Let me take you out.”

There is this animal magnetism to Xander Butcher. Where he can be vulnerable and affectionate, playful even, like when you see a panther and

pantheress curled together, seemingly kittenish, it's easy to forget that within sheathes there are claws.

Then he does this, and he's hot, a scorching wall of tight muscles and dominance, like when the panther mounts her, sinks his teeth into her fur and holds her down.

Xander is both.

He has a contronym personality.

"You're a contronym, Xander," I say.

"Yeah?" He nods, letting me have this one. "Why do you say that, Woman?"

I can't hide my smile. "Because you look like you can't decide whether to brush my hair, lick me, or bite me so hard, sink in so deep—"

"That I can taste your soul."

"So deep it hurts," I finish.

"Most things worth feeling do."

I lose breath. His passion, it's— It's not normal, but I want it. Yet, I feel my heart thrash and then twist, my mind fighting to stay in the present, to not drift to yesterday at Kenno's, to the resignation, the advertisement, the photos.

"Your cum is drying on my stomach." I laugh, changing the subject. "It's sticky."

He leans down to mash our lips together, stealing the sound while squeezing more from my throat with his fist.

"I have a fight in two days," he says through our kiss, relaxing his fist to allow me breath. "Come. Watch. Lick my wounds after." His voice drops. "I've never had a girlfriend at a fight. I've never had a girlfriend."

Girlfriend? Swept up in that word, in Xander Butcher, the most beautiful and brutal boy in the city, I murmur, "Girlfriend?"

"Lick my wounds."

"Literally?"

His groan vibrates against my lips, leading me to believe he'd actually like me to. "You have no idea what fucked up things I like to do after a fight, Kaya." He rocks his hips on me. "The hour after my fights, I'm on fire."

"Will you burn me?" Just looking at him is like staring into the sun.

I trail my hands up his back, feeling the muscles ripple and awaken further to the long caress. His lips skim down my chin, down the roll of my throat, to my chest. His hands cup both, but then he stops himself.

"Fuck." He pushes back. "I'm used to just training all day, fighting, and fucking at night, but I don't want that with you. So..." He collects himself, wiping off that intensity and replacing it with a lopsided grin that lifts the callous on his lower lip, displaying it to me. The portrait of a warrior and a charmer. "Tell me something real. Something no one else knows."

I look at the Sylvanians. "Can I clean myself up first? I feel weird talking about them while I'm covered in your cum."

He grins when he follows my line of sight, knowing exactly who *them* are. He nods still smiling at my little Sylvanian Families. Jumping to his feet, he says, "Come with me, Woman." He struts into the tiny bathroom. "Jesus!" He laughs, the noise echoing around the room, reaching me on the mattress. "I can barely fit. But I'll try." A splashing sound begins, and I slide to my feet.

I meet him in the bathroom, grinning as he kicks off his shoes and starts to undress, making himself comfortable without invitation.

I sigh, eyeballing this specimen in front of me. The red-blooded woman inside me burns up at the sight unfolding like a damn Christmas present. A slow unwrapping of long pulsing back muscles and then spectacularly thick thighs that lead to defined calves, but it's the curved arse-cheeks that one can only achieve through squats, lunges, and living the lifestyle of an athlete that causes me to shuffle in place.

"What are you doing?"

“I’m getting in your bath,” he states plainly, stepping into the pink ceramic tub before sliding down, his knees rising. “It’s snug, but you can fit between my legs.” That last bit expels through a cheeky grin, that damn crooked curve, that calloused lower corner exposing itself, and I bite back a swoon. “Come on, Woman.” Leaning back with a sigh, the water filling up around his breathtaking body, he lays his arms along the edges

I go completely quiet, and his smile falls as I pull my shirt over my head. He stares at me while I slowly undress. My frozen expression doesn’t abate the shuddering of my pulse.

Swallowing over a lump in my throat, I slide my jeans down and push them aside. If his darkened eyes could lick me, then they are. I unclip my bra at the back and push my knickers down, acutely aware of his gaze as it has me panting beneath it.

I dip my toe in and then turn to sit between his thighs, lean back, and the water rises to almost the very top. He uses his foot to turn the water off. Behind me, his breaths in and out move my spine, each a rumbling effort of restraint.

“You’re so perfect,” he says into my ear, dropping his hands below the surface to touch me. “These,”—his fingers slide up the outer swell of my thighs to my hips where they dive inward towards my pussy— “This sexy piece.” He plays with my lips, fondling them slowly, separating them with long smooth strokes up and down. It’s the perfect pace, pleasure’s simmering presence forcing my head to drop back to his chest.

The steam rises around us, and I moan, white vapours dancing in the air.

He says, “Tell me about *them*.”

His fingers leave my pussy and slide upward to my breast, where he massages the pert mounds with water, his hands sliding across my slick skin.

I take a deep breath and exhale a hidden quirk that has forever lived in an anonymous digital space. “I have hundreds of Sylvanian Families. I

make little sets with them inspired by major events in my life. Usually they are different, happier or fantastical versions, and just the most important, life-changing,”—I don’t breathe between words now— “events and then, here’s the kicker, I take pictures of them in their little poses and upload them to a private Instagram account called Sylvanian Diaries.”

I inhale air.

Oh. My. God.

I just fucking said that out loud to a boy of all creatures. To a boy I like.
Kill. Me.

With his hands still moving around my body, his heart steadier than I’ve ever felt any heart before, his aura calm. I wait for any response to that absolute insanity.

Soon, his silence heightens every noise: the dripping of the spout, the humming from adjacent rooms, his deep, strong breaths—

Then he finally says, “Which one would I be? If you ever deem me important enough, which Sylvanian would I be?”

I smile, my heart swelling. *Xander Butcher*—a contronym. “I don’t have a panther.” I lift my knee, the water sliding down my skin. “So maybe a wolf or a fox.”

He hums. “What are you?”

“I’m a rabbit.”

“Well,”—his lips meet my shoulder, his words murmuring against it—
“then I wanna be a rabbit, too.”

I spin in his lap, his hands sliding over my stomach, never leaving my skin beneath the surface. Until I am straddling him, eye to eye, nothing but us.

His erection is pressed between our stomachs. I study him, and find my fingers desperate to be in that damp hair, dragging my nails up the back of his neck through the strands.

I can't stop looking at him, and he won't waver from me. That grin is there, but dark shadows of desire tighten it, the bite in him gnashing below the surface.

You're not a rabbit, Xander.

His cock beats, so I push up and lift my hips until I'm rolling my lips up the pulsing length. Just on the outside. I shudder at the sensation, and he licks his lower lip, watching me take pleasure from him.

I use him without penetration. Just rubbing. Work my clit and entrance over the piercings that bone the underside. I watch him. My pussy ripples, wanting what is so close to fill my deep clinging core. I rub on him harder.

"Fuck," he hisses, gripping my hips. I try to work his erection as I slide the full length, trying to massage him to pleasure as I climb towards my own.

I open my mouth to pant into the steamy air. Needing support, my thighs trembling to the rising sensation, I grip his taut shoulders—wings like an angel, but instead of soft feathers they are thick muscles, rising bones like plates. They are warrior wings.

I moan, refusing to break eye contact.

His fingers dig into my sides. "Slow."

"No. Help me," I beg.

"You're such a lovely sight. Rocking your pussy on my cock. And you didn't like him before?" The coaxing rasp in his timbre spurs me on, my hips firing up, rubbing against the piercings. "You like rubbing yourself on me now, don't you? I think you should admit that your pussy is greedy for me. That you're juicy for me. That I touch you so fucking good, you crave me now. Tell me, Woman." His eyes flash with dark intent. "Go on."

My pussy pulses and ripples to his words. I wiggle around. Flooded with need. Desperate to come so badly to his words, to the look of utter demonic ecstasy in his eyes. "No."

"Tell me that I touch you so good."

I'm desperate for him. "Yes."

"Yes, what, Woman?"

Groaning huskily as the pleasure eludes me, I can't speak, can't think straight, not about anything but reaching my climax. "I need you." I finally gasp. "I need your touch."

He tilts his pelvis so that the three bars press to my throbbing opening and feeds his hand down between us, setting a thick skilled thumb to my clit where he circles it. Each lap rising heat to my ear, each lap lifting the pleasure up my spine, each lap building my orgasm until I'm feverish, shaking, captured by the rotating pressure.

I cry out, squeezing his shoulders, gyrating around on him as I come in a blazing rush. The corner of my eyes blur. He doesn't stop when I need him to, when the feel of his thumb is edging pain, too intense, but he knows what he's doing because my orgasm continues.

His long groans are pure possessiveness. "You're simply the sexiest damn girl in the world when you come. And I gotta have all of it. I want to have every single one of your orgasms rubbed out on me. My lips. My hands. My cock. I don't care. But, dammit, I'm not sharing a damn moment of Kaya Alana Lovit when she's vulnerable. A man won't survive sharing a sight like this."

I lower my body until I'm curled against his chest, rattled, and shivering from the blissful aftershock.

He envelops me in his arms, one hand on my spine, one on the back of my head, fingers feeding through my hair, the tips circling my scalp. It's so intimate. And I don't know how we got here, but I'm not ready to question it.

Ugh. I don't want to.

So, I snuggle into him further.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

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kaya



MY HEART IS in my throat as the sound of the crowd rumbles. It's like nothing I've ever experienced before. It's visceral, vibrating in the cells of my marrow, consuming my ears. The energy seeps inside. No sense is without ferocious stimulation.

I can feel them in my spine—the horde.

With the masses, Chloe and I sit in the arena shadowed in near pitch-black, the ring in the centre glowing under moving strobes. The air around us is electrified.

Everyone is on edge.

Adding to the dynamic, to the utter intensity that creeps into my chest, the music builds in a crescendo of booms, claps, and drums, a kind of musical manifestation of the brutality of boxing. Not a moment of silence, no reprieve for anyone, noise that shocks, the horde that roars.

My nerves feel on the edge of snapping.

Chloe and I are close to the ring, four rows back. Vibrating with near tangible anticipation, a wall of spectators rises like a dark modern colosseum behind us. This is no underground fight. This is the stadium. A spectacle.

I press my hand to my chest and run my fingers over the pendant of my necklace. It says *princess*. I find my palms and skin clammy from nerves,

shaking slightly with anticipation.

The rows directly in front of us are less rowdy than the wall that flanks us—more trained to the stage. I scan the backs of heads, and my eyes land on Charles Young leaning forward with a man at either shoulder, uttering close to his ear.

I sneer at him.

“Ladies and gentlemen, this is the moment we have all been waiting for, sweating for, ladies gettin’ wetter for,” the presenter roars from within the ring, causing a surge of screams to race across the wall on spectators. “This is where legends are made! You know what you’re here for.”

The overhead television comes to life. Clips of Xander boxing in past matches, training, covered in blood and bellowing, unlike a man but akin to an animal, flash across the display as the presenter thunders, “The New Legend, Xander—The Butcher—*Buuuuuuutcherrr!*”

The display is now recording live. Drums beat, the power in them culminating inside my bones.

A camera suddenly slices to a corner of the ring where fire shoots from the floor just as Xander strides out to the thunderous tempo.

He’s followed by two bouncers, three suits, and his dad. His hair is shorter and wet, too. A mouthguard fills out his lips, his teeth gnashing on the rubber, a film of sweat already coating his muscular physique, and he’s fucking beautiful, brutally, so.

He leaps into the ring with that panther-like prowess and bounces around; the proceeding screams sit low in my abdomen, and my fists turn white under the gripping jealousy.

I hear shrieks.

“I want to have your babies!”

“You’re a god. Kill him for us!”

One cries, “Let me suck your cock after your fight!”

Another begs, “I’ll let you put it anywhere. Any. Where!”

I'll knock you the fuck out, bitch! The. Fuck. Out.

I gasp angrily, jealousy feigned as outrage. That acupuncture sensation needling through my veins. So, these are boxing groupies? Every mouthy bitch in here volunteers to finish him after the fight, their knickers clearly drenched from the sight of Xander—The Butcher—Butcher. Spurring him on, fuelling him for violence, with their enraptured catcalls and praise and *ugh. Sluts.*

While the men call, “Make him bleed, Legend!”

“We want blood, Butcher!”

Suddenly, I picture his crooked grin distorted by the mouthguard and disguised by the scowl. The dark floppy hair that used to always hang in his lashes. The clear blue gaze that is my air. The soft touches. The brilliance he spouts. And the tattoo on his wrist comes to mind: “monsters are made.”

Sadness creeps in.

My heart beats harder behind my hand as Xander revs himself up, nodding to his dad, who stands in the corner of the ring reciting something to him. His brothers are there, Clay, Bronson, and Max, too, just outside the ring.

Behind the Butcher Boys, in the first row, are their wives or friends. I know this as I recognise Stacey and the blonde one wearing all pink—*Cassidy*. She’s the District’s Golden Girl. The ballerina who fell in love with Max Butcher. The entire city followed their love story.

I pan back to Xander. Even from this distance, I can see every muscle carved from his flesh, contracting, bulging, leading down to his red satin shorts.

I flush with heat.

God, I’m not one of these girls.

Control your cat, Kaya!

The presenter goes on, “In the other corner, the contender, Davos—The Beast—*Briiiiittonnnn!*” Introducing the man they call *The Beast*, who seems

thicker than Xander but a similar height.

A slideshow of Davos now fills the screen, but I'm watching Xander as he skips without a rope, warming up his thighs and calves.

"Jesus Mother Mary Joseph, he is fucking hot, Kaya," Chloe gushes into my ear. "You need to give that man your virginity. He deserves it. He's such a good boy."

I'm reminded that I haven't told her about selling my virtue for a million dollars. But, if I tell her... my pride will ensure I follow through—not that I don't want to.

My heart decides to ache at the same tempo as the building crowd. "He is beautiful," I say over the screaming women and barking men, because she isn't seeing the warm heart within that formidable wall of powerful, fierce muscles.

Mine.

The bell snaps me from my perving, and Xander and Davos collide, both unapologetic in getting close and bloody. Davos takes hits. Xander swerves. His fists as sharp as he is stunning. He anticipates, waits, and then he jabs freely, unhurried. It's measured with him.

The hits he accepts are purposeful. Why would anyone want to receive the blows? It seems to fuel him. Drawing out the fight, he takes a few light hits for the dropped tenor of the horde. Then he delivers blows that launch his opponent backwards, sprays blood and paints canvas.

When the bell goes off, Xander's brow is gushing crimson rivers. He howls, holding his arms out wide, flexing his muscles, and when the girls scream at the display, I brazenly join them.

Break time. Xander drops into the corner, where he guzzles down water, and his dad uses something to stop the blood from blanketing his eye.

It's so quick. Then the bell causes him to leap to his feet again. Ducking. Dodging. Jabbing. *Oh, God.* Davos lands a fist against his

wounded brow. That one was brutal. The blood and sweat coating his face, covering his eyes...

Can he even see?

Xander stills.

Takes another jab.

I. Stop. Breathing.

He sways for a moment, there is clear disorientation, and I'm waiting for him to drop to his knees, to fall, to end this, but he's holding himself up on stubborn, unrelenting limbs.

Davos throws another punch to Xander's forehead, the blood now everywhere—a crimson waterfall. A scene from a horror movie—Carrie at the prom. Still, Xander stays strong but takes more hits like a punching bag.

No. No.

“What's happening here?” the presenter says, and I realise he's been talking, narrating, all this time, but I couldn't hear him above my own thunderous pulse.

I stand. I look at Xander's dad with desperate intent. *Will he help? Stop this? Can he?* His dad is saying something from the sideline, his anger evident in curt gestures.

“He's still standing!” the referee yells to him.

Then Xander rattles his head, coming too, and I'm not sure if that's normal or not, but for a few seconds, I felt like something inside me was bruised. Something was being tortured. And I never want to feel it again.

He's back with a start. My heart lunges with whiplash when he ducks in close to Davos with unexpected precision and drives his fist upwards, connects with his opponent's jaw, and snaps it upwards.

That's it.

It's over.

Painting the ringside with blood from his mouth, Davos collapses, and the horde detonates.

The wall of spectators rises like a swelling ocean in an otherworldly sea, booming and clapping with uncompromising velocity. But I'm shaking, eyes locked on Xander as the referee raises his fist to signal his win.

His dad stands with his hands on his hips; the lack of celebration stirs inside me. Bronson, Max, and Clay are on their feet, staring at the reigning legend.

And Xander seems distracted, his gaze scanning the room, until it finds me and halts. I inhale harshly. He penetrates my core with that bloody stare, filling me with warning and excitement that isn't reverent but turbulent.

Chloe gasps. "He's looking right at you."

I lick my lips. "I know."

Tugging his fist from the man's high grasp, Xander dips between the ropes and bounds from the stage, heading towards me. A sea of hands reaches out as he passes between rows of girls. They touch his body as he moves, sliding their fingers in his sweat and blood. The camera is on me now, the entire stadium watching our exchange.

I smooth my hands down my faded denim jeans, reading myself to say something dumb like, 'You're hurt or hi or I've seen better—' When he gets to me, he ducks down, grips me around the back of my thighs, and slings me over his shoulder like a log.

The breath is stolen from me. Filled with both unmeasurable amounts of adrenaline and smug satisfaction that every bitch here has to watch the spectacle with green projecting from their envious eyes.

I watch on the massive display as Xander struts down the corridor with my person as his baggage. Behind us, in the ring, his dad is now taking the belt, shaking hands, representing his uncontrollable son.

"Don't let anyone back here," he tells the two bouncers at the entrance.

Then we push through a curtain, but the intensity doesn't disappear with the horde, the flashing lights, the cheering, the growls, no, it continues all

the way to the changerooms because it is him... The passion and energy beat from him in uneven, unrelenting, ferocious waves.

He strides with me into the shower and plants my feet on the ground. I am still reeling as he cups my face with both crimson-marred gloves and gives me a bloody kiss that buckles my entire soul.

I grip his shoulders, finding them rocks of pulsing muscles, finding his skin dripping with blood and sweat, his pulse wild in his neck, the veins and cords beating as the adrenaline lingers.

And his mouth eats at mine, while blood falls down his face. He pulls away and spits a bloody mass through his lips and to the floor. "I want you!" He growls, his tone guttural, his tongue curling around those three words darkly.

"Tie me up!" He backs me into a corner and presses me against the tiles. "Tie my hand with the skipping rope to the shower tap." His body burns with need while his voice is strained with restraint. "Drop to your knees, drain the fight from me, or I'm going to fuck you *hard*, and I don't want to do that for your first time, Woman. So, tie me the fuck up before I explode. I'm barely holding on."

He presses his gloves to the shower wall on either side of my head, allowing me room to duck under them and grab the skipping rope from the bench.

I'm wet from his sweat, the blood, and the frenzy of his need building in my core. When I return, he hasn't moved, but his muscles vibrate, wrestling against his desires. I duck back into the cage of his body. There is blood in his lashes, beads drying on the strands. An angry split in his brow. An utterly brutal vision.

With a groan, he lowers his shaking fists for me. I wrap the rope around his wrists, through the centre and circle them again. As I work, he lowers his nose to the crook of my neck and inhales me on a rough hum.

“Tighter, Woman! You smell too good. I don’t trust myself with you, not with that innocent pussy.”

I tether them together and fasten his bound gloves to the tap just above waist height. He growls as he tries to get free, to test the restraints.

With feigned strength, I brave his fierce blood-shot gaze that is a meagre inch from me. “I’m not innocent, Butcher. And don’t treat me like one of those whores. Do you understand me?”

He licks his bloody lip, untamed in this moment, the fight still in his twitching muscles, the blood freshly dripping from his wounds. “If you were one of those whores, Woman, you’d have that skipping rope handle in your cunt and my cock bruising your guts right about now.”

My pussy weeps from his words.

He goes on, “Drop to your knees.” He tugs on the restraints. “Have you ever sucked a cock before?”

My indifferent confidence shatters, but I’m with Xander, and maybe it’s okay to be honest with him. “No,” I admit.

“*Fuck.*” He drops his head back, groaning in a feral way. When he lifts his heated gaze, arrowing in on me like a target, he declares, “You’ll only ever taste my cock.” His tone is reverent and greedy. “So, jerk me off with your hand and lick the tip. Don’t be gentle, Woman.”

Our attraction pummels us both.

I drop to my knees; blood and sweat drip on me as I pull his silk shorts down. His huge erection springs free, the size of it, the crimson colour, it appears just as aggressive as he does. The piercings protrude.

Rocking slightly, unable to control the need in my hips, my arousal for him a potent thing, I run my hands along his cock. He pulses within my clutches.

“Hard!”

I use both hands and jerk him off, one after the other, feeling his need in the thrashing veins along his long shaft. I lean in and lick the tip, earning

myself a growl from his throat.

“Hold your fists still.”

I do as he asks, and he starts to fuck the tight channel. I grip harder, squeeze. He batters my lips, my tongue darting out to taste the sweat and cum dripping from him.

“Good. *Fuck*. That’s my girl.”

He looks down at me on my knees for him. Unwavering from the action, he bucks his hips forward into my fist.

“I can see you rocking your pussy,” he hisses the words, each one a sliding, rasping timbre. “Are you juicy right now? I dream of your pussy. At night, when I jerk myself off, I dream of you sitting on my face. Of soothing me with your pussy to my lips. Tell me, do you feel this, too? This thing between us.”

Moaning to his words, I merely nod my response.

He continues, “Next time, you’ll be claimed, and you’ll be taking every inch of”—he slams forward— “this inside you. You’ll be letting me ride you sore. Fuck. Ride. You. Hard.” He strains to get the words out now, his orgasm brewing. “And you’ll help me work this fight from my veins with your clinging little cunt.”

Still raging with adrenaline, with violence, his grunts and growls become primal, and the energy of him, of me on my knees, of what I’m letting him do to me, sweeps me away.

I’m letting him use me.

For his pleasure. To settle his monster. The monster of the fight. I can literally feel it inside him.

The monster they made.

And I want to be dirty with him. I like being unkempt. Feral. Having spent my entire life forced into a flawless cage of sophistication, I love breaking through the bars.

More blood and sweat slide from him. As he towers over my squatted frame, fucking my hands thoroughly, my fists begin to ache, but I work him harder.

His rhythm is carnal.

He yanks on the shower tap.

Wanting to break free.

My heart gallops; he's intimidating like this.

He locks his teeth, jaw muscles punching beneath bruised skin, pupils dilating, face contorted in brutal ecstasy, the kind that needs to be expelled, the kind that needs to be exorcised.

Through a deep growl, raw to hear and feel, he comes in powerful shots, "Fuck. Fuck. Fuck." Matching his need, his animalistic thrusting, the words fall from him.

His warm release slaps my lips, mingling with his blood and sweat, a crimson layer to tarnish this perfectly sculptured socialite. And I'm anything but a model little Lovit daughter now.

Fatigue lolls him, and I stand. His eyes are pressed together, and he's holding them like that. Suddenly, now sedated, the billows of his fighter's endorphins dropping, I see him vulnerable and wounded.

I possess the back of his neck and in supportive empathy, I press my forehead to his and he exhales hard. Riding down his breath, absolute exhaustion, and something else. The tainted boy with the crooked smile, with the shaggy hair always in his eyes, an abyss within his wounds.

"Let me clean you up," I breathe, my heart twisting as sticky plasma drips from his lower lip, sliding down it, lapping at the tiles. I lift my head from his.

Dropping my hands, I untie his wrists, and he opens his eyes to watch me tend to him. I almost burst into tears to see the crimson veins and distant gaze within his blue eyes.

He doesn't talk. This time, I let him be. I tug off his wet gloves, the leather thick and weighted with sweat. They are hard to get off, and he winces when his swollen fists are freed.

I gasp to behold the damage within. "Xander. Is this normal?" I hold them like they are battered animals. "They look broken."

"Not broken," he murmurs, hoarse and fatigued. "Just swollen. Filled with fluid. They'll be okay in a few days. Don't worry about me, Baby."

But I do.

I worry so much.

"Baby?" I whisper. Around him is a sense of loss but I'm not sure what eludes him or how I can get it back for him. It's like a comedown, a drop into reality.

"Yeah." He drops his head to my crown again in a way that suggests he just can't hold it up alone. "Is that okay?"

"Yeah, Xander," I breathe. "Can I call *you* baby?"

"Yeah." He laughs, but it's hollow. "I think I'd like that."

He lifts his head again, his eyes swimming with wholesome needs. The need for my line of sight. My smile. So, I smile at him, our eyes locked. And suddenly, my entire world narrows to just him... *Xander Butcher.*

My heart swells despite the painful truth in front of me, the truth of the made monster. But I can't stop my heart from feeling his touch. Can't will it away. And I don't want to.

My guard is down for the first time, and I am bare within it. I'll never forget this moment in time, in all its bloody, brutal beauty, because this is the first moment, I've ever felt a shift to my entire makeup—the very first fall into love. It's as though my soul is whispering, 'He's finally here.'

Someone reliable.

Honest and real.

"I want to keep you," he states, the innocent statement offset by his raspy timbre. "Stay. Stay with me. I'm not easy to be with. I fuck up a lot

—"

"No." I lift my finger to his bloody lips. "No. You're easy to be with. You're the easiest thing in my life at the moment."

"Not just now. All the time. Be the person who stays for me. Who listens to *me*. Who actually *hears* me. I need that person, Baby. Stay, and be that person."

God, he's intense. My chest squeezes: he's acting strange again, distant, disorientated, but he's okay. He'll be okay. "I'll stay."

"Promise?"

My lower lip wobbles, but I don't know why. The emotions are so extreme they form lumps in my throat, well my eyes with tears—*scare me*. "I promise."

I strip down to my underwear. I turn the shower on, feeling dizzy with this love spell, and I help him clean his face, the blood already caked in his *now* shorter hair and across his scalp.

He's unsteady on his feet. He leans his head on my shoulder, and I wash his back. Nuzzling his nose against my temple, he's soft and gentle.

Do you feel this too, Xander?

This moment?

The one when we fall in love?

I take the heavy load of his head, but then it gathers in burden on my shoulder until the feel of it is bruising. Then he leans his weight, his feet—*Oh God.*

"Xander!"

He collapses forward.

I try to catch him, but we both slip against the water. I drop backwards, his body crushing mine to the tiles. I press my hands to his hard chest, straining to lift him even an inch, but it's fuck all use.

Blood waterfalls from his mouth.

Oh. God.

I strain to push his shoulders upwards, but he's a dead weight. I grip his heavy head, a bowling ball in my palms, to search his face.

My mouth fills with bile when I see his eyes are closed in a harrowing way. Not shut. Not squeezed. *Unconscious*. A slight gap that shows inner whites. There is so much blood leaking from his mouth; it's thick and fibrous, falling from the pooling red mass collecting in his lower jaw.

"Xander!"

No. No. No.

"Somebody! Help us! Help him!"

My heart feels like lead now.

Heat hits my eyes and pummels them with tears that spit from me. Sobs shake my body as he crushes air from me, the downpour and his blood puddling and mingling around our crumbled bodies.

I cup his neck, his head almost too heavy to hold. "You said 'stay with me!' You said 'stay!'" I shake him desperately. "I'm staying! Where are you? Get up! Get up!"

I lose it.

Hysterics consume me, flood me, drown me, as I remain pinned beneath him, below the falling water, the leaking blood, helpless and useless as the moments stretch.

I try to lift him again. But what if I hurt him more? His spine. His neck. That truth drops me into despair. Tears so hot and fierce, such an influence on my entire body, force my eyes shut. I squeeze them. Wheeze.

My fingers grip.

I can't help him.

I'm not enough—

Then someone yells, "Let him go!" And I feel his body lifting from mine, realising I'm holding him to me, hugging him with all my strength, with desperation.

Staying.

I'm staying with you, Xander.

But they take him.

They drag him from me, lay him down on the floor, and circle him, so I scoot back to the edge of the shower. I take so many breaths, fast, shallow, uncomfortable until I am panting and bawling relentlessly.

“The girl?” one of them says.

I can't move now. The water still pelts down on me. It's seconds... *Less than.*

Another man answers, “No one important. Just some boxer groupie.”

I watch them work on *my* Xander.

A blur of happenings.

He's there.

Oxygen mask.

Then he's on a stretcher.

Then he's gone, and I'm still here because I stayed— “*I stayed, Xander*” —but he couldn't, couldn't talk, couldn't be heard, couldn't tell them I need to stay with him, and I broke my promise. I'm alone on the tiles, bathed in a crimson pool with my fingers still gripping at space—space he should be filling the moment we fell in love.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

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kaya



I'VE SHOWERED THE BLOOD, sweat, and cum from my skin, and now I'm alone in my motel room. I dart my sad gaze between the plaster cracks behind the door and my phone.

Tears stream from my eyes, and I wait with my hand clutching my iPhone, torturing myself with repeats of the fight on YouTube.

The District News replays the twenty seconds or so that Davos used Xander as a freestanding boxing bag. With each hit, I ask myself: *is that the one? Is that the one that broke him?*

This footage concludes with amateur recordings made on camera phones of Xander being wheeled out of the changeroom, flanked by his brothers and his dad. The anger and devastation on their faces deepen my concern.

There is a moment missing.

The spectacular moment between us when we fell in love. No one knows about that moment.

Will it be missing from his mind?

My throat fills with tears. Even though I'm clean, my teeth brushed, I can still taste his blood mingling with the salty sorrow, a metallic hint, and two days ago engulfs me with vivid significance.

“THAT I CAN TASTE YOUR SOUL.”

“So deep it hurts,” I finish.

“Most things worth feeling do.”

A TAP at the door causes me to bury my face in the pillow. Then, a voice hesitantly sails in, “Kaya, sweetheart, can I come in, please?”

I’m surprised when I say, “Yes,” but mentally trump it up to exhaustion and the fatigue of my heart. I twist my face just enough to see the door open; my cheek still mashed into my pillow.

“I have your laundry.” Mum walks inside, a woven basket held in front of her with my shirts, jeans, and dresses ironed and folded in pristine colour-coded stacks.

I don’t move as I watch her fluff around the room, her back to me. “Heaven knows I wasn’t going to use these laundry machines on your *Henry LeF’o* shirts, so I had them cleaned properly.”

Unsmiling, I say, “Cool.”

“I also have this”—she approaches me slowly and places a picture frame down on the bedside table, directly against my tear-blurred gaze— “I thought you might want it.”

She lingers as I push up to one arm and stare at the picture. A moment in time captured. My dad and a nine-year-old me in the woods with bandanas on, searching for critters.

She continues gently, “I thought this would make you smile. Make you feel like he’s not so far away.” She pauses, her silence becoming an exhale. “You both look so dirty, but I know you don’t care.”

This is an olive branch.

I purse my lips, squinting at the image, remembering that holiday for all the wrong reasons. But I somehow forgot or didn’t quite understand at the

time, not enough to carry the memory into adulthood, to reanalyse it with a mature perspective.

My dad came home early on a Thursday and told us all he missed us and that we should go on a vacation.

It was one of the best holidays we ever had as a family. Better than Hawaii. Better than Bora Bora. The Australian outback and us. We toasted marshmallows. I had a two-prong stick so I could cook multiple mallows at once.

Mum even ate them, though not directly off the wood. My dad was fawning after her the entire time.

She was smiling a lot.

But the day we got back, *she*—mistress number one—was waiting on our marble steps with a swollen stomach. I didn't understand anything then.

"I saw." My mum's voice slides into the memory, clearing the hazy vision and awakening something. I didn't see it before. That he wasn't a great dad. Not really.

She presses her hand to her chest—her signature gesture—her fingers tangled in her necklace. I always found that conceited, like she was checking the valuable item was still there. Today, though, it looks coy and hesitant. "Well, I didn't see, but Mary St Clair's cousin's sister showed her the reel or whatever it is called of you and the boxer..." She pauses, and I inhale fast. Waiting for a lecture on decorum, appropriate behaviour, and tossed over a boy's shoulder on camera is not ideal press, but it doesn't come. "The boy who is now in the hospital. Am I right?"

I stare at the cracking plaster.

"I'm sorry, Kaya." She touches my hair, comforting, and I want to press back, take more warmth, but she retracts her hand, forgetting that we don't do that. I forgot, too. "That's the same boy who was fixing chains to our doors earlier this week. Wasn't it? Do you want to talk about him?"

I do. I don't. I bite back a sob. "No."

Her voice is soft and thick, like cream, and it's so familiar, yet, not how I remember it. "Have you been told how he is?"

My voice wobbles as I admit, "No."

"Do you love this boy?"

Yes. I clench my jaw, teeth locking the details within, while my heart is under duress, wanting to cling to my mum and wail about my heartache.

"Okay," she says softly and stands from the edge of the mattress, smoothing down her dress at her thighs.

"Don't. Go," I mumble sadly, my words strained from honesty and hesitation, our history taunting me. *'You'll regret talking to her.'*

She sits back down, resting her fingers on her lap. She doesn't take up much space in life, ever. I only just realise this. And by obtaining perfection, by ordering and organising, sitting quietly, and... She just tries to shrink her presence with faultlessness. Today, this doesn't annoy me; it saddens me.

"They won't tell me." I look up at her, finding her face genuinely pained, a mirror image of mine. "They won't even call me, Mum. I don't know if he's asleep or... *dead. Oh God.*" My voice fucking cracks open. "They don't know me! I'm not *someone* yet"—My voice shakes with the effort to not wail— "to *them.*"

"What do you mean—"

I lose the honesty through a cry. "His family! They don't know about me and him. It's new. I told Xander I would stay with him, promised him, like he knew something was wrong, but they don't know me, so I can't just demand to be close to him, so even if he's dying right now, my promise in his mind, that I'll be the one who stays and listens to him, my hand isn't in his where I said it would be, where I swore it would be!"

"Right." Mum straightens, wiping at her eyes that seem to leak like mine. She clears her throat, rising calmly, chin level with the floor and proud. "Up you get. We're going to the hospital, but you can't wear that."

I crawl to a sitting position. "What?"

"You're meeting the family," she says simply; the way her mind works is a damn conundrum. "You need a nice jacket or a cardigan."

I almost laugh against a mouthful of tears. "What? I can't go to the—"

"Kaya Alana Lovit." She grips her hips. "You have spent the last nineteen years of your life putting your foot down and rooting it to your exact demands. You have never let *anyone* tell you what to do or where you should be. I don't want you to start now. That boy needs you."

He does. I jump to my feet and grab my bag, following her graceful strides towards the door. "Okay."

"Sweetie..." She stops and turns towards me, her eyes pleading. "A cardigan or a jacket. Please?"

"Okay, Mum." I can do that for her. I rush to the wardrobe and stare at the contents, at the different outfits I would usually spend half a day matching and preparing, but my brain stalls. "Which one?"

"Ooh." Mum steps forward, the question like catnip to a feline. "I like the champagne denim with your—"

My half-hearted glare cuts her off.

"Okay, okay." She nods her misplaced enthusiasm away, holding the door open for me to exit. "The denim is fine. And let's go. I'll call aunty Jul —"

"Oh no." I wander through the gap, hearing her locking the door behind me as I head down the veranda. "We are calling Mac."

I feel a sense of dread creeping up my spine, but I have to do this for Xander. I have to put my nose into the Butcher family dynamic because I think he might want me to. I don't understand it. I don't need to. I made him a promise.

Retrieving my phone, I request Mac for an immediate pick-up and cross my fingers that my beach-bum is available to take his convict to the hospital.

I can hear Mrs Proper floating through my mum's tone as she says, "Who? I can't ride with a strange man. Kaya. I'm not a teenager anymore."

I slump down on the brick wall by the motel driveway. "He's not strange—" I halt on that lie because he *is* kind of odd with his far-out stare, his chapped lips, and sand carpeted car. "Well, he is no stranger than most people."

We wait. Across the dimpled road, narrow houses are stacked together like dominos—sagging dominos. The overgrown vegetation reaches through the cracks in porches and driveways like hundreds of needles rising from the dirt.

Mum is standing, fidgeting with her chain, looking at her bare wrist, at a phantom timepiece, swiping away rogue hairs that don't exist. She's nervous.

For a man who cruises through life, with energy like a turtle on sand, he sure doesn't mess around with Cabi timeframes. He's here within ten minutes.

I hear her inhale when the old Mazda pulls up. If I could feel anything other than fear for Xander, I may revel in this moment more. This is good for her.

We're adapting, Xander.

That is what we are doing.

Swallowing hard, I head to the passenger door to allow Mum a spot up front with Mac, but we collide at the same door. Shoulder to shoulder. I nod to the front seat. Her eyes widen, and her lips curve into a smile she clearly doesn't feel.

We slide into the car.

Mac stares ahead, while beside him, my mum folds her hands in her lap like the Queen of England.

On Mac's dashboard, the navigation shows his car as a green arrow and the destination—The District City Hospital—as a pin that is twenty minutes

away.

“What have you done now?” he says after a few minutes of silence on the road. From the corner of my eye, I can see him glancing at me through the mirror.

I mostly gaze out the window, wanting to engage in our usual banter but not having the attention for it today. “I’m visiting a friend. That’s all.”

“Did you put him in there?”

I smile sadly because that’s exactly what I thought he would say to me. “Not this time.”

“She did not put him there.” My mum defends because contextual clues and satire are always lost when she feels her name is being defamed.

Or maybe she’s protective of me?

“That’s good to know,” he says.

The rest of the trip runs in silence that may have been comfortable if not for my mother’s nervous fumes mingling with her Chanel No. 9.

Mac takes us right to the doors. The hospital is a vast beige five-storey building stretching around us now.

We climb out at the drop zone, ambulances parked beside us, a gurney at the ready, but I lean in to say, “Thanks, Mac.”

He doesn’t look at me. “You’re not yourself.” He nods slowly, making his mind up about something. “I’ll wait ‘ere.”

“What?”

“For your mother.” He gazes out farther, like he can see the ocean beyond the city scape. “You’ll want to stay. I can tell.” He tilts his chin to my mum who hovers behind me. “When she’s ready,” he says loud enough for her to hear, but still directs the words to me. “I’ll drive her home. I won’t make her wait. Won’t feel right if someone else picks her up, either. Get the feelin’ this whole thing makes her nervous.”

My brows draw in, suspicious. People aren’t nice for no reason. “Why would you do that?”

“Same as the picket.”

I grin at him, half-heartedly taunting, “Don’t hit on my mum, Mac. She’s a married woman.”

He laughs in a husky, addictive way that makes me want to smile. If I could, I would. “Not the husband that’ll keep ‘em away,” he advises, “but the four of *yous*.”

Nodding in agreement, I close the door and my mum and I push into the hospital side by side.

There is a queue at the reception desk, but sticking out like a sore thumb, a tower of large muscles, is the last Butcher Boy I want to encounter first.

My fingers twitch as I clutch my necklace, touching the chain. I’d prefer Clay, who’s outwardly calm and reasonable, or Bronson, who is renowned for his teddy-bear-like approach to women and children, but his grim-reaper demeanour towards everyone else.

But... no.

It had to be *him*.

It had to be Max Butcher.

Pulling something from the vending machine, Max is leaning down when I approach him. My mum is quiet behind me. It’s nice having support; though, my stomach is unsettled in preparation for what she may say. And to Max Butcher, of all people. *Shit*.

Max straightens and I swallow. When he turns to face me, almost walking straight through me, which isn’t a surprise, as he’s a fucking road train and does not give two fucks about swerving for oncoming traffic, I stiffen.

He frowns at me, and I realise I’m staring up at him, seeing so much of Xander, only Max is broader, with less warmth and charm.

“Max?” I ask, even though I know it’s him, but if I feign uncertainty, he might not take me for a stalker.

“Do I know you?”

I nod slowly, my eyes catching on the juice box appearing so tiny in his large grasp, and then I shake my head, returning my gaze to his crushing stare. “No. You don’t know me at all.”

“Her name is Kaya Lov—”

“Mum, please,” I say, holding my hand up to her prattling off our last name as though it would mean something to Max Butcher. To a few people, maybe, once upon a time, it may have. But even if I was Mother Teresa, Max Butcher would still be glaring down his lashes at me.

I force the words over the lump expanding in my throat. “I’m Xander’s friend.” It’s such a trivial thing, really.

A friend.

What nerve I must have to be here.

A muscle beneath his jaw pulses. “Is that right?”

Yes. Tears shoot to the back of my eyes, but I fight them off, my throat bobbing under the effort to not sob. “I know you’re a private family, but—”

“You know that, do you?” he bites out.

Oh. God. Don’t cry, Kaya. “Please,” I whisper but he turns his back on me and walks away. I panic. My efforts splinter and tears spit from my eyes. “Fuck you! I just want to know if he’s alive!” I scream.

He halts mid-step, but he doesn’t turn around.

Fuck.

Inwardly, I tremble, but hold my ground with fists at my sides. “I just want to know that he’s alive,” I say, trying to sound softer, pretending the ‘*fuck you*’ was a phantom and didn’t break through my lips. “Anything, please give me anything.” My breath hitches and holds. I relax my hands and take one step towards him. “Please, Max.”

“You care about my brother?”

“Yes,” I breathe the words through pain, taking another step towards his stiff back. “So, so much.”

“Does he care about you?”

I nod to his back, the nodding is for me because I need to feel it. It's true. He does. “Yes. He does.”

He begins to stride away, taking all my hopes with him.

As I turn to my mum, I hear, “You coming?” Without a second thought, I jog to catch up with him. When I reach his side, he adds, “Watch that bullshit language around my wife and daughter.”

This might be the first time my mouth doesn't object to being told what to do by a man. “Of course.” I forgot that he has a daughter. He's the last man on earth I imagine with one, but then, what do I really know about Max Butcher besides what the media shows me?

Ahead of us now, down the long hospital corridor, Max's wife Cassidy; a blonde girl I don't know; and a half-asleep child sit opposite an open hospital room.

I wipe at my eyes, smearing the defiant tears as we approach them. Hospitals change people. Everyone in a hospital looks smaller and more vulnerable...

Hospitals shrink people.

“Who is that?” the blonde woman asks, brazenly staring at me with suspicion, her aura holds power, and though she appears younger than me, it fits her well. My eyes drop to the diamond-studded butterfly pendant around her neck. She's wealthy, too. The gems are real.

“I don't know her,” Cassidy whispers.

The little girl with Max's grey eyes and golden hair styled like a firecracker on her crown joins the scrutiny. “I'll name her,” she says sleepily. “She looks like a Blaire.”

Too close to them, to the door that may have Xander inside—not ready to face that—I slow down, dropping behind Max to talk to my mum.

To stall.

To think.

I don't know if it's sensible having her here for this. We may be bonding right now, but she doesn't know Xander, or me, really.

In the middle of the corridor, I stop and face her as Max meets the girls still eyeing me questioningly.

My hands get sweaty, so I press them to my chest, my fingers nudging my necklace.

I stare at my mother, seeing her hand in the same position at her chest, and I— I can't believe I never noticed that her nervous quirk became mine. It's the same. Not a pearl-clutching gesture, but a hand-twitching one.

We play with our chains as we talk quietly. "I think I should do this alone," I say. "I think... It'll be weird taking my mum in with me or something. I don't know."

"I wish you'd worn something warmer."

"Mum"—I raise a brow at her— "I'm warm. It's warm. Stop fucking fussing. You've done enough," I say with a little too much attitude, causing her eyes to sadden. I sigh. *Be nice, Kaya.* "Honestly," I press, dropping the 'tude. "Thank you for making me come, but you should go. Mac is waiting for you. He'll take you home."

Her throat rolls over emotion. "Will you let me know..." She pauses, lifting her chin, before saying, "how the boy is?"

And I feel sad for an entirely different reason in this moment. What she really means is: will I message her this time to let her know that *I* am okay.

So, I release my necklace, take her hand from her chain and hold it softly. "Yes. I'll text you."

A middle-aged man in a white coat, with greying hair and tired eyes, walks from Xander's room, and I home-in, my hand slipping from mum's as I approach to hear what this obviously important man has to say about *my* Xander.

The three girls on the bench have straightened, Max has his arms folded across his chest, and Bronson and Clay Butcher have stepped from the

adjacent hospital room, too.

No sign of Luca.

He knows me, well, enough to know I matter to Xander that is. But *I* recognise both Butcher Boys. Bronson is impossible to miss with his vivid tattoos, colours painting him entirely, but for his face. And Clay, suited and professional, tall and steadfast.

I don't have time to feel nervous about seeing him again after lighting the fire and the way he reprimanded me for it. I don't have time to care. It was a mistake. He found out. And he was the mayor then, so I got my slap on the wrist.

Whatever.

The Butcher Boys and the girls are focused on the doctor, offering me a chance to edge close enough to eavesdrop. The doctor stares at Clay Butcher—of course. He'd be stupid not to address him first.

"The MRI was fine, Mr Butcher. But short-term memory loss is very common in fighters. They often wake up and ask whether the fight has started." He goes on, "After a concussion, this is normal. So, we need to see what he remembers. But that's not the main issue here."

Will he remember when we fell in love?

But, he's okay.

Alive?

Is that what he's saying?

My feet force me to the open door. Taking a deep breath, I prepare myself for dread. But when I see Xander sitting up and talking to Stacey and another brunette woman, the light from the open window bathing the room is a visual symbol of happiness. It's like a daydream, a perfect reverie, the way I wanted it to be when I walked in here—*Xander alive*— too good to be real.

So, I catapult myself towards him in a single-minded action. Tears build; my eyes are too used to them today.

“I thought—” I climb onto the bed, and his smile grows despite the obvious swelling to his jaw. That’s it. His grin. That is all I need to narrow to him again. Only him and me. “I know I said I would stay. They took you.”

“Hey, Woman.” I crawl up the mattress and drop my knees on either side of his body, banding his neck with my arms. Joining our bodies as close as humanly possible. *God*, he still smells like Xander. “Bit bruised there,” he groans through a chuckle.

“Oh *God*.” With a start, I release him and push backwards, but he keeps me to his chest, where I can feel his heart beating steadily. “Did I hurt you?”

“Most things worth feeling hurt, Baby.”

When he says baby, tears spill from my eyes. I needed to hear him say that. The pet name we chose moments before he dropped. Maybe, I thought that he’d forget the seconds we fell in love, like the first time we met; his memories aren’t as extensive as mine. I have a night with Xander that he doesn’t even remember when he licked me into a limp mess.

I bury my face while I sob, not wanting anyone else to see these willing tears, but he cups my cheeks, insisting that I look at him. Pushing my face to where he can see, his endless-blue eyes study me under a frown. “I don’t like those tears. What are those tears for? I’m fine.”

I cry in the cradle of his palms. “You weren’t.”

“You were alone.” His smile is void now; his brows furrowed above a regretful gaze. “That would have been scary, yeah? I’m so fucking sorry, Baby. I’m so sorry you were alone in there and I couldn’t get up.”

It’s not about me.

I shake my head in his palms. “It doesn’t matter.”

“I’m sorry, Baby,” he says again, pulling me to him, holding me to his chest in protective warmth, and now I can feel more eyes on me though I

can't see them. His lips lower to my ear, "You're more fragile than you pretend, Kaya. I'll have to remember that. I'm just getting to know you."

"Shut up." Tears fill my mouth while his words make me feel sadder; his acceptance of my vulnerability is enough to crack me open and spill my emotions like a pinata. "You fell. You went down so fucking quickly. I hate boxing."

I feel his nod, a stiff acceptance, his jaw moving beside my face. "Yeah. I bet."

A throat clears behind us, so I scramble from Xander's lap, who reluctantly allows me to move to the edge of his bed.

Ahead of us, Clay Butcher and the doctor are at the foot of the bed, the others are spread around the room, with Cassidy, the blonde woman, and the little girl still outside on the waiting chairs. The room is full enough with all those Butcher men.

I shrink internally but square my shoulders outwardly. Xander feeds his hands through my hair, gliding through the strands, and I don't miss the way Clay's eyes watch the entire interaction. Whatever Clay Butcher—the Boss—is thinking or feeling is a mystery.

"Hit me with it, doc," Xander says with ease that doesn't match the mood circling the hospital room.

The doctor gazes at me. "Miss, excuse us. You should probably leave the—"

"No," Clay states, and I freeze under his smooth tone, a seriously unapologetic dominance to the rich timbre. His presence is so fucking powerful, his voice literally steels my bones. "She can stay where she is."

Clay and I share a look, a truce, a bridge, I don't know what, but it's a split second of significance. And now he's looking at the doctor again, ordering, "Go on, Matthews."

Matthews continues, "We did an MRI. You have swelling, but no more than I would expect. But your friend here"—he gestures to Stacey, and she

looks at the ground— “has informed me that you had tremors the other day? Is that right?” He pulls the clipboard from the end of the bed, bracing it in front of him, eyes cutting to Xander over the top. “How often has that happened?”

Xander sighs roughly, then looks across at me, eyes coasting over my face, the time stretching.

“What?” I ask softly, wanting to help.

“That would have been scary for you,” he says to me, confusing me and bringing more tears to my eyes. I frown as he lifts my hair and holds it to his nose, inhaling.

Answer the question, Xander.

God, please answer him.

“Xander,” the brunette woman says, moving to his side. She touches his arm, her gaze solemn with knowledge, and I don’t think I want to know what she clearly knows. “Focus.”

I bite back a whimper. *Focus*. It feels like a steady decline. Like I’m watching him slowly fall apart, and with every second that passes, he slips a little further away, a little more lost. And I can’t hold on to him, keep him grounded.

I clutch his hand. “Xander,” I mutter again, my throat tight as I nod toward the doctor, who I hate now because he’s scrutinising the interaction through such a clinical gaze.

Xander blinks, eyes lifting, his trance dissolving when he looks back at the man with the clipboard. “Shaking hands? It’s normal, Doc. That’s part —”

“No!” A rough voice soars in. The bellowing tempo could only belong to Luca Butcher. “It damn well is not normal unless you have a fracture, my boy.” Max and Bronson part for their father as he passes through the door. The room is even more crowded now. Xander and I are centre stage.

In this moment, I understand him a little better. The ‘*be the person who stays for me, who listens to me*’ makes sense. He’s alone in a crowded room because they are all such large personalities. Being the youngest of a brood like this, being the one they coddle. It’s easy to feel small and unheard, even if it’s a flawed perception.

“Do you have a fracture, my boy? A glass slipping from your hand is not *normal*. Disassociation in the moment, like in the ring, in the bar with Stacey, your fists were shaking that day you shadow boxed, *se*. Not normal. I saw this with my own eyes. Don’t play me a fool, my boy!”

“I was distracted that day. That’s all.”

“Cut the crap!” he barks. “I should have—” His voice holds self-loathing and regret.

The doctor attempts to pacify the energy, taking the conversation back. “How is your memory, Xander?”

I gasp, and they all hear it, eyes shifting to me. *I’m a blackout drunk, Kaya*. I lift my chin in defiance, but glance away from their gaze.

Xander nods his answer, watchful of his father’s levelling stare, before saying, “Yeah. I’ve had a few blackouts.”

The doctor goes on, “Headaches?”

Xander nods stiffly—with each nod of his head, I fall deeper and deeper into his side while he seems to hold me tighter to him.

“Any irritation?” Matthews won’t stop, and it feels like his questions are a knife scoring down my heart. “Impulsive behaviour? Poor judgement?”

Xander nods again.

Bile fills my throat.

“I knew.” Luca Butcher closes his eyes, understanding the truth in each nod. The meaning. “*I knew*.” He holds them shut as something affects him, and it’s so hard to see such a large, powerful presence overwhelmed.

He opens his stern blue eyes, the irises glistening as he turns and leaves the room.

Max follows him through the exit, both their energy like a rising wave of turbulent and crushing agony.

“Where are you two going?” Cassidy asks from outside the door while Max follows his father to an untimely explosion of emotions. It’s not hard to see the pain surrounding them.

Returning my welling wide eyes to the doctor, I watch him walk to the window and draw the curtain across, casting the once light-filled room in a sombre grey hue. “It’s called Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy,” he advises. “Chronic, meaning long-lasting. Traumatic, as in the trigger for the disease, and Encephalopathy, meaning it affects the brain. This is the medical term for what you call being ‘punch-drunk.’”

Xander drops his head to my shoulder, hiding his face from the room, but I hear his exhale and feel the shudder of it against me.

What does this mean?

I joked about it. Threw the punch-drunk term around to describe a mood, but it’s a disease. A real disease. That’s the word he used... *disease*.

Xander lifts his head as Bronson collapses backwards to the seat. The brunette I don’t recognise meets him in a flash, holding his face to her chest, hiding him, but I can hear his wheezing, and it’s utterly hysterical. I dart my eyes to Stacey, who is sobbing quietly. But I don’t understand.

I look at Clay, who has no emotion riddled in his resolute gaze, no doubt a more powerful air in such a sorrow-filled room. I can’t stop myself, clutching at straws while everyone around me clutches at themselves. “But I thought you said the MRI was okay. Normal. A bit of swelling or something. I thought that meant that he’s okay. I don’t understand.”

“You can’t see it on an MRI,” the brunette cradling Bronson, says, “There are no biomarkers for it. It’s diagnosed on autopsy.”

What? I can’t breathe.

“Dr Shoshanna Adel is correct,” Matthews continues, his voice mingling with my own internal, *No, no, no, this isn’t happening*. “You can’t

typically diagnose a person with it while they're alive—"

Hope clings to my tongue, and I straighten. "So, you don't know for sure then? You're just guessing?"

"No." He shakes his head once. "I *am* certain. I'm the leading neurologist in the state. I know what it looks like in living patients. All the factors indicate that Xander has CTE."

"What does that mean, though? For our—" My voice breaks on *our*. "I mean, *his* future."

"There is no cure for CTE. On one side of the spectrum, he lives a normal life with minor issues, the same ones that are currently present. Anger and impulsivity can be managed with drugs if needed. We can offer supportive care to help with the symptoms, but not the underlying cause." His eyes are dubious. "But given that he already presents with stage-four symptoms they may get worse over the years, leading to other diseases, Parkinson-type symptoms or dementia. He'll live with them as long as he doesn't fight. No more boxing. One more acute concussion could mean severe brain damage or death."

"But—"

Xander slides his hand across my throat, not in the possessive way he usually does, but in a gentle way that coaxes my attention.

"It's cool, Woman. Let it go," he says, but I don't want to. I don't want to let it go or accept it, but I allow the gentle squeezing of his hand to anchor me. "Thanks, Doc. So, no more boxing. *Gotcha*," he says, bitterness in his tone, because that's like telling him to stay in the flames, to keep burning. He nods to the door. "Can you all give me some time with Kaya?"

I feel like a Siren who has bewitched their brother, but I can't deny it's what I want. *I need to know how he's feeling... right now? Knowing everything is going to change... that he may degrade...* My world faded to him yesterday in that damn shower. It's now all about him.

“No.” Clay dismisses, and I frown at him, happy to trade blows with the boss for Xander to be heard. “We need to discuss this as a family.”

“Well, Max and Dad are done, clearly.” Xander’s jaw locks up, the swelling bulging at his lower lip. He’s not okay. I touch his arm. “Fucksake. I get it, bro. You finally get what you always wanted, Clay. Me out of the ring. What do you want from me now? I’m gonna lose my fucking mind. Isn’t that what you said would happen? Must feel good to be right.”

“You can leave, Matthews,” Clay orders, his sharp pale-blue gaze on Xander, his mouth a straight line while the doctor leaves the room and shuts the door. “You’re lashing out. I understand it. You’re going to struggle, and I despise that for you. What I wanted,” Clay begins smoothly, “was for my brothers to be everything they could be. What I am, is what I needed to be. What I was raised to be. You, you could have been anything in this damn world.”

Scoffing, Xander says, “No, I couldn’t. Would you let me leave? Go to another city? Become a rockstar? An artist? Live on the beach? Do nothing? When you say I could be anything, you mean intellectually, I could. You wouldn’t let me leave. Do nothing. I was to work here in the family business. Like Max. Keep the Butchers together. In the District. The city we worked so fucking hard to keep. That we bleed for. Killed for. That’s what I was to do. From the fucking start. Don’t be so egotistical that you think that you’re the only one with the legacy. We are all Butchers! Not just you, Clay!”

The brunette I now know as Shoshanna steps backwards as Bronson rises to his feet, his eyes bloodshot from tears, a crazed look painted across his face.

Clay glances through the window at the small blonde woman with the blinged-out butterfly necklace, then back to us again. “You never showed any interest in leaving the city, Xander. Is that something new?”

“Can we please just let this go,” Stacey presses, holding her hands up between the two men, displeasure rushing the length of her shaking arms. “Can you two decide what’s best for Xander on another day? Now is not the time.”

“Let them finish,” Bronson says.

Xander sits up. “I never showed an interest in leaving because I spent the first decade of my life dodging Mum’s bottles!” he hisses, and my spine shudders. *He what?* “But you know that now. You did something about it.”

Clay remains neutral, saying, “Our mother died of an overdose, Xander. I tried to get her sober many times.”

“Yeah?” He laughs dubiously.

“*Xander*,” Bronson warns.

Xander sits back. “So, the first ten years were somewhat blackout for me. The second decade I spent being groomed to be a lawyer, to keep me clean and close to home, and the third trying to avenge Dad, trying to keep Max out of jail, trying to keep Bronson from insanity, trying to fight your war! The *Cosa Nostra*’s war! When would I have had time to do anything that didn’t fit into that damn mould somewhere?”

“You should have told me what you wanted, Xander,” Clay states. “Asked.”

“Asked you? To what? For what? I shouldn’t have to ask you. To live where I don’t feel like my skin is crawling, with this fire, this need to bleed or fuck or both because I’m uncomfortable all the time. You can’t give me that.”

“Don’t leave me, little brother.” Bronson’s heart-wrenching utterance is smooth; it’s such a vulnerable sentence but delivered in such a dark timbre that it’s hard to understand the context. “We’ll move out of your way. What do you want us to do for you?”

“Right now, Bron?” Xander levels them with his strong blue gaze, and I’m struggling with the pain in this room. “Right now, I want you to leave. I

want to be alone with Kaya, which is what I fucking said. Because you have your families, you have your forever, your girls, Kelly, Stone at home with the nanny, leave me here to speak with *my* future.”

Stacey touches his hand; I hadn’t noticed that she’d moved closer to us. She looks at me and smiles. “Nice to meet you. I knew there was a girl. I’ve barely seen him the last few weeks.” She finds Xander’s eyes again. “I’ll call. I’m sorry.” She swallows regret. “I haven’t been around. Just life and —”

“Girlfriends,” he says with a knowing smile.

“Yeah. Felicity keeps me busy, too.”

“Good. As it should be.”

She squeezes his hand and then lets it go. “I’ll drop by soon, Xan.” Then she leaves with Shoshanna at her flank.

The three Butcher men stare at each other, energy crackling like a visible thing, but after a stretch of time, painful acceptance dowses it and the older boys nod.

They walk to the door. Bronson holds it open for Clay who meets the blonde woman in the corridor, her arms going around his waist, her head nuzzling his chest. That explains the potent air of power around her. She’s Clay’s. So much younger than him, but—I watch him smooth her long blonde hair down her back—he’s not so intimidating when he’s holding her, gentle even.

“I love you, buddy,” Bronson says, drawing my gaze back to him. His eyes glow green within welling pools that rise but don’t spill. Now, he is *unnerving* in this state—a flick away from detonation. “I’ll make sure we all listen better,” he says. “Yes. I’ll do that.”

Then we are alone.

Xander stares at me hard, so I shuffle around the mattress, sitting on his thighs, inching close and intimate.

“Xander,” I breathe his name, too much to digest.

“I shouldn’t have said all that crap in front of you, Baby.” He shakes his head. “About the *Cosa Nostra*. How much do you know about my family?”

Why are we talking about his family?

“I know enough.” I blink at him, as he leans back with exhaustion he accepts in the comfort of my company. “I just want to know about you. And this—” I stop myself because I don’t want to push, but... the visceral imagery of a little Xander ducking as his mother hurtles bottles at him is one I’ll struggle with. “*Disease*. And one day, your mother. I want you to tell me about her. About what happened to you.”

He sighs roughly. “Okay. One day, Baby. I will.”

He cups the side of my neck, his thumb caressing my throat as I speak. “So, you really are a punch-drunk hothead,” I say through a soft laugh.

He grins. “*Clinically*.”

Ugh. I hate our mockery of it, but it feels better than condemning the topic. I want to both take this disease seriously and laugh in its face because it won’t become us. “It’s not funny.”

“Then why are you laughing?”

“*Because*.” I gaze at him with pain and fear drawing my brows in. “We haven’t even started, yet. I don’t want to lose you, Hothead. I only just found you. Like, what does this really mean? Without the medical jargon. Max and Luca seemed to know before the doctor even said it. Bronson took it really badly, but you seem... I don’t know. Do you understand it?”

“I got brain damage, Woman,” he says, his tone not holding the weight it should. “I won’t be a lawyer. I’ll never be able to retain the information needed to be one, not that I care, but my family cares, and that’s why those two left like that. I literally boxed my potential away. And, well, Bron. He’s always had problems with his mind not being on his side and not being reliable. He won’t talk about it. But we all know. So, he probably understands what I’m in for... It’s just something I’ll have to deal with. Forgetting things. And”—he massages his temple and forehead with one

hand— “impulsivity... It’s like I’m not even seeing what’s happening—” He snaps his gaze to me, suddenly guarded. “Look, you can walk away, you know.”

I blink at him. “Wait. What?”

“You don’t need this, Baby,” he says, but his hand tightens on the curve of my neck. “I don’t know what this means moving forward. More doors being kicked in. More bullshit, anger. I’ve been on fire recently—”

“Stop. Stop.” I can’t breathe. I swat his hand away from my neck, the greedy tightness at odds with his words. “Are you seriously telling me to say this is too hard? That I don’t need this shit or something?”

“You can.” He clenches his jaw. “Is all. If you want.”

My lip wobbles. “What happened to needing me, huh? You fucking— *Fuck!*” Heat hits my ears. “What happened to ‘Stay, Kaya! Stay with me.’” I growl at him, my hand twitching, wanting to knock some sense into his beautifully damaged face, but that’s how we got here. Too many knocks to the fucking head. “‘I want to keep you!’ What happened to that?”

“I’m sorry.” He pulls me into his arms, my body shaking slightly as air becomes a wild force, neither going in nor drawing out of me. In a panic. He’s going to pull away. Leave me with this sinking sensation inside. With a world, faded around the edges and void of its sole focus.

But he crushes me to his chest, saying, “I’m sorry. I want to say all that, Kaya. Fucking trust me, I do. But when I woke up, I could hear you beneath me in that shower, could hear you groaning and unable to get free. I couldn’t move, but I could fucking hear you for so long. I can’t hurt you.”

“If you push me away—” I lock my jaw as I punch the words out, still stiff with anger. “You’ll hurt me then.”

“Okay, Baby.” He soothes my back, his fingers tracing the tense muscles along my spine, relaxing them until I can breathe again. “Okay.”

I groan against him. “Are you finished?”

“Yes.” He kisses my hair. “I’m finished.”

It's a contronym. "Which one?" I say through a sob caught in a growl. "Which finished?"

"*Complete,*" he stresses, his lips next to my ear now. "I'm not finished, Kaya. We're not finished. We will never be finished if I can help it. We'll be complete. I don't need sanity, remember? You drain it from me anyway." His hand moves up my side, possessing my throat again. Dragging my lips to his, he kisses me so deeply, I fall into him.

We kiss hard, soft, and everything in between, until the nurse advises us that he can leave when he's ready. She walks from the room, and he stares at her retreating back.

Lost for a moment, he mumbles, "They're done with me here. I don't know what to do."

Confused, I ask, "Like, with your life?"

"No. Just when I get home."

I shrug. "Chill."

"I don't know how to," he laughs, and so do I, but then I see the glossy pain to his gaze. "I'd usually go train. Eat. Fuck. Box. Sleep. I've usually got two things going on at once. Even when I work on Clay's campaigns, I have the television on in the background. Music, too. I'm, like... always doing something. Then I hit the bed. Out. Ya, know?"

His eyes shift to mine as I search his boyish face, blue and green, but beautiful. "Will you stay with me tonight, Woman? I don't know what to do when I get home."

God, he's so lost. So vulnerable and wild at the same time. His whole life has changed in an instant. Adapt.

"You know, they studied habits and addiction in Vietnam vets..." I remind him, grinning, and his eyes soften on my face. "Adapt, and all that." I touch the chain around my neck, feeling the thin loops move across my collarbone. "What about your family? You live with your dad, don't you?"

He smiles, yet it doesn't meet his eyes. "Nah. He'll probably be on a plane to the other side of the country right about now, Baby. Maybe, he'll be in Sicily. That's what he usually does when things get rough and shitty."

His blue eyes darken. I plummet heart-first into his gaze, lost in the shades of tragedy and abuse. Sad, I nod. "Yeah. I'll stay with you, Hothead."

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CHAPTER TWENTY

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kaya



HIS HOUSE REMINDS me of our holiday home in British Columbia—well, the holiday home we *used* to have. The walls are vast, tinted, single-sided windows, letting the outside world in while privacy remains. The steps that incline three levels are a rich red wood—Jarrah, probably. Another wood, like mahogany, that’s hard and stunning and imperfect.

The house is spectacular.

We drove straight here from the hospital after I texted my mum with updates. It’s past midnight now but I have a planned visit with dad in the morning, so I’m in Xander’s laundry room, going toe to toe with his washing machine, while he’s showering upstairs.

Squatting, trying to figure out this touchscreen machine, I laugh contrived. I secretly wish for the old top-loaders at the motel with the coin push to activate. Simple. Just right for people who had so much abundance they didn’t learn with changing technology.

Didn’t need to.

Eco. That sounds like a responsible washing cycle. I stuff my shirt and jeans in the drum, close the glass portal door, and watch the spin begin. Hear the gentle hum as the machine vibrates. Seems promising.

Standing, I watch it fill with water. Lips touch my ear so I tilt my head to the side, accepting them as they trail down my neck. His hands grasp

either side of the machine, caging me in, holding me in place. I look down at the veins racing along his forearms, a ripple of activity within them as his grip tightens around the top.

He gets closer behind me. Heat radiates from his large, finely cut physique, licking against my back and spine. “You weren’t in my bedroom.”

I feel tiny as he looms behind me. Under the intensity of his heat, I step forward, my hips touch the machine and my heart races, stoking my pulse to a frantic tattoo within my neck. His tongue laps at my pulse eagerly, chasing the race of my adrenaline.

I can feel the beat of my heart. He can probably taste the vibrations, the nerves. I don’t know why I’m nervous. He’s quiet, leading me into dark energy with him. The fervour in his breath carries a blanket of warmth. Of warning.

“Seeing you doing laundry makes me hard.” He presses his cock to my backside, and I moan when he rolls us against the washing machine.

“You’re with the wrong girl if that’s what gets you off, Hothead,” I say, losing my footing as he slides his erection up and down the gap between my cotton-covered arse-cheeks.

“I’m on fire, Baby,” he warns. I clutch the machine beside his hands, bracing myself as he eats at my neck, the previous vision of a panther mounting its mate making my fingers numb. He pries my hands from the machine, his dark voice by my ear, “Turn around.”

With a deep breath, I spin in the barrier of his formidable wall of muscles. My eyes cast down, until I drag them up his bare abdominals, over the patches of tattoos, along the smooth, hard plane of his chest, and peer through my upper lashes to see his face in all its dark, brutal beauty.

His eyes are intense on mine, drilling in profoundly but lost in heated desire. So, while I clearly have every *inch* of his attention, his intent is all his own.

He grips my hips, lifting me to sit on the machine. The humming below my backside mars my cheeks in a blush I can acutely feel. I grow wet and greedy in an instant, seduced by the way his eyes heat, the way his tongue darts out to lick his lower lip, and the humming below my pelvis. It's all I can do to not climb him like a tree and rub myself on his face.

His chest muscles flex. Flinch. On edge. So, slowly, to not stoke the aggression bubbling ever-so-steadily below the surface of his control, I slide my hands up his bare torso, the most exquisite pack of eight abdominals purring like a panther might. I get to his neck and slide my fingers into his hair.

Watching me, he grins, his eyes lost in darkness. Then he presses my thighs wide, ducking, lowering his lips to between them.

I lean back on the brick wall, my fingers knotting in his hair as his hot mouth kisses me over the fabric of my underwear. A rumble from his chest hints at his enjoyment. Below my backside, the machine hums, carrying steady vibrations from my arse up to his mouth, working in unison to send me out of my mind.

My eyes roll back. "Oh. *God.*"

He's barely touched me, but the combination of both affects me at once and curls my toes. As his tongue finds my clit through my knickers, I arch into him.

His hands slide down my inner thigh, ending at the seam. My neck burns. He pulls the fabric to the side, licking slowly up and down, the leisurely motion a contradiction to the darkness that roars he wants something fast and loud.

"I'm a liar, too, Kaya." He inhales me, and I blush, but he exhales a lusty breath. "Fuck. I lied. I wouldn't have let you decide it was too much. I gotta make that clear. Now. Here. I might pretend—" He kisses me between words. "Might say I'll let you leave,"—kiss— "but I won't"—kiss— "ever. I'm keeping you, Baby."

My stomach clenches as he licks between my folds, unhurried, an indecent speed that sends me into a fever.

His tongue moves upward, his mouth sucking and kissing at my clit as two fingers slide into me.

I arch my back violently, and he groans, “Fuck,” at finding me so slippery his fingers move in and out without any preparation.

The machine is still a slow roll below me, rocking my pelvis, and I’m already there, already simmering with pleasure.

His other hand holds my thigh down.

I look at the open door. “Oh. God.”

He sucks on my clit, the bundle of nerves firing below his reverent tonguing. I plummet over the edge, coming with a deep moan, his fingers moving with plunging precision as my pussy locks onto them. I massage the two digits as I work my hips, riding my climax.

I’m still trembling when he pushes upward, sliding his mouth along my tight stomach and grazing over my shirt. He lifts the fabric over my head as my mind spins, reeling from the orgasm and the way the washer helps it linger.

My body floats, a buzz in my pleased delirium, when I realise my bra is off, my breasts falling out. Xander latches onto one, sucking it to a stiff pebble.

“Fuck.” I cup the back of his head. One of his hands holds my breast, feeding the supple mound into his mouth as the other strokes his length in an impure display of masculine energy and need.

The head is free, thrusting upward from his grey sweatpants. He jerks his erection and sucks hard on me at the same time. He pants against my breast while the plush tip of his cock touches my pussy as he rubs it.

Then he pulls back, his eyes near pitch-black, consumed with lust. “I don’t want to ask. But I will this time. Just this time.” He is barely controlling himself. “Nod your head, Kaya. Say, I can keep you.”

And I know what he's really asking—if I choose him... I can't sell my virginity to a stranger. Can't be with anyone else. Not now. Not that my world has narrowed to him. Tomorrow, before I go to see dad, I'll have Kenno cancel the sale, and I'll find another way to get Dad out on bail.

There has to be another way.

I gaze at Xander. Am I ready? Will it hurt? With the piercings... And he's diabolic like this—his lips are a wicked curve that glisten from my orgasm, his arm muscles twitch with enjoyment as his hand strokes his length.

He's magnificent in his animal allure, wanting to take me without consent, wanting to demand I be his, mixed with the charming boy-next-door that feels everything so intensely.

Xander Butcher: the contronym.

My pussy clenches and I nod.

He closes his eyes, holding them like that for a moment, and when he opens them again, their deep blue depths are ready to devour me.

"It'll be okay, Baby," he says, his voice tight and raspy. I pant fast and shallow as he slides me to the edge of the machine. My legs lock around his thighs, and he drags my knickers to the side further, notching his cock against me. "I'll fuck you slowly." The thick crown of his cock slides heavily an inch inside me.

I open my mouth wide, gasping at the weight of it, at the stretch. He buries his face in my shoulder and grips my thighs, his fingers biting at my flesh, making little divots.

He growls, "*Kaya*," as he forces me to take him. To take each inch, the piercings sliding in, one, two, three, the entire long length of him filling me until I can barely breathe.

"Xan— Xan— der."

"You'll stretch, Baby." He groans. "Oh, *Fuck*. You're tight. So fucking tight you're goddamn choking me."

“It’s hard to breathe, Xander.”

“Steady, Baby,” he pants. “Big breaths for me.”

I inhale hard, my pussy rippling with each draw of air.

“Oh, fuck. You’re strong, Woman. I won’t move until you’re ready.”

I clutch the blades of muscles at his sides that shake under his effort to hold still. The wide crest of his erection is deep, in the perfect place, the silver bars touching nerves I didn’t know existed, and like he said, he doesn’t move any more. Still. Breathing fierce heat. Stretching me.

I feel stuffed and unsure. “Do I— Do,” I stammer. “Should I do something? Should I move?”

His eyes bat heavily. “Fuck.”

Nerves get the better of me. “Are you okay? Are you sure I feel good?”

“Dammit, woman. Just—” He covers my mouth. “Stop talking. I just want to stay inside you like this. I just want to feel you like this for a little longer. Cause you feel so fucking good. You smell so ripe. And as soon as I pull out, your first time will be over. And I just want to savour it. I want this moment for me ‘cause it is the first time I’ve been inside you.”

The washing machine suddenly picks up pace. Lowering his hand, he leans back. I can’t keep my mind on one sensation. The way he is pulsing inside me, his cock wanting to move, to thrust, beckoning him and me.

He holds my thigh in place while a hand slides up my tightening stomach, between the valley of my breasts, to possess my throat, as he gazes at his hips touching my pelvis.

A throaty cry leaves me when he draws out, his eyes trained low, observing the slow exposure of every inch, his cock and the ladder of piercing, before pushing back in, sheathing the entire length again.

Testing.

My head falls back.

“*Fuck*,” he pants, and starts to move, in and out, the beat of his hips, the shuddering from the machine, forcing my eyes shut with the devastating

stimulation. “Open your eyes. Don’t miss this. Look at your body swallowing me, Kaya. See that.” I open my eyes to his dark and worshipful. “Your lips take every inch, suck me in deep. Made for me.”

I don’t know what to say; my mind is everywhere. My skin is wet, my breasts heavy and bouncing, my nipples little bullets on top, *aching*.

Unwavering, he studies the action as he rolls, skilled and rhythmic, working his cock in and out of me, perfectly timed and outright indecent.

“Now, you’re going to come around my cock so I can feel it,” he orders, as though he has absolute control over my orgasm. Wrapping his arms around my back, gripping me hard, he crushes our bodies together in slick perspiration.

Does he think he can just switch my orgasms on— Oh my. *God*. He starts to angle, tilt, and fuck me in a succession that feels utterly illegal. I spasm around him.

His pants become strained, the smacking sounds of his balls hitting my arse, of his cock slapping through my pussy lips, the moans falling helplessly from me—obscene sex noises only slightly drowned out by the fierce motor in the washing machine as it spins and thumps.

My stomach convulses. I throb. Too taken. Too overwelled. I clutch at him as the brewing of my orgasm approaches fast, collecting in my core. Firing from the muscles enveloping his cock, my climax bursts, sending dark pleasure to blur my vision. I come hard around him, my internal walls bearing down under pleasure’s intensity, massaging his cock on his inward and outward thrusts.

“Oh, fuck, Kaya!” Suddenly, he tenses to ungodly proportions beneath my fingers, and virile growls fall through his lips in time with his thrusts. And I’m still shuddering hard, the machine and his pace, the piercings cool and hard on my sensitive nerves, when he spills inside me. His cock beats, punching out his cum in powerful bursts.

After a few moments, wrapped together, quaking masses, he leans his weight on me, gasping. Still rocking his hips slowly, he wrings every drop of his orgasm out. The internal pumping is still strong. A part of him he can't restrain.

I cup his cheeks, direct his face to mine, and kiss his jaw, his lips, every inch as he whirls on a comedown. "Are you okay?" I ask him, feeling so much in my chest, like it could pop, spray blood everywhere. It aches from this.

"I know it's soon," he says, lips wet on mine. "But I can't deny it. And I don't want to. My entire life, I've been taught to be neutral. To be the controlled man. But I'm not good at it. And now, I don't want to pretend. It's not how I want to live my life, and it's not how I want to love you. And I *am* fucking in love with you, Woman." He leans back to look at my response to his words, sweat sliding between his brows, pure satiated lust hooding his gaze. "I'm in love with you. I'm *dangerously* in love with you, Kaya Alana Lovit."

My throat tightens. I feel the same, but my mouth won't say it aloud. Hesitation seizing it. I try to, try to force it out, then I envision GirlX's avatar, and I stop myself. I don't want to say those words out loud until she's gone, until she's deleted and forgotten. "I feel the same."

"It's okay." He kisses me hard. "I didn't expect you to say it, Baby. I just feel it. Like your fist made a hole in my chest, and you're squeezing. Just, ah..." He laughs. "Let me breathe every now and then, yeah?"

I smile at him. "I feel a lot," I admit.

"See, I wouldn't believe you even if you did actually say the words." He grins, that lazy, boyish curve that I adore. He flexes his semi-engorged erection inside me. "Not after that absolute work of art. You're just in love with my cock and all his bling." He lifts his hand to my throat, holding his palm where he's most comfortable. "Are you okay, Baby? Are you sore?" He trails a hand down between my breasts, holding my pussy as he

withdraws from me. I inhale to the feel of his wet cock sliding out. “I’ve never been with a virgin before.”

He ducks down, so I try to close my legs on his face. “Don’t. You’ve just come inside me.”

“I know,” he says, raspy lust rides his tone as he spreads my legs wide for his eager perusal. “And I want to see what you look like here after your first time. So, spread your legs, Woman, and let me watch my cum leak from between your sexy lips.”

“*Fuck.*” I cover my face as air cools the perspiration beading along my skin. “You’re a pervert.” I groan but don’t stop him even as I feel his eyes caress every swollen inch between my thighs.

“You’re bleeding, Baby,” he says with such genuine displeasure, but I can’t feel any pain, just heat.

His fingers touch the tight, scorching outer lips, and I open my eyes to the sight of him worshipping me again with his fingertips. Both digits move in his mess as it slips from inside and drops down my thigh, marring a pink trail along my skin. “Stunning,” he gushes. “Have you ever looked inside your pussy before? Your skin is pink. So plump. I fucking love it. And it’s mine.”

“It? You know.” I lift my chin in mock disgust. “I told myself I’d slap the man who dared to treat me like property.”

“Fine.” He grins. “I’m *your* property. You wanna own me? Treat me right? Buy me flowers?”

I arch a brow at him. “Just watch me.”

Menacingly, he straightens to his full six-foot-four height, his large body sliding upward, forcing me to arch my neck, my pulse to race, and my gaze to lift.

I swallow thickly, liking that he’s a packed house of muscles and man, with a sugary and passionate interior.

Smirking, he collects my bra and shirt.

I slide the strap on and reach back to fasten it, but he leans around and clips it for me, his head moving inches from my mouth, his lips pepper mine as he does. “I want to do *everything* for you, and I’ll fight for you, for the privilege, because it is a damn privilege,” he says, pulling my shirt on.

“You got the wrong girl,” I tease, even though I let him smooth my shirt down my stomach.

He puts his hands below my arms, effortlessly lifting me from the machine. “I don’t.” He ducks and takes me into his arms, cradling me like a bride in my underwear and tank top. I flick my hair over his arm and cuddle his neck as he carries me through the house.

I roll my eyes at the caveman carrying his woman, but he’s so fucking cute, I let him have it. Between my thighs, I’m throbbing. In my muscles, my orgasm is humming. And my head is light, floating under the girlie high my orgasm has gifted me—I’m happily accepting of it.

Xander props himself up on one hand, using it to crawl up his mattress with me. Laying my head gently on the pillow, he watches me shuffle until I’m comfortable before dropping down to rest his head on my chest.

He tangles our legs.

Lets half of his weight hold me.

Pinning me, he nuzzles into my breasts, using me as a cushion for his weary head. Immediately his breaths deepen, his chest rises and falls against my abdomen, and his body becomes heavier.

And I’m locked beneath him again, but this time, it’s planned and strategic. He’s keeping me. Ugh.

Hothead.

Do all guys fall straight to sleep like this?

Or just the ones who exist on overdrive?

Dark hair flicks around under the overhead fan, so I comb my fingers through the strands, liking the shorter cut but missing the long fringe that usually hangs boyishly in his lashes. I sigh. He’ll be able to grow it now.

No more boxing.

What will that mean for him?

I know it's his outlet. For all that pent-up emotion, for the fire that burns inside him, for the flames like veins beneath his skin. Sometimes, I can feel them when I touch his arms and sometimes, they lick out to sear anything close.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

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xander



I LEFT her in my bed. I wanted to climb on top of her the second I woke up, sweating the memories of the past out through veins of fear and rage. With my cock so hard with the need to come, needing to fuck this feeling away, I nearly took her without consent, nearly rolled her to her stomach while she slept and—

But I couldn't.

So, I'm downstairs in the gym. My muscles flare with pain as I beat the bag with such speed the heavy pendulous column doesn't even sway. It holds fast at a forty-five-degree angle under the perpetual jabs.

One—No more fucking boxing.

Two—No more boxing.

Three—No more boxing.

Four. Five. Six.

What have I forgotten?

What have I lost?

A moment or a memory?

Yet, one stays so fucking true.

Lowering my head, my shoulder muscles bunch, and I roar in pain as they seize in warning. My body screaming for me to stop fucking up this bag as though it is my enemy. I imagine the bag is Chuck—Chuck, who I

will never fight—his torso, his face. But then it's my mum, so I close my eyes and rapidly beat the bag until the sound becomes one droning slam that echoes my inner screams from that wardrobe.

"Xander," Kaya's husky voice wraps around me, finding me in the chaos of my mind, but my fists don't stop. I open my eyes, train them on the bag and keep thrusting. The crippling tightness is damn near blinding now, my muscles telling me to stop, break, but if I do, then I get hit. If I stop, then they have to protect me. If I stop, then I'm in a wardrobe alone, cowering in the corner, wishing my brothers would save me, and screaming praises to her, telling her how beautiful she is, how flawless. I'm weak! Nothing.

Fuck!

I growl. With my fists working harder, I ignore the ache, the convulsing, until my body physically shuts the fuck down.

Fuck.

My head hits the leather and I lean on the bag. My gloves grab the sides as my body wanes, nearly collapsing.

Focus, Xander.

I close my eyes, sweat flooding my face, tears breaking loose. I try to disguise them for her. She's behind me. I can feel her getting closer, so I roll my head on the bag to smear the sweat and tears together. Mingle sorrow with exertion.

Slowly, I face her, panting like a fucking lunatic, but then my eyes clear enough to take her all in. In a little camisole, her nipples are pointed through the fabric. Her bikini line is a smooth strip bracketing little white knickers.

I want to grab her there.

She is already comfortable walking around my house half-naked or is it because we are alone here? I could have this with her. Her and me. No guards. No darkness.

No boxing.

Her and me.

She steps closer, engulfing me with her scent, a floating aroma of body wash and sex and me—a sweating beast of a man. Not the person I want to be with her.

Sighing roughly, relenting, I drop my forehead on her shoulder. She immediately cups the back of my neck. Tears and sweat drip from my brows, down my nose and all over her.

I like it when she's covered in me.

My cock gets hard instantly, but I'm way too worked up to act on it, knowing I'll be hard and rough with that tight wet pussy of hers.

"You're okay, Baby," she whispers beside my ear, cradling my heavy head against her slim shoulder. "I got you."

"I'm not okay."

"I've got you, Hothead." She holds me as I shake with restraint. The exhaustion only fuels my need to push harder. "You're okay," she soothes. "You're not alone. I'm here. I stayed."

"I'm in pain," I admit, my throat choked. It's not only physical. "I can't give this up."

"You can still punch the bag."

"To what end?"

"Get the fight out."

The fight... I groan, flexing my cock in my shorts. "You smell so"—I nuzzle into her caramel hair, my cock expanding more as I inhale her natural perfume. I exhale the words, "fucking good! I wanted to fuck you. Before—" I hold my arms at my sides, not letting the unpredictable muscles anywhere near my girl right now. "I had to leave."

She rolls her head against mine. "Would you usually just fuck a girl while she sleeps, Hothead? Is that what you want?"

“I told you, Baby,” I say, my voice dark and deep. Not me. “I don’t hook up with inexperienced chicks for this reason. So, yeah, I would usually fuck them if I felt like this.”

“Do you want to do that with me?” Her voice takes on a purr, the salacious cadence reminiscent of our encounter on the trampoline. Her body may be inexperienced—mine—but she’s dominant in the bedroom. She holds all the cards.

I clench my jaw, my words coming through gritted teeth, gnashing to lock onto something. I shouldn’t say it. But I do. “I want to fuck your eyes open, Baby.”

“Okay.” She presses her body to mine, and I hold my breath, my hands and my muscles that jerk to grasp her hips and bend her over the workout bench. “I consent.”

Fuck. “Don’t say that,” I warn.

“I do.” She rolls against me, her tits squished to my chest, her legs on either side of my thigh, her pussy grinding on me. “I consent. You don’t have to ask. I trust you.”

“You shouldn’t.”

“I’m not fragile, Xander. I’m the boss of my body. And I consent to be what you need when you need it. Tell me what you need, Xander.”

She slides off me, her eyes locking with mine as I lift my head. A seductive hood narrows her gaze as she circles the boxing bag, her fingers sliding along the leather as she moves.

Leaning against it, I track her slowly swaying body around until she is next to me again.

“Maybe,” she says, gripping the bag with two hands and shaking her backside at me, “You can beat into me instead. To that end. You don’t need the bag. I’ll be *the end* for you.”

Fuck. I lose it.

Straightening, lust-filled eyes arrow to her. I rip the gloves off my fists and retrieve the skipping rope, ordering gruffly, "Hug the bag." I watch her pulse rush up her neck, but she does as she's told like a good fucking woman.

Tying the rope around her wrists, I secure her to the bag. The fact that I just sweat and cried on the same spot her cheek is pressed to only makes this more intimate. I circle her bound form, trying to calm down, but with each lap, my need gathers in my cock and balls. I can't take it. I feel more fire, more fuelled.

I loom behind her.

Ready to take what's mine.

She tries to peer over her shoulder, but she can't turn, wrapped tightly around the bag, arms stretched wide.

I push her underwear down, exposing that porn star arse with the round lower cheeks and her wet, open pussy between spread, toned thighs. Bent and bowed, her naked pelvis shocks every masculine cell inside me.

Need it.

Need her.

I swipe two fingers through her folds, lathered by her arousal immediately. She is ready. And I can't wait. My cock throbs as I drop my shorts, position my cock, grip her hips with two hands, and slam into her wet hole with a powerful thrust.

She yelps, her body crushed between me and the bag. I don't hesitate this time, needing to fuck. A dark focus hazes my vision as I pound her against the bag, my hips hitting her soft arse hard, my cock sliding in and out with force, her pussy clinging and kneading and boiling fucking hot from friction.

Fuck. Too good. I growl, and her moans are long, deep, throaty, and never fucking ending.

I lean down and sink my teeth into her shoulder, ripping a cry from her mouth that turns primal and needy. She likes it. Her pussy clenches at me harder. I release my bite and roam my gaze down her blooming face to watch her tighten with pleasure and passion, overwhelmed by my hard drives.

“Fuck. Kaya. I love you.” I groan. Her pink pussy lips hold me in with need—as I need her—only to unfurl as I draw out, making room for me. “Fucking lovely.” I want to be inside all of her, have her take what I want. “Open your mouth and twist your face.”

Mashed to the bag, her face is bright red with arousal and endorphins when she parts her lovely bow-shaped lips for me as I asked. I’m a slave to those lips.

I look down at her. She tightens around the bag, losing strength in her arms, the rope holding their limp weight. Her body wants to collapse. But I keep my pace, fucking her hard, pounding into her with relentless drive and passion.

Fingers biting into her hip, I leave one hand grasping her with authority. The other I use to possess her jaw and tilt her head back, so I can spit into the depth of her pretty mouth—my eyes lose focus as my saliva slaps her tongue, seducing the thick muscle to pulse upwards with the same gluttonous excitement it would for whipped cream.

Fuck. Me.

That’s hot.

Taking it all.

All of me.

It happens fast. My balls draw up. My abdomen bunches. She loves my spit, my cock, my pace—my fire—her eyes rolling, her pussy massaging me as she comes undone, moans and cries, clashing together like a sonata of pleasure and intensity. I don’t let up.

It feels too good, the fight inside me detonating to her sounds. And I grunt my orgasms into her wet, tight hole, climaxing at the same time as her while I glare down at her mouth dripping with my saliva. I keep coming hard, pumps lashing into her pussy to the beat of my grunts.

Keeping her impaled, my cock jerks inside her. Dropping my head back, I pant to the ceiling. Sway under the lights. Lose my vision to pleasure and fatigue. Still gripping her hard, I feel the intensity in my muscles mellow, my heart rate level. Leaving me with her... just her and me.

I lift my head and release my killer grip on her hips, soothing the area with my fingers. My heart twists slightly, as my world shifts, muscles cool. Touching her wet cheek, I feel tears, but they could be mine. "I'm sorry, Baby." I rush to untie her, focused on getting the ropes off her hands. "Baby? Woman? You, okay?"

"Xander," she moans—my name on her breath is everything. "Take me to bed. Please. I'll lay on you this time, so you can't leave without waking me up. So, I can give you what the fight does."

She lifts her head, heavy on her shoulders, and when she's free from the ties, she becomes wobbly on her legs. I scoop her up, holding this petite, caramel haired chick in my arms who won't let a man fucking own her, use her, but lets me fuck my monster into her body. *Mine*. Her soul and mine are different when they are together. We made rules to keep ourselves safe. We break them all to be together.

I find myself grasping at her as we walk upstairs. I'm not sure how long I've known her or how this happened so fast, or whether it's the same as what my brothers have, but the feeling sits right in my chest.

She fills my chest.

When I enter my room, it's dark. The fan is on, blowing the curtains and circulating warm air. I lay down and pull her over me, doing as my woman ordered me to do.

She slides to the side of me, one arm and leg slung over my body. Light as a fucking feather, but I pretend she's pinning me down. Holding me there.

It's quiet. Then she says, "Dad told me to take this year to decide what I wanted to do." She runs her finger down my chest. "I was meant to go to university next year, and be... *something*. But we don't have the money now. Maybe I can get a part-time job to pay for classes. I've never had one before, but I reckon I could work in retail, sell clothes, because I think I'd like to study. Not at university. Maybe get a trade. Maybe become a photographer." The intensity in her voice is pitched with optimism, throwing her pulse up her throat with the prospect of this possibility. "What do you think?"

My head feels heavy, sluggish. I try to stay awake for her, but I'm wiped out from being inside her. I yawn. "What you gonna take pictures of then, Baby?"

"The world," she replies softly.

Lashes fan over my vision. "Sylvanians abroad."

She laughs in that sexy cadence, forcing a smile to settle on my lips, picturing the curve of hers as I slip further into slumber. Her presence is alarmingly stunning.

I'm so fucked.

"Yeah," she agrees. "Imagine it. I'll set little scenes up in special places. In different countries. And it'll be what *really* happened that day because that version will be the best one. For once, it'll be what I wanted to happen that day."

I don't want to miss that.

"Can I come?" Breathing deeply with my eyes closed, unconsciousness reaches for me. I can still feel the way she combs her fingers through my hair, and that place inside my chest gets warmer.

The last thing I hear before I fall asleep is a quiet sentence that cements in my soul. “It wouldn’t be the best version unless you were in every scene, Hothead.”

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CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

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kaya



I KNEW *he wasn't okay.*

Exhaling, I watch him deep in slumber, feel his sleepy weight on the bed. Between my thighs, I'm throbbing. Intensely passionate is what I expected from Xander Butcher. Passionately intense is the result.

I'm not a fool. I know this is going to be hard. That he's broken. I'm difficult. We're a hot mess that mends each other before our breath catches.

But I love him broken with all the difficult parts of me and the rest too. *Is it possible to love too much, too hard, too quickly? Is it bad? Love shouldn't be moderated or controlled.*

I touch the bruises below his brow.

My broken beauty.

But potently masculine, too.

I'm gazing at him, enamoured by the way he smells like man—is that even a scent—the way he sleeps heavily like exhaustion rid him of gravity, and yet, quietly vulnerable.

When my phone chimes, I fumble.

I reach for the bedside table, the tips of my fingers skimming the device, before nudging it close enough to grab hold. Smiling still, feeling in love and sore in all the right ways, I pull it to my face and see the word, Kenno, flashing at me. My cheeks rush cold.

Resting my hand on Xander's chest, I glance at him, before using the one hand I have free from his body to display the message.

KENNO:

Ding. Ding. Ding. And sold to the mysterious ManXY who wants to meet you at the Ritz Carlton tomorrow night. There is a booking under C.Ray. Everything sorted.

I CAN'T BREATHE. I thought I had time to cancel. Surely, I can still cancel. Surely!

My heart gallops between my ears, the noise loud enough that I gape at Xander again and wonder whether the violent organ will rouse him.

KAYA:

Is it too late to cancel?

Kenno:

Whatcha talking about, Kaya? It's like a normal sale. The bitcoins have been transferred. It's done.

BILE RISES IN MY THROAT, but I force it down with a thick, firm swallow.

KAYA:

Fuck. Cooling-off period?

Kenno:

Kaya, you're freakin me out! This is serious shit. You don't want to mess with these people.

Panic grasps me.

KAYA:

But- But it's anonymous.

Kenno:

Not for the coders, Kaya! They'll find us. Stop this shit. Ima call you.

MY EYES GAPE when my phone rings, the sound stirring Xander. He moans as I fumble, one handed, with the device, killing the display and tossing it across the room as though it's sweltering, peeling my flesh, stripping me down to bones.

Stripping me bare.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

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kaya



I'VE SCARCELY SLEPT, but between the half-coherent nightmares that rehearse possible encounters with this ManXY, and the moments of consciousness when Xander groans, I've come up with a simple plan.

I'll meet ManXY—clever, chromosomes, *haha*—and tell him I'm no longer a virgin. Kenno will give him his bitcoin back.

C'est la vie.

In theory.

I gaze up at sleeping Xander, circling the hard plates of his chest with the tip of my finger. I know, deep inside my soul, that I should tell him.

Tell him, Kaya.

But he's struggling already.

Preventing the words that sit like lead on my tongue is the image of him losing his hot head over this. Losing his temper. Losing his mind. Losing that look—the one that growls she's mine, she picked me, her virginity *does* matter to us both.

My hothead is a romantic. I'm not. Or at least, I wasn't. It's easy to get swept up in the passionately intense, in the need and romance of Xander, but I'm not a damsel in distress, and I dug my own goddamn grave with this one—I know it.

I just didn't think it through. Not really. *Dammit*. I was pissed at my mum for her idle acceptance of Dad's cheating when I did the same—accepted it. I wanted to fix it for all of us and prove... *something*.

Fuck. And I was so fucking bitter about the whole situation. I couldn't see reality. I can now.

Tracking my finger along his chest, I realise that the shift inside me that day in the shower changed everything. Like, I dropped one fucking wall down for this man, but it was load-bearing, and now my entire guard has crumbled, debris at his feet. My hothead did that.

The light from the new sun slips in as the curtain moves beneath the ceiling fan. Another day. I feel like everything is so different from last week, from yesterday. Not just because I have someone in my arms or that we love each other with the kind of intensity that burns and buries but—because he's sick, too.

And maybe he'll live a long life with this disease, but maybe he'll live a happier one with me by his side to hold his hand, listen to him, and be the cure to the fire inside him. And *maybe* that possibility is powerful enough to drive my actions now. Hold my tongue about this. Fix it myself, and he'll be no worse off.

"I don't remember last night, Baby."

"What?" I push up to look at him but I'm met with a smirk. I smack his chest. "Don't do that. Don't lie about this. It's serious stuff."

He deflects, "I think I need a redo." Lifting his hips off the mattress. Dragging my gaze down the length of his smooth, firm torso to his tented shorts.

I roll my eyes at his stamina. "You've been inside me twice in the last twelve hours."

"Don't remember. Can you walk me through it," he goes on darkly, a lazy drawl to his sleepy words. "Something to do with a skipping rope, am I right?"

I arch my brow at him. “Have you heard of the boy who cried wolf, Xander?”

“I thought I was a rabbit, like you.”

“No. It’s an old story about lying. The shepherd boy used to shout “wolf” in the fields so all the villages would gather together and look for it. But there was no wolf. And he would laugh and laugh at their angry faces. He did this trick many times just because he was bored. But one day, there *was* a wolf. And when the boy cried “wolf,” no one came. And the sheep got eaten.” I feel immediately sad, my heart dropping as I repeat the tale told to me many times. “My dad told me that. See, ‘*no one believes a liar, Kaya, even when they are telling the truth.*’” I clench my jaw. “He’s the biggest liar of them all.”

Xander pulls me up so that we share a pillow, our noses inches apart. The evidence of his affection sparkles through his topaz-blue eyes, softening my mood.

I smile at him—it’s impossible not to. “It’s silly. My dad’s a cheating bastard, but I blame my mum. I’m a fucking feminist who blames the female for his cheating. *Fuck.*”

He watches me closely. “My father’s a cheater, too.”

That unsettles me. “Are you?”

His nose strokes mine, playful. I’ve got the kittenish panther this morning. A well-rested, well-fucked predator seeking pawing time. “Nah.”

“You’ve never had a girlfriend,” I point out. “How do you know you’re the loyal type?”

“’Cause loyalty is in my blood.”

“But not in your dad’s?” I press.

“It’s not right what he did, Kaya.” He tucks a rogue caramel-brown strand of hair behind my ear. “But he was loyal in a way just not to her. He was loyal to the love he felt for another woman. Loved her once and forever. You might not know this, but I have a half-brother, Konnor, and

he's the son of this other woman. She died, but his love for her never did. My mum wasn't the love of my dad's life, and she knew it."

"You believe in *one* love, then?"

"How can I not? I've seen it with my own eyes. My brother Bronson fell in love at first sight. Shoshanna slapped him, kissed him, and saved his life all in the space of an hour. How does a man get over that kind of woman? And Max despised women my entire childhood. Took his hate for our mother out on all of them. Then, he picks this drunk chick up off the floor at her eighteenth birthday party, a quirky, silly thing that had no business being in our world, but... it was Cassidy. She is everything my mother isn't. His perfect match. And Clay, well, his soulmate came in the shape of a girl half his age, with bohemian ideologies and unkempt blonde hair. He smooths his tie, and she throws pillows around. It's a fucking clash of control and chaos."

A contented smile rests on my lips, hearing the awe in his timbre as he discusses his brothers' relationships. Fear and intimidation are words used to describe the Butcher Brothers. *Romantics* would have never been a label. "And you?"

"Well, Woman. Since you're asking." He leans in and kisses my nose, dragging his lips across to my cheek and finally my mouth. He peppers me with small kisses, then pulls back to ensnare me, desire and affection evident in his expression. "We're just starting out, but I'm pretty fucking sure I've got an argumentative little scrapper who doesn't sweep shit under the rug like I've been trained to do. Like everyone else in my world does so fucking well. What can I say? I'm not house-trained. I never was." His gaze suddenly slides right through me, drilling in deep. "I want this. Between me and you. I want all in. Are you all in with me, Woman?"

I am. But... after tonight.

I won't keep anything from you.

Deflecting, I slide over him, dragging my body along the harder, larger plane of his until I'm sitting on his abdomen. His face is still bruised but beautiful, sending my heart scattering through my body. "Do you think I can take you like this? With me on top?"

"I think I want to watch you try," he challenges, amusement in his tone that doesn't abate the lust deepening it. I shuffle backwards, his erection jutting out. He lifts his hands and grips the wooden headboard. "He's all yours."

I pull his erection from his shorts, the magnificent appendage bobbing and swaying free. The silver bars are a ladder to an already swollen and dripping tip. "Lose the shirt, Woman, or I'll chew it off."

I laugh, tugging the shirt over my head, my breasts bouncing free to the air but flushing under his scorching gaze. He is fire.

"Get yourself wet first, Woman. Let me watch how you play with your pussy." He lathers his tongue along his lower lip. "And then slide down my cock and ride me."

Swallowing over a lump in my throat, I spread my legs wider over his sturdy torso.

I reach down to play on the outside of my knickers with a delicate brush of my fingertips, a whimper leaving me to the sensation, a groan rumbling within him to the view.

My eyes roll back as I feel pleasure bloom beneath my skin. It's his gaze and the feather-like touch of my fingers. Seduced by the moment, I dip my forefinger into my knickers and play at the apex between my folds.

He grips the board with more force. "Show me. Show me what you're playing with. I want to see."

I pull the curtain of my knickers aside, and the fabric bunches at my bikini line. My shoulders roll as I relish the gentle caress of my fingers and enjoy the scorching heat from his tunnelling gaze.

His cock thrums, the skin tightening around the bars. “Inch a little higher until you feel your clit, then rock your finger just below it. Be a good woman and do as you’re told.”

His eyes drink me in, the memory of his words flash in them, *‘Have you ever seen a man come while he’s staring at you? Like he could eat you, Kaya?’*

Right now, if Xander could literally consume me, I’d be rolling around his tongue like a juicy morsel. I like the way his gaze catches every movement, flaring with each flick of my finger, every desire-induced shudder.

Edging higher, I roll my finger below my clit, and my legs tremble under the electrified sensation. “God. I’m ready. I’m wet already.”

“Good.” The word expels like a hiss from deep within his throat. As I position him at my entrance, the muscles in his jaw thrums below tight skin.

My eyes flutter shut when I slide his thick crown through my slit, then rock my hips to take more. The sound of the headboard creaking under his efforts to stay still spurs me on. “You know what I think,” I purr, rolling my pelvis to take him, dominance in the arching and circling of my body. His words from a week ago come back, *‘You did that. And if that’s not dominant, if that’s not part of your feminine power, your strength, I don’t know what is.’*

Nerves buzz inside my walls as the bars slide in. “I think you’re the one who is a good boy for me.” My heart and pussy pulse frantically as my words excite me. “Keep your hands where they are and watch me ride you. Don’t look away. Don’t close them. And don’t take control.”

His eyes flash, an innate dominance in his Butcher blood that wrestles with restraint. “You look so fucking hot when you’re bossy. Handling me, though, not sure you’ve got what it takes, little girl, but I’ll play.”

I gasp, impaled beautifully on him. A smile creeps across my lips, *challenge accepted*. I place my hands on purring abdominal muscles and

begin to slide up and down. Slow at first, I anchor myself on him and in his blazing topaz eyes.

I work my body on him.

Ride him.

I have his unwavering attention, his thick cock at my command, and all the time in the world to make him surrender and admit, I own him. *Watch me.*

At a teasing pace, I make love to the length of his erection in slow circles, in sexy hip rolls. I sweat, a mist of perspiration coats my skin. “Do you like that?”

His knuckles turn white, the wooden headboard moments away from fracturing in twin lines below his fists. “Fuck,” he groans, fighting to hold my gaze.

“Don’t look away.” I drag my hands along my slick abdomen and up to my breasts, where I smear the sweat along my nipples. “I’m aching.” I pant. “My nipples are so hard they hurt. Lick them for me like a good boy.”

Then it’s fast. He sits with a start, grinding me to his lap, his twitching arms envelop my torso, and his hips surge upward to fuck at a relenting pace. My breasts bounce around his face. Catching my nipple between his lips, he sucks and tugs on it like a chew toy. Always my panther.

“Kaya. You’re mine,” he says through a groan. “You chose me. You’re fucking mine now.” He near roars the words around my breast, the brimming of his orgasm in every inch of his shuddering thick body.

He licks at my nipples. Treating each one as they bob around his face with our jerking motion.

I clutch at him. With my legs circling his back, I take his punishing thrusts. Sweat slides between us. Chests heave. We slip together. The friction from his pelvis and my hips rising, heating, and building us to wild pleasure.

I shut my eyes. “Don’t you dare come until I do.”

The growl he makes in retort throws my head back, my climax forward, and my entire body into frissons of sensation. Cries expel from me as I orgasm. Pulse. My pussy gets tighter around him, and his never-ending growls bleed into a roar.

His name is my gasps. “Xander.”

My name is his chant, “Kaya.” He swells inside my clenching channel, coming hard and forcefully. His lips suddenly find mine in a clumsy, desperate way, mouthing me through the wave of his climax as his hips quicken and jerk to wring every shudder from both our bodies. Being with Xander Butcher is going to keep me so fucking fit.

We collapse backwards.

“Fuck.” He holds me to his chest, our legs tangled in pretzel-like curves. “Are you on birth control? ‘Cause the way I want to fuck you won’t allow for gaps in your cycle.”

Panting still, I pause. I consider teasing him, but I don’t. “Yes, Hothead. I’m all yours.”

It was just something people say, but his arms tightened around me as though I had just saved his life. “Thank you, Baby.”

After tonight.

After tonight, I’ll be all yours.

Possessive, his hand travels up to hold my throat. *God*, I hope he can’t feel the anxious pulse shuddering beneath his palm. I hate keeping this from him. I hate it.

Still, I choke out, “I have a scheduled day with my dad this morning, and I really need to talk to my mum.” My throat rolls within his grasp. I think about how he’s alone with this new diagnosis. “Will you be okay?”

“I’m fine, Baby. Don’t worry about me.” His hand squeezes my throat to contradict that.

“Fine is a contronym, Hothead. Are you fine as in divine, superb...” I lower my voice sadly. “Or the opposite, merely average, coping, dealing?”

He doesn't answer the question, which screams the latter. Instead, he says, "I want to come. I want to be there for you. Meet this man."

You can't.

Blinking, I look down and see the words 'monsters are made' on his wrist, catching a frown along my brows.

No. And yes. A monster is made from something, and that something is still there, living and breathing beneath its angry skin. I lift and reach beside his drawer for my purse, needing to remind him who he really is. In case he forgets.

Retrieving a black liquid eyeliner from within the silk sleeves, I sit on his lap, grab his wrist, and start to draw.

Pushing up, Xander leans his large torso on the headboard. His chest is two carved, hard mounds. His abdomen is a perfectly formed grid of eight...

Shuffling, I continue my sketch.

He watches me closely. I can feel his eyes drag over my face, landing with intent on the art in progress.

Below the tattoo, I draw a little rabbit with one floppy ear that hangs in his lashes. Xander is a rabbit, just like me.

Much better than the tattoo. I snap the lid on and put the liquid liner away. Needing to talk as the silent message soars between us, I force my lips around the words. "I've bawled wearing that stuff, and it never smudges. It'll last you all day and night. And I'll see you tomorrow."

His brows furrow above narrowed eyes, pain startling me within brilliant blue depths. "What did you bawl over?"

I tilt my head. "What?"

"Someone made you cry. Who did it?"

"Maybe I stubbed my toe."

"Did you?"

Ugh, he's serious. Amused, his flare of unbidden possessiveness settles into my heart. Passionately intense. Intensely passionate. My Xander Butcher.

I shift to straddle him, cup the back of his warm neck and kiss his mouth once. “What you gonna do?” My lips skate along his as I tease him. “Break the nose of every person who has ever made me cry? It’s a long list.”

“Start it now then.”

Oh, Hothead.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

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xander



“THIS IS MAC,” Kaya says, waving her hand at the old Mazda driver. “You wanted to meet him, and here you go. My *personal* driver.” That makes her laugh, and I fight my smile when hit with that sound.

I want to know who this man is.

How she came to be so cosy with a Cabi driver.

Gripping the top of the car, I lean down and in to scrutinise the greying individual that Kaya chose to drive her around in lieu of one of my family’s abundantly paid chauffeurs whom I offered for her to use. Mac—sun beat-up skin wrinkled around his arms, bunching at his elbows. Leather-looking lips and nose. “Mac, is it?”

He barely looks at me, but the small sweep from the corner of his eye might as well have scanned my intentions. It’s obvious. I get it. I want to fuck her. Lick her. Hold her.

Mine.

And you want what?

Exactly?

“Yep. Mac.”

Talkative.

Reminds me of my brother.

Kaya ducks below my arm, giving me an eyeful of her round tits squished into her top. The same ones I sucked on this morning until they were swollen, the ones I rolled around between my teeth as she sat impaled on my cock.

I catch her wrist. “You need a jacket, Baby. In the house. Grab one of mine.” She raises a brow at me, so I flash her a grin that pinkens her cheeks. “*Please.*”

Her knowing stare slides from Mac to me and back again before she rolls her eyes and walks back into the house. “Caveman,” I think she mutters.

“How much?” I ask straightaway, not wasting time. Bringing money into the conversation seems like a douchebag move, but it’s a hand I hold and Kaya lacks. I don’t like finances making her vulnerable. I can fix it. I want to fix it.

“Don’t charge her.”

“Does she know that?”

“She would if she looked at her account.”

I don’t like that.

There is always an exchange. He doesn’t look at me, not because he’s nervous—steady breaths, side slouched against the driver’s door—but because he seemingly doesn’t feel the fucking need to. “What do you want from her, then? If not money?”

“Less than you do.”

Dipshit. That’s true. I want it all.

Every ride. Every look.

Every second.

But you have some of that.

Don’t you, Mac-old-boy?

I admit it. “I want everything.”

“Make sure you give the same back.”

Well, shit.

Kaya appears with my jacket, a swirl of caramel hair and curves. Measuring him up, I can't decide whether I like this guy or not... I think I do. She kisses me quickly as she jumps into the front seat. I don't like the light peck, but I let it slide. Already planning tomorrow when I pin her down, part her lips with my thumbs, and spit into the back of her throat to watch her tongue undulate for more.

I stare at her. "You got my number, Woman?" I wrote it on her arm like a damn teenage boy. I used her eyeliner. Told her to start that damn *Noses To Break* list. Text me a name a day.

She won't.

I'll keep asking.

Kaya smiles softly, her eyes climbing up my body as though she's a goddamn pervert. I'll fuck that lust right out of her if she keeps that up. "Woman?"

"Yes, Hothead. I have your number."

Stepping back, I rap my knuckles on the top of the car to stop from pulling her from it, pushing her to her knees, and getting a prime view of what her eyes do when she is gagging on my cock and drooling all over my piercings.

As the Mazda rolls away, I snap a picture of the license plate and send it to one of our men. He'll get me all the details on this Mac character.

Possessiveness expands my muscles, urging me to run after the car, go with her to meet her father merely to tell him to fuck off, and then demand she stays here. With me.

The white car disappears around the corner. My body vibrates with anxiety and discomfort. I lean against the brick pillar, eyes roaming the front gates with pathetic longing.

So, this is what love feels like... Huh. It's fucking distracting. It ignites a predatory need inside me. To hold her. To know where she is and what she

is doing at all damn times. To keep her. I want to see her—the slope between her nose and her upper lip, the caramel swirls in her hair, her getting dressed, showering, sleeping.

I'm obsessed.

I thought my brothers were fucking mad...

But here I am.

Wanting to strap a damn dog collar around her throat that zaps her every time she tries to leave the yard. My cock thickens at the thought. That's a damn inconvenience, too. She is sex on fucking legs, and my greedy cock is insatiable without her natural perfume enveloping me and when it is—

Fuck.

—Feral.

Tearing myself away from the deserted driveway, I head back inside. The eerie quiet rolls around me, sliding into my muscles. Hate it. It's not the solitude that unnerves me, but the stillness that accompanies it.

Like being locked in a wardrobe.

Forcing that from my mind, I wander to the kitchen but stop as I pass the hallway to Dad's room.

If I go inside, will half his closet be empty?

I remember it so well as a child. Finding my way in there, wanting protection from Mum, only to discover empty hangers swaying as if Dad had only just ripped the apparel from them in a rush.

Maybe he's like me. Maybe he needs to keep moving or the pain will catch him.

But I'm a grown man; I don't need him. Not to help me decide what to do with this diagnosis. Not to hold my hand through it. I know what to do. Move on. Coach, maybe. Travel, perhaps. Just stay active, so my skin can't crawl, too hot and fatigued to bother me.

I could take Kaya and see the world. I've got the money. Pack all her Sylvanians in that leather case with the flippy straps. Watch her unleash her

quirkiness, carefree, and play without expectation. Then fuck her like a woman. Fuck her like I box. Hard. Fast. Wet. Messy.

“Dad gone?”

Gripping the orange juice that I must have grabbed while deep in thought, I spin around to see Max filling the kitchen doorway. Above his elbows, his white shirt is bunched, showing forearms the size of my goddamn thigh—my brother Max is a beast. Like our father used to be.

You left, dickhead.

I don’t say it aloud. The thought alone was an obvious and emotional one. Both sentiments Max has no time for. “I haven’t looked but he’s not here, mate. You know, he blames himself for my broken brain,” I state simply, sipping the orange juice and leaning back on the counter. Max’s response is his signature grunt.

He strolls over, rounding the large marble island bench to lean opposite me, mirroring my position with his feet crossed at his ankles.

He’s here for me.

The need to be real rises. I ram it down. I ignore his vibe, the way his furrowed brows aren’t apathetic for once, tight lips aren’t sneering, and his gaze isn’t bored but, instead, dedicated to me in a way that kicks inside my chest.

As the silence stretches, an internal debate rolls within his gaze. After several moments of our brotherly stare-off, he breaks it. Completely out of character for him. Getting words from Max is like pulling a bone out of a starving dog’s locked jaw—usually. “She’s why I hit the bag, too.”

My shoulders deflate.

Doubt it’s the same, mate.

Doubt you take a punch just to see her. Doubt you use the pain like a riding crop. Doubt you like the reminder that the past is real.

“Yeah.” I put the glass down, to move, and avoid idle hands. “I’m sometimes that kid locked in a wardrobe after a punch.” I see anger swirl

inside his eyes like a dark wormhole. So, I add with a smooth tenor, “You and Bron got me out so many times, mate. Took so many beatings for me.”

“You don’t need to do that.”

“Do what?” I ask although I know.

“Thank me for being your brother.”

I swallow, my throat choking on the statement. “You were never weak around her,” I add, the haunting memories crashing through me. She needed my praise. My love. I thought it was... that—*love*. Abuse=boxing. Love=fucking. It’s my construct. She did this. “I don’t remember you ever telling her how beautiful she was right after she fucking beat the shit out of you. Can’t even remember you ever speaking with her.”

Max folds his arms over his chest, which always makes him expand and look tougher, each visceral mass protruding like the fucking hulk. He’s our dad, through and through. His eyes punch right through mine, into my skull, to my broken fucking brain. “It’s pathetic,” I bait, needing him to agree with me.

He hums. “I wasn’t a good son.”

“She didn’t deserve a good son.”

“She didn’t deserve *you*.”

I laugh, but I don’t feel it. At all. “Are we talking about her now?” I ground my voice with doubt. “Is that what this is? Mate, usually I have to detonate you to see what is inside. You gonna open up willingly because of the damn CTE?”

His jaw pulses. “You want to talk, buddy?”

Yes! *Fuck*. Shaking my head, I gaze to the heavens. *God, give me fucking strength with this lot*. “Fucking hell, yes. I want to talk about it.”

“Tell me what you want to talk about.”

“Clay finished her, Max!” The words should slice right into his lungs and force a gasp, but he barely twitches. So, I continue, “You know that,

right? You and Bronson both know that he had something to do with her death, right? Let's talk about that!"

The energy sits heavily between us, my declaration thickening the air. He nods slowly, eyes skewered through mine. Cracking his fists, he looks down at the one adorned with his wedding band. He does that a lot. All his answers lay in his love for Cassidy. The band is screaming 'What Would Cassidy Say?' She is the angel on his shoulder.

"I have everything I need, buddy," he states to the ring. Then he returns his gaze to me. "You're included in that *everything*. Victoria never was."

"It's my fault," I hiss through displeasure, remembering weeks ago when I finally admitted to Clay that she used to beat the crap out of us. Clay, who spent most of our childhood at boarding school, groomed to be Don, kept from us to keep him focused and single-minded. I know this. But I told that man, and inadvertently, I told the Don of *Cosa Nostra* that my mother—his mother—was a liar, volatile, and abused his brothers. That must not have sat well. He took it into his own—infallible—hands. I'm fucking certain of it. "I told Clay that she used to beat us up. Now she's fucking dead, Max."

"You feel guilty." He scoffs once, the cruelty evident, but it's not meant for me. Out of all of my brothers, Max is the most intimidating. He doesn't hold the power that Clay does or the insanity that Bronson airs, but he's unforgiving and callous. Bar a handful of people, he genuinely does not give a shit about anyone else. He'd be the one in a zombie apocalypse that survives. He has no time to help the family on the side of the road—the one who is bait for the ambush lying in wake. He's too focused on making sure we all survive. And his conscience is clear as fucking water. "You felt guilty she was left alone when you were a child, and you feel guilty now she's dead," he states, pinning me back in the conversation. "I don't talk a lot. Don't think the silence is improved by my bullshit. I will say this, we all blame ourselves for something. Butch. Me. Bron. You. You know who

never did... *Victoria*. She just blamed us. It's time to let it go, Xan. Time to let *her* go. Look what you got." I follow his focus to my wrist, to the black rabbit drawn below my tattoo. "*She* suits you."

Well, son of Butcher.

"You're right, Max." I fight a building smirk. "The silence isn't improved by your bullshit."

He grunts through a subtle smile. "Shut up, dickhead."

Is he right?

Should I just let this go?

Maybe the memories can go, too?

We don't talk much more, but my big brother stays with me for most of the morning, putting me to use on a spur-of-the-moment renovation of the third floor.

Mum's floor.

Max is an architect, managing the city's building covenants and regulations alongside Clay. They have the entire building industry in the city wired under a planning scheme that benefits the *Cosa Nostra*.

He designed this house a decade ago, and every time something big or life-changing happens, he starts rearranging it. He's like a chick needing a new hairstyle after a breakup. The last time this happened, he found out Cassidy was pregnant.

His mum's dead.

His brother's brain is fucked.

My brother is a man of few words, but his actions speak and heal what his mouth struggles to articulate, and right now as he knocks down the wall in my mother's room, he is physically manifesting his closure.

Or he's just keeping me busy, so I don't spiral with nothing to do.

Fucking Max Butcher.

Never change, mate.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

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kaya



THE STALE AIR taps at my skin as we sit in the waiting room of the remand centre. It's crowded. My older sisters, Natalie, Mae, and Lisa, slouch on the other side of my mother. Natalie is on her Kindle, no doubt reading some man-on-man dark romance story, while Mae and Lisa have mentally dissolved into the TikTok portal.

My skin is hot but not from the weather; it's strange being together. Mae and Lisa go to university—a place I should be. They practically live on campus, only ever home to sleep. I understand why. The motel doesn't exactly scream 'charm and comfort; stay within my cosy walls.'

While my sisters aren't mentally present, my mum smiles at the guards in the same way she might a priest who is here to grant us Hail Marys or whatever the fuck priests actually do outside of the movies. As though they hold all the cards, and we are at their mercy.

I don't smile at the guards. *Fuck them.* Smiling at them won't give us our house back or protect me from my encounter with ManXY tonight. Won't give me the million dollars I need to get Dad out. Won't help.

Fuck them twice.

I focus on the phone in my lap. After spending too much time with my hothead this morning, I was late to the motel. So, in Mac's Mazda on the way here, I impulsively texted Chloe explaining, well, *everything*.

My skin prickles at the thought.

About ManXY. About tonight. What I did under the strong arms of my bitter pride.

I told her everything.

Kaya:

I know you're pissed.

Chloe:

Shut up. I'll be there.

Kaya:

No. I'm going to meet him ALONE. Tell him we will transfer the bitcoin back. And that I no longer have my virginity, so there. That's that.

He might be dangerous. I don't want you there.

Chloe:

Exactly. And Kenno will be there too. His punk arse got you into this mess. I'm fucking pissed at you both.

Kaya:

Chloe. I did this on my own.

Sighing, I shove my phone back into my pocket. This room smells like guilt and bleach; the latter probably used to douse the former.

My gaze shifts around the waiting area, a narrow rectangular space with seating fixed to the floors in parallel rows along grey walls.

It's busy today; I didn't have to wait last time.

At the far end, a woman sits quietly with her thighs pressed together, heels crossed at her ankles. She stands out. Much like we do. Dusting her

flawless skirt, she smooths the wrinkles that don't exist. She looks nervous. Looks kind of like my mum... My forehead tightens with suspicion. I study the woman, auburn hair, blue eyes—*oh God*.

It's one of his floozies.

Fuck me.

I recognise her.

Instinct takes hold, jolting me to my feet. I grab Mum's leather purse from the seat beside her. "We're going."

Startled, she presses her hand over her chest, leaning back into the chair as though I'm about to rip her from it. "What's gotten into you? I have your father's book."

Natalie glares up from her Kindle. "Sit down, you weirdo. You're making a scene."

Ugh. And we can't have that. I ignore her and drag Mum up by her elbow. Pulling her out the glass swinging doors, I beg her, "Please, let's go."

"Kaya Alana! What on Earth?" Following my lead until we are a few metres from the entrance, she doesn't fight me.

Not really.

Releasing her elbow, I whirl around to face her. "Fuck his book. *She* is in there, Mum!"

A small gasp leaves her plum-painted lips, but just as quick as that sound, she schools her shock and presses her palms to her necklace with protective pressure. "I have his book."

What the actual fuck!

"Why?" Agitation builds inside my ears, my pulse a train rushing past me. "Why do you do this." It wasn't a question. "Why!"

She answers me anyway, chanting whatever bullshit coos her to submission every time this happens. "I am his wife. I have his book. I have —"

“Fuck his book!” I spit out. “You don’t—”

“He is my husband.”

I scoff. “Does he know that?”

Her voice pitches to a rare volume. “He’s your father!”

Suddenly, people approach. We both clear our throats and glance askance as a young family scoot past, entering the waiting room but not before peering back with intrigue.

On the other side of the glass door, my sisters stand in shocked silence, transfixed by the commotion we are causing. So out of character for a Lovit woman.

“So what,” I say quietly and then louder for Mum to hear. I stare at her intently. “So what, Mum.”

“So...” She stammers to a painful pause. “I’ll lose *you*.”

Fuck.

My heart pinches inside my chest, but I still sneer. “What? You’ll lose *money*.”

A slap would have painted less pain across her face. And as I said it, I knew it was bullshit. My gaze drops to the book clutched in her slender fist—still serving him without money. Still cleaning our rooms to contrived perfection without any visitors. It’s... all she is. *Us*.

A memory chips into my mind, of my mum sitting in the car with us when we arrived back at the house after the camping trip. The pregnant woman was on the step. All these accusations were flying. Mum told us that the woman was confused and to not be scared. And to not judge her. Not everyone is as lucky as us. I also remember Mum crying. I thought it was because the woman ruined her perfect holiday but— Now, I see her heart was breaking. “You stayed with him for us.” I realise through an airy exhale.

She glances away. “Not now, Kaya.”

I step toward her, forcing an unavoidable intimacy. Getting in her space, I press, “You stayed with him because you thought *I* would leave you. To live with him. Didn’t you?”

The conversation with Mac sails through the present discussion like a plane with an announcement banner or a jet writing words in the sky. Obvious. To everyone—but me. Mac alluded to as much. That damn Mazda driving Beach-bum-Oracle was right.

A sad sigh leaves her. Pointedly, her blue eyes fix on the matching blue ones she gave me. “Would you have?”

My jaw tightens. “Yes.”

“Then I made the right decision.”

My agitation collapses to her resolute utterance. Over this bitterness, this prideful self-imposed segregation, I wrap my arms around her neck.

And she becomes a statue.

Her hands flop by her sides. Over her shoulder, my sisters gape at us. I feel her heart pressed to mine, both quick but sturdy tempos.

“Ask me again,” I say into her ear.

Steeled, she doesn’t move. “Will you—”

“No.” I cut in. Her heavy exhale, powerful with relief and shock, blows my hair around my neck. “I won’t choose him over you this time, Mum. Let’s leave.”

I grab the book from her hand and toss it in the dirt. A gasp slips from her, but she doesn’t reach for it. Instead, she looks through the window at the woman who resembles her, except younger, and nods her head.

“Okay, Kaya, let’s all leave.”

And I don’t want to get him out on bail. Not when my mum is willing to let go. Giving ManXY back his bitcoin is even easier now because it’s not my job to support my dad.

It was his job to support me.

And my mum.

And he didn't.
I'm done.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

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xander



THE CLOCK TICKS PAST SIX-THIRTY, and I still haven't heard from her. Not a name. Not an emoji. I'm not prideful when it comes to her—I'll fucking blow her phone up soon. There is nothing cool and cavalier about my affection for her. That's damn true, as all my muscles feel stretched and drawn, as though her distance somehow affects them.

Leaning back in the tattoo chair, I lay my wrist on the side while the artist mixes his black ink with blue. I wait for the work to begin, wanting the sting, wishing it hurt more.

Pain reminds me of my mother.

It's through pain that I actively seek her out... I realise that now. This was unintentional. Until recently, I hid this motivation to get a knockout. But with each hit, I'm reminded. Each knockout, I visit the wardrobe.

Without boxing... she's gone, too.

I should be happy about that, but I think I'm a knockout junky, and I think the reality of her is when I peak. Like, around me, my brothers avoid her name, bury the vulnerable times, demolish houses that hold childhood memories, or tattoo the skin she made for them—wiping her out.

Shifting my eyes around my tanned forearm skin, I frown. It's scar free. And 'scars remind us that the past is real,' well, fuck, all the scars my mother gave me are long since healed. Not a blemish to make my

experience of her anything other than a nightmare I hold in my knockout-drunken stupor.

Do I still need her scars?

No. I have Kaya.

My woman.

That's enough.

As the tattoo artist begins to trace the rabbit on my forearm, embedding the black ink perfectly along the fading eyeliner, it doesn't hurt at all. And *dammit*, I wish it did. Wish it could throw me back in time just once more...

Maybe, I'll fight back.

Maybe, I'll tell Clay sooner.

With my arm relaxed and still, the humming from the gun is more notable than the sensation on my wrist. My new tattoo is right below my 'monsters are made' tattoo.

Monsters are made.

That's me.

Max.

Bron.

Even Dad.

Especially Clay.

Fucking made monsters.

And now... I'm a rabbit. Because if Kaya is a damn rabbit, then what else would I be?

My phone suddenly vibrates in my jeans pocket, so I shift slightly without moving my right arm. Retrieving my phone, my heart pulses to see if it's from her.

Red mists my eyes when I see another name—Charles Young—completely forgot that I have his number. Grabbed it when we were both

training at the same gym. Shared a set of keys. Years ago, before either of us were champions.

I curl my lips into a snarl, swiping with my thumb to read the message. The gun hums away. Carving me a rabbit. My jaw aches as I read his message, laced with suspicious intent. Obvious, too.

Charles Young:

You want to know what my brother does with those photos of Anderson's little girl, Butcher? Check your Tor. Get yourself a Girl.X

What the fuck is he trying to pull?

Why would he out his brother?

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CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

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kaya



THE TENSION as we enter the lobby intensifies and heats my skin. My legs shake. I wipe at beads of sweat gathering along my forehead. My discomfort is stifling, set further ablaze by the presence of Kenno and Chloe, who trail me slowly.

Chloe is panning the area, searching for a faceless man, while Kenno is hunched forward, fisted hands disappearing into his denim pockets, hoodie pulled down over his tight brow. People know him. They know *us*.

I'm a Lovit daughter.

"I can't believe this," he mutters to himself, a hushed anthem that has become our soundtrack today.

Chloe doesn't talk. I'm okay with the quiet. I welcome the state, unable to form words anyway, unwilling to dissect this night anymore, just wanting it over with so I can go back to Xander. Crawl into bed with him and disappear into his scent.

My stomach twists, but I fight to quell the warning. Looking around, I see ManXY in every set of eyes. Is that him—the man with the briefcase, my imagination plummeting into the contents—toys and torture implements?

Is that him—with the woman.

Maybe she wants a turn, too.

I swallow the lump in my throat. The hotel is obnoxiously lavish, a crystal and gold chandelier throwing warm colours and light against the interior—it's not working-class accommodation. Kenno would be more inconspicuous in a suit than with his strategically cloaked black hoodie tugged down.

I approach the reception, where a man in a silver vest smiles at me over the top of a fifteen-foot-long metallic copper counter. He sees wealth immediately; the interest flaring within his eyes says as much. It must be in my soul because it sure as hell isn't in my wallet.

Or I wouldn't be in this fucking mess.

"Hi. I'm meeting someone. The room is under Ray. C— No. Wait." I reach for the name as I muse. "Maybe, it's C. Ray?"

"This is so fucked up," Kenno mumbles and I hear Chloe hit him somewhere low and out of sight.

My hands shake, so I rub them down my thighs, the jeans I chose increasing the warmth of my discomfort.

The concierge stares at his computer, typing away before swivelling to collect a white electric key-card. He stares at Chloe and Kenno with sharp eyebrows cutting a line across his serious face. "Mr Ray has requested no visitors or housekeeping. Just his..." His dubious gaze rolls over me. "Sister. He's not feeling well."

Sister?

Is he my age?

A small comfort?

Maybe not...

I forgot the name on the booking, so the concierge knows I'm not Mr Ray's sister. Setting a smile, I try to temper the anxieties that play there.

"Okay." My voice leaves in a trail of fear, but I take the card, my head nodding to abate the dread wrapping around my muscles, filling them with adrenaline, urging them to flee, to hide and—

My gaze hits Chloe's face, her wide eyes set into an expression of helplessness and anger.

"No," is all she says.

"Go have a drink at the bar—"

She silences me with a look that slaps. "Stop! If you're not back down here in ten minutes," she grounds, "I'm calling the police."

The card has room 2003 carved into the underside. I stuff it into my pocket in case Chloe decides to snatch it from me—or I accidentally-deliberately throw it. "And say what?"

"The truth."

We step away from the counter, my arm reaching for Kenno, hushed as I say, "I'll text you the wallet number thing when he gives it to me, and you can send the funds immediately, yeah?"

"Fuck." He can't even look at me. "Fine."

"If I don't text Kenno in fifteen minutes, then call me. But you have to allow the funds to go in. Don't call the police. We will all get in shit," I whisper to Chloe, and without thinking or burying myself further in doubt, I force my feet towards the elevator, my hands vibrating and sore, my legs buckling with each hesitant step.

People know I'm here.

Know I'm upstairs.

He has more to lose than me.

I think.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

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kaya



THE AIR in my throat feels like an expanding ball, choking me as I gape at the shiny silver badge glistening on the wooden door of 2003.

My breath shifts hard.

I hear it in my ears.

Forcing my legs forward, I slip the card into the slot, watching with bated breath as the red light flicks to green and a click signals it's unlocked, ready to be entered.

Goosebumps race up my spine as I step into the hotel room, my eyes immediately locking onto the bed.

I sweep my gaze around the dimly lit space. Instinctively, I try to find the light switch by the front wall but can't. It's a standard room, as far as I can make out. Not exceptional. The orange-hued lamps create spotlighting around the space. A glow by the bedside table. A glow to the left of the flat-screen television.

"You didn't come alone."

My mouth becomes arid as a voice slithers around the room, my insides flipping under the dark notes in his deep tone. I jolt to the side, chasing the sound.

There.

In a corner, a large figure is cast in shadow by the slowly swaying curtains. I can't make him out. The breeze enters through an open window, the slip of light creating his silhouette from the moon outside.

Swallowing, I find my voice in my throat. "I don't want to waste anyone's time—"

"Anyone's?"

"*Your.*" I struggle around the possessive determiner, finding the ambiguity of *anyone* easier to digest. An impersonal word. *God, voice, work for me.* "*Your time.*"

Keep going, Kaya.

I continue hesitantly. "I don't have what you bought from me anymore, but I have the bitcoins, so I'll just give them back right—"

"Don't have what?"

I quiver. "*Now...*" He wants me to say it aloud, hear the product of this exchange spoken through my unwitting lips, like I stole something from him. I need to apologise. Beg. "My virginit—"

"Stop."

I don't know what I expected, but it wasn't this. In my mind, the picture of a rambunctious, middle-aged tycoon wanting to relive his youth by fucking a young girl came to mind. He was rich—*harmless*. He would give me champagne, maybe a meal—treat it like a date...

God. I'm so dumb.

"How do I know it's you?" he asks his tone a deep and detached rumble that comes from the back of his throat and not through a relaxed jaw. It's forced. Not his own.

I haven't moved further into the space, stalling at the entrance. And he hasn't advanced towards me to get a better look, to offer me that damn champagne of my reverie.

Squinting at his frame, I try to gauge his age or height or anything that will bring him humanity. I can fight a boy or man, but not a dark outline

projecting an unnatural voice. “What do you mean? I knew the name of the booking.”

“You could be a fill-in.”

“I’m not. I’m her. GirlX.”

“Prove it.”

“What?”

I follow his line of sight to the bed, my eyes catching on a balaclava lying on the red sheets. Red. That’s not a good colour for a hotel room, stripping the classy atmosphere, bleeding it to a trashy hue.

Slowly, I shake my head. “No.”

“Yes,” he hisses. “Now!”

My stomach caves in, but I can’t let him see the sensation in my response. So, I steel.

“Fine.” I stride over to the mattress with a stomp, frustration hiding my fear. Irritability plays well with nonchalance, and anger is stronger than terror, so I choose those. I pull the balaclava over my head, flattening my hair within. The cave in my stomach aches at what else he might ask me to do.

Though, I know.

Deadly still, the orb of his dark expression tilts; he could be a mannequin in the corner of the room. And when he says, “Take off your clothes, GirlX,” the sensation that grasps my spine is paralysing. He sees it. And I think he smiles.

The tension in my shoulders hold them high and taut, but I fight the grappling feeling, levelling them into a position of feigned indifference. My mind chants for me—*Get it over with, Kaya. Get it over with.*

Kicking off my flats, I step backwards, my shaky hands finding the button at the top of my jeans, my mind finding a resilient space inside my brain. Get it over with.

My jeans slide down my thighs.

Get it over with.

A puddle of denim ropes my ankles together, but I refuse to step from them. They are mine.

Get it over with.

The cotton of my shirt slides up my tensing abdomen, over my breasts, tugged from my head. I fist the fabric by my side, unwilling to relinquish control over my clothes.

Get it over with.

Mentally inside that resilient place, I remove my bra and slide my knickers down my legs, left completely bare, tied at the ankles by my jeans, and clutching the shirt like a lifeline.

My skin erupts in shivers from the filthy press of his ogling eyes. Unseen, but I can *feel* their presence on me. I can't see the definition of his body or face, the details cloaked in moving shadows from the dancing curtain. He is simply a silhouette of a man. He shifts. His hand moves to the front of him. The shape of his elbow juts out, jerks up and down to the side of his hip. He's touching himself.

I freeze. Even as my mind screeches for me to pull my clothes back on, step back to the door—call Chloe.

His horrible breaths shake with arousal and the sound makes me want to puke. Then he says, "Show me the inside of that cunt!"

I panic. His husky utterance enters my mind, drags me from that place of strength and nonchalance, and tosses me into a basement where fear nests in my hollow stomach.

"No."

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

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xander



I'M GLARING at the damn phone, surprised it doesn't shatter in my fist, while Clay's hacker works his magic, hitting his laptop keys with purpose.

Charles Young:

You want to know what my brother does with those photos, Butcher? Check your Tor. Get yourself a Girl.X

Dipshit.

Why?

Chuck isn't getting a response. Not from me. And our new hacker is all over his scent like the ghost of a bloodhound. Sniffing him out. Undetected.

The young blonde lad beside me goes simply by Slip—he's a digital parasite. He can slip in through tiny fractures in the code, gain access and take control.

He once followed a crooked politician for months by hitchhiking from handset to handset, activating the microphones in his friends' cars or mobile phones, listened in on every conversation no matter where he was. He followed him across the country, jumped on a plane with him and sat opposite him on the television. He was eyes within the display, watching him sleep, eat.

Yet, Slip never left his house.

Fucker's talented.

Clay inclines backwards in his chair, musing with his fingertips pressed together at his chin. "Why would Charles tip-off his brother, Xander? What are you involved in?"

We haven't spoken about the hospital or the allegations tossed around, but we have business to avoid the beckoning topic. It has always been that way. This business of ours is the great divide between him and us—his brothers.

"It must have something to do with our catchweight. A fucking threat to throw me off. To... I dunno." He doesn't know I can't fight him... that I never will.

Sure as death and taxes, Slip finds the site. The landing page is enough to set my blood to a steady simmer. My gaze roams the categories. Underage pornography, services, girls. *Fuck.*

The District's underbelly has always been managed by the *Cosa Nostra*—by us—and while our depravities are sure to send us directly to Hell, we are *family* men.

Children are off limits.

Human trafficking, too.

"Do what you have to do," Clay orders, scrolling the front page as Slip types away on his laptop. "Unpublish it. Get in. I want this site."

"Easy," is all Slip says and continues to hack the backend of the site, his fingers sliding over the keyboard, his digital presence jacked-in, moving within the code like a god.

Rubbing my temple and forehead in circles, I will away the undertone of a headache.

This doesn't sit well with me.

I look down at my phone, hissing at the name *Charles Young*. The hairs on my neck rise, creeping across my skin is an ominous energy.

Why did he send me this?

The text message stares back at me. I'm intent on finding a hidden meaning, a clue, anything. I inhale sharply. He wants me to see something...

Fuck.

I freeze. My gaze slowly shifts to the monitor, the stream of products a chilling blur of skin and sex and perversions. My mouth wrestles around the words. "Search X" The X in his message means something.

Clay narrows his glacial-blue eyes on me, suspicion swirling within them. Looking back at the monitor, he searches X, but brings up more than five hundred pages of results.

Dammit.

Clay says, "Use your voice, Xander. Tell me what you think we are looking for."

"I don't fucking know." Furrowing my brows over dark eyes, I rip the message apart word by fucking word until I'm ensnared on the last sentence.

Get yourself a Girl. X.

A capital G.

Weird.

"Search GirlX."

That's the one. Images flash at me. And the room is suddenly riotous with the sound of nothing. Of Slip typing on his laptop. Of Clay's chair groaning like tormented thunder. Of my heartbeat like a train roaring right through my cranium.

At first, the images don't mean anything to me, just a naked girl with a balaclava on. Just beautiful round tits with a perfect upward slope to her nipples.

"Xander?"

Just a tiny concave at her waist that rolls down to two perfect curves, one at the hips, one at the upper thigh.

Just...

“Buddy?”

I stare at the profile, unblinking.

It's not her.

My lips twitch.

It's not her.

My breath is shallow.

It's not her.

My fists tremble.

It's not her.

My heart is on fire.

It's not her.

My brain—my broken brain—refuses to accept what I'm seeing, because it's not her, not her perfect sloped tits, not her juicy pussy with trim lips that hide all the lush pink inner folds, not the chipped teal varnish on her toenails, not her caramel hair peeking out from beneath the balac—

Not her.

A hand snaps me from my focus. I grab the wrist, twisting, and standing, ready to throw a fist, when I see Clay's face, still and willing to let me jab my raised knuckles into his jaw. His smooth control doesn't waver as he studies me. I try to shake the pain from my eyes, feeling tears overcome me.

It's her.

Fuck, fuck, fuck!

“She is an impulsive girl,” he mentions smoothly, his unaffected tone attempting to calm my feral breaths. “She lit that fire months ago as part of a bribe to keep her father from serving prison time. She does things without thinking.” He nods to the screen, the bio and details, and a message from the user: ManXY. Slip is in the system. “Can we get details on the buyer, Slip? Is he a District resident?”

Buyer.

I clench my teeth so hard I taste blood.

Slip muses. “No way to track the wallet, Boss. That’s the point of cryptocurrency. Near impossible. But if he logs on while I am, then I might be able to find his code and get into his computer that way.”

I thrust a shaky finger at Slip; if it were a knife, it would be in his eye. “Don’t fucking look at her.”

“Understood,” Slip states.

“Do what you have to do, Slip.” Clay turns to me while I boil from the inside out. Only half in the present. Half lost down the pit of images of Kaya, vulnerable and alone, in a hotel room while some dickhead tries to touch her. Clay speaks, but I barely hear him. “Why would she need a million dollars, Xander?”

Her words float into my head: *“I’m a feminist who doesn’t believe in the value you put on my own body.”*

A million dollars.

That’s the value you put on it.

“Fuck.” I can’t think straight, my heart aches, my hands convulse, and my mind is in a haze of violence, revenge, anything brutal enough to make my reality match the pain in my chest. The crust of sanity breaks around me as I read the hotel name, date, time, *fuck!* Kill them. I’ll kill him.

Time. How much time do we have? I stare at my watch, my hands quaking so hard the display is a blur. My heart is a fireball in my chest, blazing to burn everything inside me.

All my love.

All my will.

All of her and me.

Rabbits...

Clay grabs my face, so very Sicilian in his mannerisms, holding my cheeks to reach me and control. “Think. Rationally. Why would she do this,

Xander?”

“Her dad,” I blurt out, imagining myself beating her useless father to a bloody pulp. “She a fucking daddy’s girl.”

“Yes.” He nods. “And she’s prideful. Desperate to help her father. So—”

“Don’t talk to me about Kaya! I know Kaya!” I punch the words at him, but they are strained and unconvincing. X-rated photos on the computer beside me making them lies glowing on the screen. I have no idea who she is. *Do I?* What she is capable of. What she truly feels. She’s a fucking liar. “I know Kaya,” I say quietly.

He drops my face. “Why did Charles Young want you to see this? Just some immature rivalry? Something more?”

“I don’t fucking know.”

“I will send men to get her—”

“No!” I shake my head stiff and slow, anger like I have never felt before seizing my muscles. “No. She’s mine!”

“If she is yours, then she is under my protection. I will bring her to you, brothe—”

“No! For once in your goddamn life, Clay.” I growl, charging my voice to blister his ears. “Listen to me! *I* am going. I will take two men. That is it!”

Keep it together.

My gaze catches on my new rabbit tattoo, channelling any level of sanity, calm, rational thought, anything to prevent me from snapping every neck when I get there.

Everyone responsible.

Everyone who knew.

When I fucking didn’t! My pulse roars through my brain. *Goddamn it, Woman. Why?*

My self-control shatters, but I use all my will to hold Clay’s gaze, smooth my expression, and demand he let me take this job.

I continue, infusing my tone with the irrefutability of this demand. “I am going. Imagine this was Fawn. Who would handle that? Who would go get her?”

He lifts his chin, in a kind of acceptance. Though, he doesn’t like it. “No fighting. Use the men for that. They will report back to me. Not to you. If I am not happy, I will be right behind them. Do you understand?”

My molars grind harder. “Yes.”

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CHAPTER THIRTY

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kaya



NO!

I'm not doing that.

Fuck your peep show.

What was I thinking coming here?

What the fuck is wrong with me?

I rip the balaclava from my head, tossing it across the room towards him, the mask landing at his shoes. “No. I’m not doing that. I’m leaving!”

My back hackles rise when the door clicks behind me, erupting my resolve, a volcano of emotions spilling from me. I’m in danger. I try to grab my phone, but it’s in my jeans.

Tears spit from my eyes under immense pressure, pressure I hadn’t realised I was under. I throw my arms around my middle, hugging myself as slithers of nerves lace me in violent chills.

He’s not alone!

Someone walks in.

But I’m restricted by my jeans, unable to move fast, to turn, to run, while someone with heavy feet advances on me from behind. *Oh God.*

I drop to pull my knickers up, to protect myself, but I fall forward, spread open for the person behind me, dropping to my knees and then

hands. On all fours. Taking my weight, I whimper on the floor as my hard-fought stoicism crumbles into wails of despair. I just want to go home.

Bent and exposed, I wrestle with the denim restricting my movement. My breasts bounce around. A scorching flare of shame and anguish brands my skin. I hear footsteps close now, my body becoming a frantic, groaning vessel of desperation. Hands touch me. Dark reality creeps over my eyes, crawling into the blue irises, making them confused with what is close and far, my brain so utterly panicked that my sight plays tricks on me.

And I roll to my back to kick at the person touching me but hear, “*Baby, it’s me. You’re naked. Why are you naked?*”

Tears blur everything. The ominous shadow over me has Xander’s voice. I fling my arms around his shoulders, my mind accepting the comfort and security my body is desperate for, disappearing into *him*. Needing him.

Topaz-blue eyes.

Rubber and mint.

Baby. Baby. Baby.

But the roars of hysteria in my head won’t stop when they should. I’m safe now. It should stop. Safe with him. I can feel his hands squeezing my breasts—owning them. *Mine*.

Did he say it?

Think it.

Mine.

Am I hearing it?

“I think you should choke on my cock, you filthy slut. Then I am going to fill your dirty whore mouth with my cum and piss.” Ice slides into my lungs as I let go of his neck, lean back, and see—a balaclava.

“Baby, it’s me. You’re naked. Why are you naked?”

It was in my head. The words. The voice. The place... my place of resilience. He never said that. He’s not here.

It’s not Xander.

I made him up.

He didn't save me.

Hands enclose my narrow wrists, pinning them above my head to the carpet, an ache races through my underarms from the jerking motion. I buck.

“What’s wrong?” the man says, his voice still twisted and unnatural. “You were just holding me. Such a cock tease.”

Gyrating, I try to get away. Frantic, I glare through pools of despair to find a large figure looming above me. *Two men*. One on top of me, his knees bracketing mine apart while he unbuttons his jeans... blue *jeans*. I should remember that. *Details*. I should remember details.

The other man is pressing my wrists into the floor, the weight of him crushing bones. No details—an all-black figure behind a blur of tears. A shaking, menacing form that moves as I jerk around. As I buck. As I gyrate. All I can hear is laughter, the sound churns my stomach. Bile fills my mouth.

He didn't save me.

How could he?

He didn't know I needed saving.

The man’s cock is in his fist, hard and dripping, stabbing the air as he inches up my body to thrust it into my face.

Then a bang from the hallway shakes the room. It’s so loud, it could be just outside. Or a car backfiring. But the throaty snarl from an animal spurs the man on top of me to his feet, and the one behind me backwards along his arse.

“Shit,” one of them growls.

The other says, “What is that noise?”

And I recognise that voice but can’t place it. My senses are in shock—deafened by the drumming of my pulse and blinded by my tears.

I whisper, “Please, please, please, be the police. Please be the police.”

“The police?” the voice I recognise says, but his tone is forced—performed, even. “Fucking bitch!”

“Get your shit,” the other barks.

The two men rush around the room while someone, somewhere, is kicking doors open. That’s the noise. Someone is coming for them or me... *The police?*

Paralysed, despite the absence of their bodies, I stay on the floor as though they are holding me down, still crushing my bones with the heavy host of their eyes and weight.

A calamity of feet shuffle past my ears, rushed heavy shoes, and I’m still on the floor.

Get up! Get up!

I scream for my useless body to stand, to gain footing, straighten, to get *details*.

“Fuck!” That’s Xander’s voice.

The door is open.

A gunshot ricochets down the hall.

“Fuck. Follow them!”

Quick, heavy raps bellow past the open door, the sound like a crescendo that rushes into the distance. Only it doesn’t. The sound stops, and then heads towards me, a current of steps below a weighty body.

“Baby.”

He kneels on either side of my body, grips his shirt at the nape of his neck, and tugs it over his head. Pulling it down my naked torso, the seam long, hanging below my thighs, he covers me quickly.

He pulls me to his chest. “Did they touch you?” he spits out. “Did they fucking touch you?”

Rage rattles through him, the tension rolling up his muscles like a physical entity taking control. Within his deadly, desperate grip, I lose air and ache.

My arms are numb, but I hook them around his neck, inhaling rubber, man, mint—Xander. “They didn’t have time.”

He growls. “If they put their cocks inside my girl, I’m going to hurt them. I’m going to fucking beat the life from them, make a bloody puddle with their bodies.”

“Kaya!” Chloe’s voice finds me.

“Fuck!” Kenno’s follows.

Xander’s grip tightens protectively. The large, hot mass of muscles enveloping me, making it damn obvious no one is to come near us. To touch me. To talk.

“Stay back, guys,” I pant, the air roasting, radiating from the boiling rage within Xander.

“Back the fuck off!” he barks, grasping at me harder, his back steeling, his arms growing with the onset of his attack. Ready to lash out. “Get out!”

So, I let him know I’m here. Awake. Aware. I soothe him. “I’m okay. They didn’t touch me.”

“Get the fuck out!”

The intensity licking out from inside him is too much and just right. It’s forged in the flames of our promises to be together, to be honest, to be real, raw.

I lied to him.

I find the strength to survey the room from over his shoulder, seeing Chloe and Kenno walking hesitantly through the door. I meet Chloe’s eyes over Xander’s taut shoulder. Her lips twist in anguish, evidence that she finds leaving the scene—leaving me—tortuous.

I want to say, “Sorry I put you through this.” My eyes well up to relay the message. I did this. To them all. *God*. I whimper at all the pain I’ve caused.

And for my dad.

A man who cheats and lies.

A selfish bastard and shitty dad.

The door shuts.

Tears are in Xander's throat. The sound of them bubbling around the word, "Why?" He breaks. "Why?" The choked cry crashes past my ear, the sound cascading down my neck, slipping inside and causing a little crack down the centre of my heart. "Why, Baby? While I was falling in love with you, you were planning to fuck someone else!"

Oh. God. My heart twists. "I didn't plan— *God.* I didn't *plan* any of this. I just decided to do it and—" I implore him. "Please, it was before we fell in love, I swear, Baby. I swear—"

He rocks with me in his arms. "Why? You said I could keep you. You lied."

"We weren't together."

"Why?"

God, he's bordering on sobbing into my hair. The sound of him coming apart turns my blood to rapids in my veins. "I was here to cancel, I swear it. I swear!"

He stands with me in his arms, but suddenly tosses me to the mattress in a way that suggests he can't bear to hold me any longer... I bounce a few times, the absence of his embrace a message that carves and bleeds.

'No one believes a liar, Kaya.

—even when they are telling the truth.'

Dammit!

His nostrils flare. "Why are you naked then? Huh?" Gripping the back of his neck, he curses. "Fuck! How did that happen? When did you take your clothes off for them?"

And now that he stands before me, shaking and unsteady on his feet, I can see the tears streaming down his red face. There is nothing weak about this man, not even in this heart-breaking moment as he sobs. He's more

intimidating in his vulnerability, a careless utterance away from becoming totally rabid and wild.

Around his wrist, cling wrap is all bunched. *Did he get another tattoo? My rabbit?* “Baby, your wrist.”

“You’re mine!”

“I am.” My heart aches. “I swear it.” The pointless plea only triggers him to pace at the foot of the bed, burning a trail into the carpet with his angry gait.

“Tell me. I need to know why you’re naked. Tell me everything that happened. I need to know. Did you let that man fuck you? Did you let them pretend you chose them? When you really chose me?” He grips his forehead. “Get the images out of my head, Woman! You naked with the balaclava, showing your body. Tell me what fucking happe—”

“Okay, okay.”

He knows...

He knows about the sale.

How?

Shame and anguish war inside me. I slide to my knees, sitting on my heels, finding more strength in this position than on my arse. “I came in here. And he was in the corner. So, I told him I didn’t want to do this. That I don’t have what he wants—”

“Your virginity. You gave it to me.”

“Yes, Baby.” I soothe the panther inside him, the one ready to claw out. “I said I didn’t have my virginity. That I wanted to give him back his bitcoin and leave.”

“Why are you naked?”

“He said, ‘How do I know it’s you,’” I say the words, and Xander stops pacing midstride, staring ahead, too rigid to turn, too volatile to trust his muscles. I go on slowly, “He told me to take my clothes off.”

Xander shakes with restraint, vibrating with rage under the effort to stay still. “And you did.”

“I did.” I shuffle. “I didn’t want to. I just wanted it to be over. Then he asked me to do something I didn’t want to, so I said no and—”

“What!”—His voice pitches into a roar— “Did he ask?”

I sink back. “It doesn’t matter.”

His eyes cut to mine, the glare reaching through my lips, down my throat, and ripping the words up. “He asked me to show him the inside of my... he said *cunt*.”

The fierce growl that beats around the room catches my breath. He spins to the wall, thrusts his fist through the plaster and begins to beat the boards like a boxing bag. Dust flies around. The sound is feral.

White fragments embed in his bloody fists, dragging whimpers from my mouth.

I climb to my feet and wrap my arms around his middle from behind, not stupid enough to get in front of him when he is wild and out of control. “The staff will come. Xander!”

“I would have given you the damn money!” He continues to beat the wall, sob, and growl. “I will give you the damn money! A million dollars, right?”

God. I squeeze his pulsing core in an attempt to anchor him to me. “I don’t want it anymore. I fucked up. I swear, I tried to leave, but the other one came in. He pinned me down, and that’s when you got here. I was never going to go through with it. I swear.”

He stops.

Panting animalistically, he braces himself on the wall, glaring at the craterous holes painted crimson from his weeping fists. “I’m going to kill them.”

“No. We have to leave. The s—”

“No one is coming in here, Kaya.” He laughs, but it’s a horrible sound—lonely and pained. “I told them not to.”

And he’s a Butcher.

“Okay.”

“I’m going—” He grows within my banded arms, almost contracting, flexing to jolt me away, terrify me or— I won’t release him! Clinging to him. “Let me go, Woman. I need to get to my men. Make sure they caught the dead fucks.”

“I don’t want you fighting.”

His chest and abdomen are rock-hard. So fucking firm in all the places I’m soft. His large, thick muscles are like burning steel beneath my clutches.

“Use me.” I feel desperate—my heart racing, thrashing within my ribcage. He can’t fight. He can’t. “Don’t fight.”

“Not after what just happened.” He pants. “Don’t say that. You don’t know what you’re saying.”

“Your touch could never hurt me, Xander.”

It’s like a detonation of will. Flying around, he slams my chest against the wall, his large body following, crushing me to the plaster. My face presses alongside the craters, the paint curling like bloodied ribbons.

“You’re mine!” He runs a hand down my spine, my skin rolling beneath his caress. “This spine.” He licks the nape of my neck. “Your sweat.” Lifting his shirt over my bare arse, he slides his big hand between my legs, dipping two fingers inside me, dominating my clenching walls like he’s never done before. “This pussy is mine to open and explore. I won’t share your moans, your sweat. Nothing. Or I’ll leave a bloodied trail of dead fuckers everywhere we go.”

My hands flex around the wall.

“I’m keeping you to myself.”

He jerks his hand from inside me, smearing my juices over his lips. Fisting my hair, he jerks my head back, controlling my chin. “Taste yourself.” He crushes his mouth to mine, tongue sliding in possessively. His saliva mingles with my flavours, and they slide from his tongue.

My toes curl on the floor.

Frantically—feral with possessiveness—he rips his mouth away, drawing breathless pants from me.

We need this. Both of us. Just as wild. Just as angry. Just as unpredictable. When I’m wild with Xander, the uptight parts of me, the defensive parts, crack. Bare me.

The pressure of his need—his intensity—is *everything*. His need is my gravity. Giving myself to a man is not what I thought it would be. Not when his obsession is so potent. It should terrify me, but it doesn’t.

He’ll never cheat; I can see the truth in his topaz-blue eyes when they sail down my body like it’s his ocean. I feel it in his thrashing heart when he’s anxious I’ll slip through his grasping fingers. I own him.

He crushes me to the wall, holding me there with his shoulder to my back as he unbuttons his jeans. Letting them drop to his feet, he braces himself at my entrance. Without waiting, he thrusts into me from behind, drawing out and slamming back in again before the first yelp tumbles through my lips. I pulse against the wall under his relentless fucking.

With each drive, I yelp.

Full, empty, hard—*God*.

It’s painful.

It’s good.

“Mine,” he growls, covering my entire back and spine with his body, leaving me no way to manoeuvre.

Finding my hands flat on the wall, he feeds his fingers on either side of mine. Leans his weight on me and captures me. Fucks me with wrath his guide.

His feverish pace is too much, anxiously overstimulating—too deep, too angry, too good. Soon I’m shaking and crying, receiving his profoundly passionate thrusts—thrusts that claim.

“Mine!”

I come with a throaty cry. “Yes.”

“Say you’re sorry.”

Shaking from being pummelled against the wall, from my screaming orgasm, I groan, “I’m sorry.”

“You’ll tell me everything!”

“I promise!”

“You’ll marry me!”

“What?”

As the claws of his orgasm sink in, he pumps his warmth into me, coming hard, a long, guttural groan wrenched from his panting lips. The heavy heat of his breath blankets my neck. His hips keep bucking to drain every inch of fight from his trembling muscles.

My body is completely taken. Used. I lean against the wall, so utterly spent I nearly slide down it. But his words are on repeat in my mind: ‘*You’ll marry me!*’

It’s too much.

The entire night.

My stupidity.

His anguish.

Tears fill my eyes, gliding helplessly down my face as it all becomes too much to process.

“Baby.” He turns me around, possessing my throat, supporting the thrashing pulse within his grasp. He kisses the corner of my eye. “Baby, I fucking lost it. I’m so sorry.”

I cup the nape of his neck and hold his chin to my forehead, the sweat from his hair drips to my face, my tears meeting them on the trail. “You

forget, Hothead. I'll take you dirty. I'll take you clean. Just let me be the one to take you. All of you. The hard parts and the brutal ones. The vulnerable ones. I don't want Xander Butcher suited in stoicism."

Twenty minutes later, we are showered and emotionally drained. Neither of us are able to tackle the night, create closure or move forward. Not right now.

We just decide to stall.

I dig my phone out of my jeans and text Chloe.

Kaya:

I am so sorry!

Chloe:

Are you okay?! Fuck. You are killing me, girl. We have to leave but I need to know you're okay.

Kaya:

I'm okay, Chloe.

Chloe:

Kenno deserves a fucking blowjob after this. He's such a good guy.

Kaya:

Yes. He is. Dumb but good.

Chloe:

Dumb? You can talk.

Kaya:

I deserve that.

“The fuck are you texting?”

My gaze sweeps over to see Xander scowling at me with the still grace of a predator. So utterly beautiful, too. Freshly washed and clean, the bruising on his face healing with each passing day. I follow his drilling stare to my phone, my fingers braced on the display. He doesn't trust me.

“Chloe,” I say softly. “Want to see?”

His jaw pulses, his muscles threatening to break through his skin. “No. Yes. I don't want to have to, but I just nearly threw up when I saw you holding your phone. This isn't like me. I don't like how I'm mindlessly in love with you.”

I like it. “My passcode is 3310. You can look at my phone any time you want. No secrets.” It's the least I can do. I haven't earned his trust. I've destroyed it. If the situation were flipped, I'd be frenzied and anxious, too. “Just know... my world fades to you, Xander. I was going to cancel this today. I was never going to go through with it. And I was too scared of what you would do if I told you, Hothead. After the diagnosi—”

“Don't.” He stiffens. “Don't you dare take this from me, Woman. That's the cruellest thing you could ever do.”

“Take what?”

“I want to fucking protect you!” He stalks towards me, getting close enough for me to feel those flames flaring in his hot veins. “I need to fucking protect you”—his fist hits his chest— “with every beat of my goddamn heart. I would rather die than not protect you.”

My eyes sting. “Okay.” I nod.

We can protect each other.

I don't say the quiet thought aloud. I finally understand the silent truth of women when it comes to their men. To roles. To needing to be, well, needed. I could bust with pride and demand we share that role or I could let him have it. Knowing in my core, I'll be his rock. I don't need to say it. “Be that man in my life.”

His fingers entwine with mine, and we walk from the hotel room. “Let’s get the fuck out of here. I never want to see this hotel again. Stay close.”

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CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

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kaya



THEY GOT AWAY. ManXY and his partner. And I didn't see their faces; voices were contrived, the blur of events now muddled in a sea of anxious thoughts, self-loathing, and regret. Xander is the light at the end of the event. Everything else is cast in shadows.

Why didn't I get more details?

I tried, didn't I?

It's a damn haze.

So, they vanished.

The next twelve hours are strange, moving fast when Xander is inside me, then slow and restless when he is boxing out his rage. We barely speak a word. We're both stubborn arseholes, so the silence becomes a collective space where we welcomed our fatigue and sadness.

I don't push him.

I don't take it to heart... much.

This time, I let him brood. Like he asked of me that day when he kicked my door open to prove how easy it could be done. Though, he was punch-drunk that day. The volatile and impulsive behaviour of Xander is all I know.

And it matches me.

We are both messy.

He might be angry right now, but he still has that worshipful intent deep within blue flecks whenever his gaze sweeps over me. I haven't lost him.

The next morning, over his shoulder, I stare at the ceiling. Xander's body covers mine. Hard, sharp muscles press over my soft, curved figure in a deeply protective way.

His head is buried in my hair, hot breath cascading down my neck. And he's inside me, thickening in his early morning slumber as his consciousness gathers.

I feed my hands through his hair, the short dark strands soft and boyish while his body is anything but.

Coming to, he starts to rock against me, sliding in and out at a reverent pace. One I haven't experienced before. It's been fast, hard, me on top, bent over, against the wall, tied to the boxing bag, sitting on the washing machine. This, though, this sluggish, easy pace, is making love.

It's slow and clumsy, so I wrap my legs around his thighs to help guide his leisurely thrusting. The pressure on my core all night has kept me distracted, on the edge of arousal, wet against his pelvis, and ready.

I know when he's completely awake. His lips slide over to mine, his tongue dancing inside my mouth, his groans clashing with my moans.

Rolling, he grinds on me.

The perfect spot.

Right there...

I moan as he orders, "You are moving in."

What? Wrapped in the way he stimulates my clit and rubs my internal walls at once, I struggle to respond. My brain is lost in the motion between my thighs. He grabs my throat, his thumb in the centre, feeling every one of my swallows. "Don't argue with me about it either. I will take care of you. I will protect you." His thrusts get deeper and steady. The methodical rhythm is like a coiling wire, slowly collecting sensation into a ball in my core. "It

makes sense. Don't say it doesn't. You don't have a home. I have one that's too damn big and lonely."

I swallow thickly—he feels it on his thumb. "*And you don't trust me.*"

"I have to. I'll make myself."

"You haven't spoken to me in hours. Living with you is the first thing that needs to be said?" I blink at him. For a moment, the gravity of this discussion doesn't register. Innately, I want to argue, but the fight inside me is surrounded by love and a desperate need to show it to him.

I'm going to earn your trust, Xander.

Just watch me.

After all that, he still wants me. The dirty, gritty parts of me. Like he always did. He will bathe in those parts, and the clean, poised ones, too. I don't want to say no to him. Cut him off to spite the concept of a woman I tried so hard not to be— my mother. I was wrong. About her. About me. I want to say yes to him, 'Yes, I'd love that.'

"Okay, Hothead. I'll stay with you," I whisper into his kiss and my acceptance turns the needy petting into the kind that is capable of devouring our souls. Deep. Unwavering. Full of passion.

Full of love.

And love is messy. I don't love him messy by accident. I love him messy by choice. I want to hate him at times. Hate the shitty parts. I want to be intoxicated by him. An addict for the good parts. I want to scream about the aches and pains and cry into his kisses because love is flooding my soul.

I want it messy.

Within a few minutes, the precision of his deep drives, the motions of our mouths, the licking of our tongues, snaps that coil in my abdomen.

I arch my neck and curl my toes, the heavy pressure, *right there, so good*, throws me into an orgasm. He groans, feeling my pussy cling and massage his cock. The shakes take a hold of him, his muscles bunching to a steel-like density.

We come together, clutching at each other as though the world is trying to separate us, but we would rather lose limbs, sanity and air than let that happen.

As the sensation tightening our bodies dwindles, our kiss remains a boundless reconciliation against last night, our moans and groans straining with apologies and forgiveness, our breath exchanging in acceptance.

An endless time later, he pulls back, his thick, wet length sliding out from inside me. Anguish hits his gaze when I whimper at being emptied.

“Did they hurt you, Baby? Yesterday?” Bracing on his side, he reaches for my hand. He flips it over; a small bruise mars the surface of my wrist.

I don’t lie. I won’t lie to him again. “They pinned my hands down. I thought they were crushing my bones.”

He brings my hand to his lips, pressing a kiss to the bruise. “It’s not broken,” he says to the skin.

He’s up on his knees, straddling my thighs. “Where else did they touch you?” He’s naked, the long length of his body, damn near no body fat at all—stunning. He’s lethal and beautiful. And mine. “I want to know.”

I reach for my necklace, fiddling with the loops, wrestling with my need to protect him from the truth. “I’m going to tell you the truth. Always. But I need you to try to swallow the anger. For me.”

He nods.

“My breasts,” I admit quietly. “One of them squeezed me pretty hard. I’m okay, though. That’s the truth.”

Instead of losing his mind or perhaps hiding his anger in a jerk-like action, he dips down. He inspects my breasts with his adoring blue eyes then with the reverent touch of his tongue. Licking over the skin, he cups either side of the plush mounds, so they bunch around his face.

“I have to forgive you. Can’t not.” His breath is like steam on my soft flesh; I know he’s burying his anger in my chest. “Don’t break my heart

again.” He sucks my nipple into his mouth, devouring the pebble until it is flushed and hot. He moves to the next one.

“Never.”

And I mean it.

IT'S HOURS LATER, but we haven't left the bed. I'm on my side, hands tucked below my head, gazing at my messy lover as he sits on his phone with his spine to the headboard.

I stare at the tight lines across his forehead, the lush shape of his lips, and his square jaw that leads down to a thick neck. He's too pretty and too virile all at once.

Ugh.

His level of gorgeous is predatorial—welcoming and stunning, each feature perfect and easy on the eyes. Approachable. Endearing.

Come closer...

Then he bites.

And I like the way it feels.

Xander is texting someone, and I feel the need to understand his furrowed brow and tight lips.

I nudge him. “So, who are you texting?”

“Clay.” He doesn't look up from his phone. “He's looking for those fuckers. We'll find them, Baby. Don't worry.”

I sigh, wishing it all away. Then it hits me—*how did he know where I was?* Chloe, I presumed, but maybe not... “How did you know where I was?”

His jaw muscles pulse. A warning. “We got a tip-off.” His focus remains on the phone. “Until we know more, I'm not involving you, Woman.”

Right. ‘Cause I’m not involved already...

“Trust goes both ways,” he adds, flicking me a side-eye that’s undeniable. “You want me to trust you, Baby, start by trusting me.”

Fuck.

Fine.

Too soon, our isolation is broken by the sound of a masculine voice carrying through the door. “Is Cassidy fucking pregnant again? Why is Maxipad knocking down walls this time?”

Xander curses at his phone, dropping the handset to his lap. “I go weeks without seeing my brothers,” he says to me and himself, an amused sigh rushing from him. “Now they have me on a roster for check-ins. It’s not even fucking subtle.”

“They like you. Can’t see why.”

A wicked grin slides over his mischievous lips. “If you want to be cheeky with me, I’ll show you how cheeky I can be.”

“Oh, yeah? Try me, Butcher.”

He pounces on top of me, possessing my neck in his fist. His lips skate over mine as he says, “I’ll fuck your cheeky mouth, Woman. And when you try to swallow what I fill you with, I’ll squeeze your throat shut with my fist”—his fingers band tighter— “You’ll open your eyes and mouth in distress. And all my cum will leak down your cheeky face. Like that idea? Want to try *me*?”

My insides clench to be the woman that annoys him to this point, pleasures him to it. I fight against the airless sensation, saying, “Sounds like you have anger issues.” I swallow in his fist. “You should really see a doctor about that, Xander Butcher.”

He laughs—it’s a symphony to my heart. “I thought we weren’t joking about the CTE.”

I grin—airless but fighting. “CTE?”

Heavy feet move around outside the room. Xander closes his eyes, shaking his head in exasperation. “Fuckin’ babysitting their little brother. Better show them I’m okay.”

He releases my throat, and air gasps into my lungs. I rub the area, surprised at how the smallest amount of pressure can limit so much oxygen.

We get dressed, with my body drowning in his blue shirt. I’ll have to get some clothes— Or... all my clothes because I am moving in? The concept still seems hard to digest.

Heading into the carpeted hallway, I follow Xander up to the third storey, shocked to find it a construction site. The windows are open, the sun highlighting the plaster and dust particles that dance in the air.

Ahead of us, Bronson Butcher explores the new area, pushing the wheelchair for a stunning dark-haired woman appearing in her thirties.

How the hell did she get up here?

Did he carry her up the stairs? No.

It’s pretty obvious she’s related to Shoshanna with the dark hair, tanned skin, and amber-coloured eyes. They could be twins if their age matched.

Shoshanna—I now know is Bronson’s partner—is holding a chubby, blonde-haired toddler on her hip, rocking him back and forth in the way mothers do naturally to soothe. She knew about Xander’s condition; the physician called her Doctor Adel... So, she can help me.

I want to ask her questions and pick her brain, so I can be the best help for Xander as time progresses his disease. I’m not sure how to approach the topic or whether it would piss my hothead off. His pride will have to waiver on this one. I just want to be all about him. Everything he needs.

Bronson beams. “There he is!”

“You babysitting me, dickhead?” Xander gets straight to the point with a punch to his words.

Bronson’s cheeks dimple, making his six-foot-five tattooed body appear softer around its rugged edges. “*Man-sitting* you, my beautiful brother. And

yes. Plus, Stone misses his Uncle Xander.”

“Well, at least you’re fucking honest.”

Giving Shoshanna a kiss on the cheek and Stone one on the forehead, Xander moves around the dusty room quickly and then back to my side. It feels good to be so needed by him—*the feeling is mutual, Hothead*. “This is Kaya. An official introduction is needed, I think. No antics. Just behave.”

“Antics?” Bronson stares animatedly at Shoshanna, who just snorts her response. “I have no idea what you mean.”

Xander stares at him, a message clear in his blue gaze. “Like throwing her in the pool. Shit like you used to do to Cassidy. Don’t fucking go there.”

Bronson walks over to us, his boots raising more dust particles into the air. “I have matured somewhat since then, buddy. I have Stone, ya see. I’m a father now—”

Shoshanna burst into a fit of laughter, the husky cadence beating around the room, catching all of our attention. “Sorry,” she follows it up with, “That’s just the most untrue statement you’ve ever made, Nutcase.”

The toddler giggles the word, “Nutcase.”

“Don’t you start, my boy,” Bronson says to his son before holding his hand out for me to shake. “Nice to meet you *officially*, Scrapper.”

“Scrapper?”

Xander presses his shoulder to mine. “He saw footage of you wrestling for the case.”

I roll my eyes. “Oh. Right. My finest hour.” I accept Bronson’s hand, but he tugs me into a bear hug so powerful that I wheeze. Dropping me to the ground, he steps backwards.

“Wow.” I shake myself off. “That was a strong hug.”

Xander pulls me to his side. “Couldn’t help yourself, could you?” The smile tugging at his mouth indicates he only half means that.

“This ravishing creature is Akila.” Bronson directs my gaze to the brunette in the chair who hasn’t said anything. Her face is still. Like a

statue. Admittedly, I was trying not to look too closely because I'm awkward, wary, and I don't want to make anyone feel uncomfortable. I know that's wrong. But I just want to be respectful.

"Hi." That patronising voice people use when they are trying to be extra sweet slips through my lips. *God*, I despise that voice. Clearing my throat, I say in a more natural pitch, "I'm Kaya."

"She doesn't talk anymore," Shoshanna advises with the slightest hint of regret hiding in her tone. "You don't need to feel uncomfortable. I know a lot of people do. Akila is my sister, and she was in an accident many years ago. We don't know how much she understands."

"I'm so—" I go to say the basic thing everyone says: I'm so sorry. Like, it's something needing an apology. One that I can give... that convention never made sense to me. So, instead, I say, "That sucks."

Can I say sucks around a toddler?

Shit, too late.

"Yeah," Shoshanna agrees with a hint of a smile on her tanned lips. "It does suck. Thanks, Kaya." Her tone sounds refreshed by my choice of words.

Thank fuck.

Bronson gestures around the space, taking it all in. "We are going to need more houses to demo if he keeps this up."

"Who?" I ask, gazing between the two brothers.

"Max," Xander answers. "He's not a, ah... *talker*."

I chuckle. "Oh, yeah. I got that about him."

"Yeah. You'll learn. See, my beautiful big brother Clay will show you he loves you by trying to fix your problem even if you don't want him to. It's his way of showing you he cares. He has the power, and he'll wield it for you. But Max—" Bronson opens his arms wide, drawing our focus around the empty third floor—white plaster, brickwork exposed where walls once connected. "Leaves us messages, Scrapper. We have to interpret

the construction zone like reading tea leaves.” He points to a half-demolished wall. “See this wall? This says, ‘Chronic Traumatic Encet—’” He looks at Shoshanna. “Baby, help me out?”

“Encephalopathy.”

“Yep,” he nods. “It says, CTE *sucks*.”

Stone makes a raspberry around the word, “Sucks.”

I guess you can say ‘sucks’ around a toddler. Or maybe Bronson used it for the first time because I did. Now, I’ve taught Xander’s chubby nephew a word—*sucks*.

Bronson and Xander laugh in a way that feels reminiscent of their youth. I smile. Warmth moves through my stomach as their deep timbres pitch together.

And even in Max and Clay’s absence, there is a connection between the four brothers that can’t be measured or taught and stretches farther than proximity. It is intrinsic in their souls. A construct of who they are at the core, above a partner, lover, father, or friend—they are a Butcher Brother.

I feed my fingers through Xander’s, swamped with humility to be loved by him. To be forgiven by him. To be a small part of this family today, enough to see these powerful, dangerous men so raw, real, and odd—it’s beautiful.

Xander walks me to a different fractured wall.

Pointing, he says, “And that hole there say, ‘Dad, you gave us all you had at the time. We forgive you, old man.’” Sadness and happiness duelling in his voice. “Let’s move on now.”

I blink at the dusty cavity; Xander doesn’t bear a grudge against his dad. Not even today while Luca hides in his own guilt or regret or— I don’t know. Hides in pain.

My mind drifts to the way my sisters watched my mother and me through the glass door.

Was I the reason we didn’t bond?

Was it my attitude?

My expectations?

My grudge against Mum?

They stood beside my mum, while I was appalled by what I saw as weakness—as a bad role model.

You were blind, Kaya.

Immature, perhaps.

God, I feel so separated from past-Kaya now. This moment with the Butchers makes me want to mend my broken relationships with my siblings and try to connect on a level that matters. A small one, at least.

Like Xander and Bronson and the hole with a silent, dusty message of forgiveness for their dad... I want to appreciate everything my mum did or tried to do, because what else can I ask for but her best efforts? Nothing else is possible, so nothing else should be expected.

LATER THAT NIGHT, in his corner spa bath, we wash away the sweat we earned after hours of working on the third floor. Xander was right about his stamina; it's not only an account of our desire for each other, but his body is always on overdrive—revving. The third-storey renovation keeps him busy. I wonder if that was Max's plan or just a convenient result.

I lay my head back on his warm chest, though there is room for me to sit in my own corner, but why would I? The steaming water circles us, rippling as his hands reverently touch me below the water.

His palms are always roaming. I know this lethargic Xander. If he closes his eyes now, he'll fall into the deepest of sleep, having worked himself into a near coma upstairs. "Do you want the money?" he asks softly. "To get your useless dad out? I forgave mine, so, I can't judge you—"

“No,” I answer quickly. And I mean it. “I don’t want it. I realised yesterday that he deserve to be in there. He might have supported us financially, but he lied and cheated and never supported my mum *emotionally*. I’m done with him.”

“If you change your mind—”

“I won’t,” I say with strength. I desire only one thing now. *Xander*. “Last time we were in a bath together you asked me to tell you a secret,” I say, showing him where my focus is. “It’s your turn this time, Hothead. Your bath. Your secrets. I want them all.”

A deep breath moves through my spine as he inhales. “Okay. You remember what Bronson said about how Clay fixes problems? Even if we don’t want him to?”

I sway my hands just below the surface, watching them move, the water parting in beautiful waves. “Yeah.”

“He fixed a problem we had from childhood a few weeks ago...” His deep voice trails to ominous quiet.

I stop my hands. “And?”

“I think he played a part in my mum’s death.”

“What?” I spin in his lap. Searching the stunning blue depth of his eyes, not believing what I just heard, I seek out the truth within them. My gaze drops to his lips to watch them move around the statement that fell so easily through them. “What did you say, Baby?”

His brows slowly draw over a serious expression. “You remember what I said about the *Cosa Nostra* in the hospital? You know about my family—our business.”

“The whole city is corrupt, Xander. You don’t grow up in the District not knowing that. My family is no different. Only my mum... she’s innocent in it. Yours?”

“Definitely not innocent.”

“But wasn’t she his mother, too? What could she have done to warrant that? What—”

“She used to hurt me. *Us*,” he clarifies, the broken word *me* needing companionship. “She beat the crap out of us more accurately. Max and Bronson basically raised me. But when she wanted attention, she’d locked me in her wardrobe for weeks.” His voice becomes monotone, the empty sound prickling my spine. “I couldn’t move. Was so bored.”

My heart twists and falls.

He continues, “I told Clay only days before she overdosed. I just wanted to tell you. I’m not sure I care anymore, but there, I said it.”

I don’t know how to process this information. I feel like I *should* want to go to the police. That’s what I should want. But I’m not sure I care about this woman’s death. I don’t need confirmation of how it happened. *Do I? Does he?*

Does that make me a shitty person?

I muse. “Are you going to ask him?”

“I don’t think I want to know.” He pauses. “I don’t think I have to know anymore. I trust him.” He laughs, proudly. “Fuck. I said that? Yeah, I did. I guess I trust him.”

Months ago, before Xander and I first collided, his brother tied me up to interrogate me about that stupid fire... He let me go. I know who Clay Butcher is. I wasn’t afraid of him then, and— “I’m not afraid of your brother.”

“That’s good to hear.”

“But—” I try to feel something for this woman. It’s hard to find empathy when carving into my brain are images of Xander huddled in a wardrobe. No one to protect him from the monsters... I look at his tattoo. The one above his new rabbit. ‘*Monsters are made.*’ That’s where I feel weak. That’s where I ache. “I’m so sorry, Xander.”

“Hey,”—he runs his nose along mine— “you just said you’re sorry. I thought we didn’t say that. What do you have to be sorry for? You didn’t do anything.”

“I actually am sorry, though. I’m sorry I complained about my parents when...” I shake my head. “I feel so out of touch—”

“I didn’t tell you this to make you feel shitty. I told you this because I’m going to be with you. I want you to know me. The dirty, broken parts. The things that torment me. You should know before...” He grins softly, the curve sliding upward, crooked and annoying, and *ugh*. It’s both sad and happy, and he’s still too cute. “You think I don’t remember that I asked you to marry me, Woman?”

I drop my gaze to the bathwater between our bodies, not wanting him to see anything in my eyes like... *‘Yes. I remember. I would have said yes. Ask me again?’*

“Oh. Did you?” I hide my feelings in a tone of mockery. “I don’t remember. You might have to say it again.”

“Hey, that’s my trick.”

“Kidding. It was just one of those things,” I begin, deflecting, “A heat of the moment feel—”

“No. It wasn’t a heat of the moment feeling, but it was wrong—” My face drops, so he cups my cheeks, directing my gaze to his. His eyes whirl with intimacy, so hypnotising I get lost in them. “No, Baby, what I mean is that it was wrong because you deserve the big finish. The sweet, slow lead-up to the moment. Me down on one knee. So when you stage that important event with your Sylvanian rabbits, it’ll be picture-perfect. The perfect version.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

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xander



LYING ON MY BACK, staring blankly at the ceiling, the lifeless, yet stunning eyes of Shoshanna's sister drill into my mind. *I think about Akila...*

About her life.

What that might be like.

Restless, I leave Kaya asleep in my bed, grabbing my phone from the bedside drawer and ambling quietly downstairs to get myself a drink. Such a simple thing... What if I'm not able to do that simple thing for myself?

I can't be that man.

Sitting down at the kitchen table, I call my sister-in-law, Shoshanna. She's not a neurologist, but she's a damn good doctor who dedicates her life to working with people who are cognitively impaired.

As the phone rings, I swallow over a lump in my throat. I'm not an idiot. I want a life with Kaya, but I need to know what that means for her. I won't be taking this lightly or letting myself run out of time.

It's a quick fall. One minute, I could be fine, and the next, unable to make decisions for myself. And this isn't just about me. This is about her, too.

"Xan. How're you feeling?" Shoshanna's husky voice sails through the phone. "You okay? It's late."

“*Yeah.*” I breathe, nodding and slouching back into the dining room chair. “I’m alright. How’s Bron?”

“He’s better today. He’s better now that he spent time with you. He was devastated, Xan. I’m not sure I’ve seen him that... *lost*. Not since we were seventeen, anyway.”

“*Yeah.* I get that.” My pause stretches, so I click my tongue to add to the still. Shoshanna waits for me to speak and when I don’t, she sighs with knowing.

“Xan, what’s this about?”

“*Just...*” I pinch the bridge of my nose and massage up into my eyes—tired but anxious. “Be real with me, Shosh. What should I expect? What’s the future really look like for me and... for Kaya.”

I hear her exhale through the phone. “CTE is not a death sentence... *but...* it is a life sentence. You’ll probably develop a form of dementia—let’s just be honest. There is a very high possibility of that. You’ll slowly start to forget things. Your mind will lag. You’ll have cognitive issues—that’s a certainty.” She stops herself, and I grasp the phone harder. “But you’ll live, Xan, and you can have a great life... *together*. And if you’re healthy and careful, these things won’t be debilitating until much later on in life.”

“And if something happens...” I drop my hand from my forehead, the headache an ominous voice in itself. “Earlier?”

“What are you asking?”

“I need you to be the one.”

A shaky breath leaves her. “*Xan.*”

My brothers will do anything for me apart from letting me go... “You know,” I start, and I can’t stop. “You have been through it. I know you regret not letting Akila go when she was ready to. I know you regret it. *Please...* They won’t be able to make the call. You know me, sis. Make sure

they let me go. If I'm not me, make sure they let me go before I become..." My silence whispers her name—*Akila*.

The other end of the phone is quiet. The bombshell of my confession is raw and painful, and I hope I only have to say it this once. I hope she understands.

"Okay, Xan." Her voice is soft. "I heard you. I'll make sure we make the right decision for you."

We leave the conversation on that statement. It's all I needed to be said. I had to say it aloud while I am still capable. A small comfort fills me, knowing I'll live fast and hard or not at all.

Wandering back through the quiet house, my mind drifts down the corridor, followed by my eyes. Locking briefly on my dad's closed door, I don't hover. I frown and continue back to *her*.

Inside my room, I'm stilled by the sight flopped in innocence and vulnerability on my mattress.

A small naked body with her knee hitched to the side and the blanket bunched between her legs. Her pelvis is lifted by the material. A damn offering. Her pussy flashes at me below her soft, supple arse-cheeks. She took my cock twice last night. My need to burn the fuel inside my veins fucked her to fatigue.

I stare at her, my gaze sweeping heatedly over each smooth curve from her lush, long legs, to the two closed lips below her heart-shaped arse-cheeks. I drag my thumb along my lower lip as I drink in her lithe figure.

Fuck. Me.

Dark-caramel hair like angel's wings fanning out around her and down the track of her spine.

I stroll to the edge of the bed. I push my sweatpants down and fist my cock, squeezing until pain surges, warning me of the tight hold. I hiss and squeeze a bit harder. Standing over her, I start to jerk the long length, squeezing the tip and then drawing the skin down and up. Hard. Fast.

With one hand choking my cock, I use the other to slide my fingers over her; her ankle, her calve, her soft inner knee, and up her lush thighs.

Dark stems of pleasure creep in around my vision.

To not wake her, I gently cup her delta, apply pressure with my palm and groan as my cock starts to dribble over my hard stroking fist.

“*Fuck,*” I grunt, trying not to close my eyes as the pressure builds at my spine and grasps my ball to contractions. She fucked up yesterday. If she ever does that again, I’ll fucking die. She nearly fucking killed me this time... I’m not sharing her. I’m keeping her.

I drop my cock, the thick, aching appendage pulsing, needing more, while my possessiveness makes me want to prove something to her, to me.

Slowly, I prowl across the mattress, working my way up her body until I’m bracing myself with my hands on either side of her head. Looming over her delicate, fragile figure, I realise how easily I could do anything to her. With my strength, I could take anything. She couldn’t stop me.

I don’t want her this vulnerable with anyone else. She has to live with me from now on—*forever*. My breathing takes on a fierce edge. Her hair blows beneath the heavy panting. My cock leaks over her luscious arse.

As I dip down into her hair, I inhale her scent and groan as the smell of me and her hits my nose. I’ve always liked the scent of sex. It’s fucking primitive. In my cells. A need that isn’t civilised or tame. And right now, she smells like sex and my body wash—*mine*.

I drop to my elbows and notch my cock at her entrance, then manoeuvre her hitched knee down. I straighten her legs between my knees, lock them together, and slowly squeeze inside her in small, steady thrusts of my hips.

She moans in her slumber.

Half inside her tight pussy, I lap my tongue along her spine to the nape of her neck. Inching in more, I fight my goddamn need to fuck the pressure out. It builds to the point of pain. Hard thrusts will release me, leave me

loose, but instead, I work my cock inside her hole slowly, so she merely moans and wriggles in her deeply fatigued consciousness.

The pace becomes painful.

Dammit.

The pressure killing me...

A long, hard growl leaves my lips as it becomes too much, so I take a fist full of her silky burnt-caramel strands, tighten my shoulder muscles and arms in preparation and start to fuck her hard and fast.

She wakes up with a throaty cry, panic tightening her body and shuddering her breaths. *Panic* is good. I'm glad her body's innate reaction is shock.

"It's okay, Baby," I growl into her hair, pinning her body down and thrashing into her from behind. "Fucking *take* me. *God*, you take me so good. Fuck." I bite the words out, and her cries dwindle to whimpers, adrenaline and fear and pleasure all opposing in the sound. It turns me on even more. "This is it. You'll take me when I need. Promise me? Promise you'll tell me the truth. Stay by my side. Let me protect you." I hear the desperation in my voice, but I can't veil it. I want us raw. Honest. It's how I want to love her. And *God*, do I love her. I need her. She put herself in danger yesterday, and damn—"Promise me?"

Her nails claw at the sheets by her head, but her body relaxes and takes my drives, jerking up the mattress, but held in place by my fist in her hair.

"Yes," she moans, her pussy kneading at my cock as she comes apart. The tight grip of her muscles burst the pressure at my abdomen, detonating my orgasm through my thighs and core. As I come inside her, I growl against the shuddering intensity of filling her. Of my own cum around my cock. Of running out of room inside her so we both become messy and wet with my orgasm.

Dropping my head into her hair, I collapse, my weight pressing her beneath me as I ride my climax down. Through twitching muscles, I feel all

the tension and anxiety wash away on a wave of calm and contentment. She trusts me with her body. She trusts *me*. So, I'll fight to make myself trust her again. I'll *make* it happen.

I smile into her hair. "Are you okay, Baby?"

"Yes," she whispers, still panting. "Are you?"

Goddammit.

I love this woman.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

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kaya



THE ENSUING three days soar by in a blur of rebuilding rooms, painting cracks, healing conversations between my mum and my sisters, lunches with Stacey and her girlfriend, and random Butcher Brother drop-ins that have everything to do with *man-sitting*, but Xander and I don't mind.

At night, we spend hours sweating all over each other, fucking truth and trust into our relationship with bruising mouths and worshipful tongues.

We have ventured out for the first time today to purchase a poker table and some couches for the new entertainment and activity space.

I never pegged myself as a homemaker—I still don't. I always envisioned a future with dress suits, briefcases, business cards, and a personal assistant named Sharron. I would be running a company by the age of twenty-five like my dad—But it was never my dream.

My actions never proved to honour that ideal. Not even once. I refused to study. I always had, '*somewhere to be, someone to see, somewhere else to go.*' Studying bored me. And I refused to go straight to university; lecture halls seemed too conforming and orderly. I don't think that was ever for me.

So, while I have no intention of making a living as a designer or wifey, furniture shopping for the new extension is ridiculously fun. I have always liked spending money. And this is like staging Sylvanians... only larger and with fewer woodland creatures.

The exterior of the Butcher residence is modern with straight lines and large, rendered feature walls in white and red brick, so we went full-blown masculine and organic for his third-storey décor. With brown leather couches and dark grey walls, it's kind of moody but in a sexy way.

On our way out of the shopping complex, I detour to the ladies' room. I sit down to pee and think about what it might be like to 'make a home' with Xander Butcher.

One of our own.

It's a cute picture of perfection, akin to the one I grew up in, except this love and loyalty aren't a mere façade—it's the roots of the entire appearance.

Still, as pretty as the idea of nesting with Xander is, it doesn't seem to fit us. Quiet weekends... Movie dates... We are too... unsettled, unstable, and full of fire for that life.

We're the 'anywhere but here' people. Busy. Changing. I'm not sure the settled life will ever be right for people like Xander and me. Happiness will be found in our adventures.

"To the moon," I had said to him that day when he followed me with his car.

"Can I come?" he replied without thinking.

Yes, Xander.

Let's go to the moon.

Smiling, I leave the cubicle when a body meets mine, forcing my feet back into the small space. *Xander?* My gaze darts up the wall of thick muscles radiating angry heat.

No... the smell is all wrong.

My heart lurches when I see Grayson's eyes glaring down at me. Struck with adrenaline, I go to scream, but he cuts the sound off with a crushing kiss. My pulse roars in my ears. Lashing his tongue, he abuses my mouth.

His palm replaces his lips with a slap. He looks over his shoulder, dragging my focus to see Chuck walk into the cubicle and close the door with the three of us locked inside. *No*, his smirk, his hand on his groin, his erection—*Oh God*.

Tears build in my eyes.

They move in. Grayson presses his body to mine, squeezing a hysterical wail from me. The sound of it is masked by his hand, but my throat shudders with the plea. “You owe me, bitch! So, I’m going to fuck you against this stall. You’re going to love it. And you’re going to keep your mouth shut!”

I recognise the voice, the scent—it was him.

ManXY

“I have the money!” I cry into his palm. “We want to give it back—”

“We have money, you stupid cunt. I’m so sick of your bullshit. Your push and pull. Treat me like shit? Fuck you! I’m taking what you owe me. I’m going to make sure you can’t fit any more cum inside your little body today. Or...” He dips his head down and inhales me. My body shakes with fear. “Or we take turns with your boyfriend’s head. I heard through the grapevine that he’s moments away from drooling all over you instead of licking you.” He searches my face for the truth. His cock grows against me, his breath hot and nauseating on my neck. I look away, clenching my teeth.

He smiles, seeing the sadness I can’t hide. “I’m right, aren’t I? Xander Butcher is punch-drunk.”

“Don’t do this. I...” My voice trails to frightened silence. It’s no use pleading. He’s *‘The Taker’* now.

Through pooling eyes, I look over his shoulder at Chuck’s smirk as he adds, “What will it be, Kaya? Grayson gets what he’s owed. Or we take turns with Xander’s head? Though, if he’d been alone at the hotel like I wanted, then I would have loved to mash that brain of his. So, please,”—he leers— “choose to save yourself.”

Grayson's nose trails down my jaw, dipping into my hair again on a deep inhale. "Fuck. You used to smell like lollies and flowers, now you smell like him. I'll have to change that."

Chuck laughs. "We'll be quick."

Retail music plays through the speakers and people chatter as they pass the public toilet, but it's the sound of his pants unbuttoning that blisters my ears.

"I told you I wasn't gay, but I'll happily take this gun and ram it up your arses until you taste lead."

Xander.

Something clicks above us. A gun being cocked draws Grayson and Chuck's wide eyes upward. Mine follow.

A vision behind a coat of tears greets me. Xander holds a gun over the stall wall, his eyes pitch black and at odds with the mocking comment.

The brothers step backwards, raising their hands.

"You're a fucking dead man, Butcher," Chuck snarls. "You pull a gun on me? You die."

"Did they touch you?" Xander bites out, but his eyes are cold and dead on Chuck's face. Losing focus to anything else, feverish rage turns him to stone.

I breathe. I ball my hands into a fist and jab Chuck in the jaw, the pain from hitting his bone flares through me, but I use the fear in my veins to drive a second jab into Grayson's groin. He curls over.

I unlatch the stall door, rush out, and crash into Xander's warm, protective body. Hysterical but trying to hide it, I shake and tremble in his arms. The scent of safety and him and us envelops me as I bury my nose into his shirt.

He cups my cheeks, pushing me out to scrutinise my tears, my wobbly lip—my emotions. He wipes at my eyes. "Did. They. Touch. You?" The words come through a hiss.

I shake my head. The doctor painted a harrowing picture that day in the hospital, of Xander taking one more hit, and now I'm plummeting down a wormhole of images. A fight with Chuck. Just one pointed blow to the head.

And I lose my broken boy.

But I have to be honest. "*Baby*," I say, soothing him with my tone, swallowing the panic, but I can't seem to stop my hands from vibrating. "Grayson kissed me, but that is all." I grab his face, trying to hold his burning gaze on me. "That's all, Baby. Just a kiss."

"Just. A. Kiss," he mutters, the embers of pain in his eyes burning my heart. "*Just* a kiss. Every kiss is mine."

"*Baby*," Chuck mocks, stepping out.

Xander's eyes snap over my head, and the blood from my cheeks rushes down to my neck, a tangible sensation. "Ignore him, Xander. He's nothing."

Xander's jaw works. "What did you say to her?"

"N-nothing," Grayson stutters.

Chuck smirks, ready to stoke the flames below Xander's bubbling resolve. "That we wanted to fill the dirty whore up with cum. Your little slut was going to sell herself but fucked you instead. And Gray definitely deserves to fuck that hole for all the cunt licking she's received from him."

Xander snarls below his trained gaze—the look promises Chuck pain. He takes my hand and places the gun into it. It's harrowing. Slow motion. "Hold it up, Woman. Don't let these arseholes anywhere near you."

"I don't want it," I protest, terrified.

A blur of movement, the weight of the gun in my hand, and then Chuck and Xander are toe-toe in the bathroom, chest-to-chest. Two warriors facing off without rules. His eyes drive into Chuck's, lost in the fire and anger. "If I pass out," he says to me, his voice merciless. "Shoot them, Baby."

God. Stop this!

Xander doesn't wait this time, throwing his tight fist into Chuck's brow. I cry out as Grayson punches Xander in the back, barely moving him. I remember when I thought Luca Butcher could feel every abrasion drawn onto Xander's beautiful skin. Well, I can feel that hit in my heart, punching through the organ, mashing the soul we share in two.

I try to keep watch.

Knowing his true opponent is opposite him, Xander focuses on Chuck. I flinch when they start throwing head punches, both skilled fighters, ducking and dodging the incoming thrusts.

They circle each other.

Lunge.

My heart shuddered.

I lift the gun and point it at them. "Stop," I beg, needing this to end before he takes another hit to the head. "Stop! *Please, Baby.*"

I try to reach him inside his rage, but he's vanished within its dark, greedy depths. Their bodies become a blur of movements, of jabs and ducks, in front of my swimming eyes.

It's so fast.

Then it's not.

And the final hit happens in slow motion. Chuck's face twists cruelly. He lowers his body to thrust upwards, to jab Xander from below and use his legs for power, but Xander must anticipate the move. He jerks his head to the side. Chuck's fist coasts past Xander's ear. Xander grabs the arm over his shoulder and snaps it with a gruesome crack. Quickly, he thrusts his elbow into Chuck's mouth, caving in teeth.

The gun shakes in my grip.

A roar of pain drums inside the bathroom walls as Chuck drops to his knees, spilling blood like a fountain from his nose while he tries to hold his forearm that flops on his elbow socket. Bile rises in my throat.

Through wide eyes, I stare at Grayson as he falls to his brother's knees. Uncertain of what to do, he tries to lift Chuck's swinging forearm, like he's playing pin the tail on the donkey.

It's revolting.

Fear gets the better of Grayson, and he bolts from the bathroom. Xander takes an aggressive step towards Chuck, carnage a promise painted in Chuck's blood across his shirt, and reaches for the gun in my hand, retrieving it with ease.

"No!" I clutch at him. "*Please*, let's just go. You can't kill him here in the shopping centre, Xander. Think about this!"

Suddenly, a rush of men pushes into the restroom, making me shuffle to allow them space to fan out. They are all business; one talks into a wired earpiece: "We have them. People have seen. The shops are crowded... Yes, Boss."

I watch in shock. The other two men grab Chuck with little empathy for his howls of pain at being manhandled, the bloody pendulous limb swaying.

"Leave before anyone sees a Butcher near this scene," one of the men says to Xander, hinting at a connection. Familiarity in his tone.

One of Clay's men?

Were they following us?

Or them?

Growling, Xander tucks the gun down his jeans, grabs my hand—entwining our fingers—and drags me out of the bathroom.

As we rush from the shopping centre, I don't look back. Instead, my mind reels, throwing me into a vortex of flashing images and information.

Is this it?

Is it over?

The mess I caused?

I want it to end.

My insides twist into knots of despair as I shuffle this knowledge in my mind. It was Chuck. And Grayson. *ManXY*. And there is no way Clay Butcher will allow them to breathe District air now we know—they will be dead soon. At the bottom of Stormy River—or so the District whispers go. But the Youngs aren't a normal family either. Wealthy. Powerful in their own right. So, they might get desperate.

What will they do?

What will they do?

Out the front, we head towards Xander's white Jeep, parked across the road on the verge.

Around us, people chat and laugh in coffee shops, cars eat up the concrete, and a train rushes past the overhead bridge. It's busy.

Xander is burning my shoulder with intensity, dragging me away. "I need to check your body, Baby. In the car."

"They didn't—"

"I *need* to check."

Accepting, I nod, breathless now as his large, fast gait rushes my small feet along the road to the Jeep as though we are being chased, but we aren't. Chuck's arm is hanging off his elbow while he's hauled from the restroom by Clay's men—

Headlights hit me.

A car skids.

My pulse bursts out of my throat as a large black bonnet appears. Grayson behind the wheel and— I'm shoved to the side, hit the road hard. My mind spins.

What happened...

Where is...

I hear a thud that forces vomit up my neck, females scream, and my hand is empty again, clutching at nothing.

I push to my feet, disorientated; the sun is drilling across my eyes, flashing the scene. My gaze lands on an idling black car, then on Grayson as he is dragged from the vehicle and pushed to the concrete by more men in black suits.

I spin around, searching frantically for the missing part of me— Seeing him. Seeing flat on the road on his stomach, body strange, people around him, a quick puddle of blood already rushing down the roadside drain.

No.

No. No. No.

My legs set fire as I bolt to his side, my heart shattering in my chest, pieces of it like shrapnel, never to be placed back in the same order, forever floating in the emptiness of me.

I tear through people.

Dropping to my knees, I cry out, “Baby!” I touch his shoulder, his neck, his face. His words are in my head: *‘Put your hands on me, Woman.’* So, I grab him, pulling the weight of his torso into the protective cave of my lap. I cradle his head, smooth his hair, and burst inside out.

A rattling groan hisses from his throat, then, “*Clay.*” It’s so weak. “She hurts us, Clay.”

Then he gets heavier.

I grow weaker.

No.

Choked. Frantically, I search him for a sign of life, of noise, breath, pulse, nothing. Blood. Mouth open. Eyes shut. *Oh God. It’s too late.*

No, it’s not!

No, it’s not!

The crimson river from his skull coats my jeans, a messy blanket for us both to share as I shake with sobs.

“Baby, Baby, Xander! *Please, help me.*” *I don’t know what to do, Baby. Please wake up and tell me what to do.* “Help us!” I cry out to no one. To

everyone.

Help!

No one is helping...

“Get up,” I say weakly to him. “I need to tell you that I love you. I forgot to tell you. I forgot to say it. You have to hear it before... *God*, please, you should hear it before...”

‘Stay with me. Be the one to stay.’

My throat fills with tears, my eyes leaking them in long streams that mingle with the blood all over us. I can’t see anymore. Pools of despair overwhelm my sight, so I just cling to him. To my messy lover. To our messy love. “I’m staying, Hothead. I’m staying.”

Three of Clay’s men circle us, but they don’t pull him from me this time. People aren’t chatting in coffee shops anymore, cars idle on the concrete, and I rock my bleeding lover in my lap for all to see.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

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kaya



HOW MUCH BLOOD *do we have?*

I remember it's a lot.

But I was busy that day in anatomy.

I got new highlights—in caramel.

I couldn't stop looking at them.

The van moves slowly. My brain is submerged, senses sluggish as the ambulance navigates the best route to the hospital. It's really, really slow...

Quiet, too.

I thought it would be louder.

My heart isn't loud anymore.

It's a drone now—white noise.

In the movies, the ambulance always speeds through the streets, and cars honk and fly out of the way in chaotic formations. In the back of the wagon, the staff are rushed, emotions high, as they try to keep the patient alive.

It's not like that today.

Why aren't we speeding?

What do I do now?

Do I stay with him?

I need to stay with him.

I need to call Luca.

I don't have his number.

Clay, then?

No. I don't have his, either.

The sun makes my head drowsy and lethargic. The light that floods through the front windscreen bathing the wagon in a bright hue that seems wrong. It's so wrong to be so bright. Was it sunny when we left the shops? Or did the sun come out after the crash... It shouldn't be sunny. It shouldn't.

Glasses?

"I need glasses!"

A voice says, "She's in shock."

"You should lay down, Miss."

My mouth rolls as I say, "But I can't hold his hand if I lay down." My words slur.

Hold. His. Hand.

The meaning sags, then registers, forcing a quiet terror into my throat, daring my wide, still gaze to pan down to see his hand entwined with mine. It's heavy—his hand. There is a line of sun lying over his knuckles. I cover the line with my hand, but the ray just cuts to mine. He's here with me in the sun, but I'm completely alone.

"I need to text my mum."

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

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kaya



SLOWLY, my eyes flutter open, my vision climbing my mum's torso to her face, concern evident in her pursed lips and furrowed brows.

With my head on her lap, my body collapsed over three chairs in a row, my sides ache from the uneven surface. The rims of the plastic bucket seats cut into my thighs and waist. But Mum's fingers are in my hair, and that's nice. They slide through the long strands, bringing comfort and unconditional love with her fingertips.

I love you, Mum.

The sound of the hospital moves around me like a current, my limbs heavy from the effect of the Phenergan Mum gave me when she arrived. A simple drug. An antihistamine that puts me on my arse every damn time.

She was prepared.

That's what Mum's do.

In a daze, I roll to my side, to face the waiting room. Wanting to absorb some information, be alert and present, when I'm still numb, clinging to sensible thoughts. I look down at myself, seeing that at some point, I changed. My mum brought me clothes: a Gucci cardigan and my faded Armani jeans with distressed thighs.

Opposite me is a clock; it ticks past ten pm. Hospitals aren't designed for visitors at night. Lights are left on. Overhead announcements rouse. It

only offers the families rows of green plastic seating that are fixed to the floor and vending machines with snacks and coffee.

I blink at the men across from me, the fractures of my fatigued reality slowly snapping into place like broken bones mending themselves. It's painful. And I don't want to mend without him.

Across from me are Max Butcher and another man I don't know, who looks a little bit like Xander but has sandy-brown hair and bright green eyes glossy with emotion.

His half-brother, maybe?

I can't see Max's face. He is leaning forward, his forehead in his hands. The hugest man I've ever seen, cupping his head like he wants to rip the entire thing from his shoulders because the pain is too deep and too devastating.

I'm sorry I let you down, Max.

I should have looked after him.

It's my fault.

Would Chuck have come for us if not for the sale?

For the bitcoins still in Kenno's wallet?

Was it revenge? Pride? What was it?

The motivation?

Why?

"You're shaking, sweetheart." I look up at Mum, my mind filled with these questions, where my lips are so arid and useless the words don't reach them.

The man with the sandy-brown hair sighs, pain wrapped around his breath. "I'm Konnor, by the way," he utters hoarsely. "Xander's... half-brother. On our dad's side, thank fuck."

I smile stiffly, working my lips to introduce myself. "Kaya. Xander's girlfriend."

It's nice to say aloud.

Painful, too.

My eyes roam the spacious waiting room, finding Clay Butcher conversing with a trembling man in a white coat—a doctor. It must be scary. To be the man responsible for his brother’s life. Even with his back to me, Clay Butcher’s power electrifies the air. He could be an immortal in the way he moves—the authority he holds is in his posture, in his relaxed, unhurried movements, in the pristine suit—untouched.

Untouchable.

The untouchable Clay Butcher.

If he is here, then where is Chuck? And Grayson.

The men from earlier must have been his, so while I ponder this, I already know in my hollow stomach—Clay Butcher is the Don of *Cosa Nostra* and he fixes problems.

They have been *fixed*.

Clay turns to face me, his gaze meeting mine. Tears rise over my vision of Clay Butcher, eyes raw, bloodshot, and glassy. In so much pain. Somehow, murder from a man like him is a simpler feat to accept than his tears. Nothing is more terrifying than seeing a man like him on the brink of an utter meltdown. Losing Xander...

My lips wobble.

What do his tears mean?

Is his brother...

Is he already dead?

Was he?

The sound of heavy footsteps cut Clay’s stare to the hospital corridor. I follow his line of sight to Luca Butcher, who stops midstride under the arresting gaze of his eldest son.

He left them—left Xander. He looks strange, too; with his salt and pepper hair finger-racked and his shirt open at the collar where a tie would usually dangle. The stoic, controlled Luca Butcher looks wild and unkempt.

Not at all like the invulnerable man I thought he was, but on the cusp of ruin.

My lungs burn.

My mum's hands soothe.

I slide upward, sitting high. My movements stir Max from his tormented position, lifting his head, a gaze swollen with bubbling anger shoots over his shoulder. Konnor looks, too, more concerned than angry.

The three of us watch Butch approach Clay with heavy steps—the weight of every mistake bearing him down—and his bludgeoned heart is mere tatters on his unbuttoned sleeve.

He halts before his eldest son, the submission in his loose shoulders a message of how defeated he is.

What could he possibly say?

How can he explain another absence?

Luca swallows hard. “I couldn't decide on which tie to wear for the moment the doctor tells me that my boy is dead.”

Tears rush in twin rapids down my face.

Clay exhales a shaky breath. “You needed time.”

“He needed you!” Max barks from the seat, vibrating with restraint, his muscles flexing and convulsing against an angry need for violence.

Luca's nose flares with the effort to not burst into roaring tears. He stares at Max through the rising emotion. “Let me be here now, son. Don't send me away.”

God, the look on Max's face.

Max is on his feet, storming over to his father, fisting his shirt and getting an inch from his face. “Don't call me son! I have never been more disgusted to call myself a Butcher.”

The man opposite me curses, thrusting his hand through his hair. I cry harder; the pain is so palpable it's sucking the air from my lungs, and I can't breathe.

I watch through a moving pool of emotion.

Luca doesn't fight his son, holding his livid stare in a submissive pool of tears. "I've never been prouder to call *you* my son, Max."

"Don't do that," Max hisses. "Your words are worthless. Leave! We don't need you here."

Max releases him with a shove—wanting him far away—and stalks back to the seat opposite me, dropping down, showing the weakness of sorrow consuming his otherwise powerful muscles.

"Let me do one thing right!" Luca's voice soars across the waiting room, breaking the fuck apart. "For once in my goddamn life, let me do one thing right! I'll stay. I'll stay until the end. Until his final breath."

I hide my face behind my hands and sob into them, tears squeezing out defiantly. The feel of my mum's hand soothing my spine only wrenches more emotions from me, the safety she offers with her touch enabling me to really feel everything we might soon lose.

And I don't know what is worse: the waiting or the doctor's words.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

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THIRTY MINUTES LATER, the hairs on my arms rise as a man in a doctor's coat appears in front of Clay.

I leap to my feet but stay in the background as the other Butcher men, Max, Luca, and Konnor—crowd the doctor.

Far more interested in ducking past them all, rushing into the room that he just left, and climbing into bed with my broken lover. But I stay.

Fight the impulse in my legs.

I quickly look at the Butcher Boys. Konnor is beside Luca; his proximity seems almost supportive. His body is not tight with the same bitterness that twists at his brothers'.

While Max stands with his arms over his chest, a protective pose that contains all the emotion I saw earlier. Red eyes betray that stance. And Clay has his hands clasped in front of him, expectantly.

The doctor's greying brows are weaved, pensive. It's a serious expression, one that I want to pick apart. He's not scared... *So, Xander is alive.* He's not smiling... *So, it's not over yet? Can I read into this more—*

"Your brother has been stabilised."

I cover a gasp; the sound follows shaky, soundless sobs.

He's alive.

Stable.

He's stable.

Oh, God, thank you.

Mum is beside me with her hand on my shoulder. My back muscles won't stop jerking. Tears hurt as they build over raw, rough eyes, the salty water burning. A reminder of the many I have shed over the past two hours.

"And he's trying to wake up, so we have sedated him."

I drop my hands, surprised by this. He can't be. I saw him... I saw it. He's not all right. Dread finds a place in my stomach. "We need to operate as soon as Dr Matthews arrives. The theatre is being prepped right now. He has swelling on his brain..." His words trail to a muted drone.

One more knock to the head...

One more; he could lose his memory.

Brain damage. Or—

I blink. The conversation moves forward, as I fade into the background. I grip my mum's hand to ground myself, the sensation of being out of my body hard to calm.

Words keep pouring from the doctor, but the drone of my heart, the dread roaring through my abdomen, drowns most of them out. The others are listening, but I'm not sure what the doctor is saying. I try to understand.

He says, 'subdural haemorrhage.'

Then, 'intracranial pressure.'

Fuck. I wish I hadn't got highlights before anatomy class. *God,* I wish I hadn't spent the entire class staring at the new caramel strands.

But I didn't know you needed me to understand these things, Xander. Or I would have studied.

My mum squeezes my hand; I drop to the present through a hit of words and sounds. The conversation is clear again through the rousing sensation of my mum's fingers.

"The best course of action is that we operate with him under a sedative. So, he can still respond to us, and we can map his brain... Every brain is

different, and his is fragile. He is not in the clear yet. His injuries are severe.”

“I want you to be prepared for the possibility he won’t be himself after this. He may be different. We will have the theatre ready soon, so we are going to take him down now.”

“But he’ll live?” My voice places me in the conversation, the eyes landing on me cementing my presence. I am present. I can do this. “He’ll live.”

“Unless we have complications.”

“*God,*” I breathe.

“Call Bronson. I don’t care what he’s struggling with. We don’t have enough time for his demons today,” Clay orders Max who is thumbing his phone with the kind of aggression I imagine will soon be growled down the phone.

My feet work on their own, moving me towards the room where I feel a magnetic pull. Needing to see with my own eyes that the image brutally cleaved into my memory of my Xander Butcher bleeding from his skull is not the end of him or us. My stomach doesn’t believe it, not when the feel of his lifeless head still sits like a phantom weight in my hands.

This feels like torture.

A long goodbye.

It’s not a contronym.

Goodbye.

Pushing the door open, my gaze is arrested by the sight of him on his back with his eyes gently closed—relaxed, even. He’s asleep. Not dead.

Not dead, Kaya.

My throat clogs up for a moment of pause as my eyes roam my broken world: his newly shaven scalp, the bandages over his ear where the rivers of blood came from when I cradled him on the street, the hospital gown, the long tubes like plastic snakes rushing down his forearm.

That's all I get.

A peek at him.

Too quickly, the nurses are around him and his bed is being wheeled right past me and through the door.

I follow them slowly, drawn to him, stepping out into the long, white corridor that disappears through double doors.

"I love you, Hothead," I whisper.

And as they wheel him away from me, I stare at the bed with tear-clouded yearning. Unravelling. Hollow in a way that doesn't seem possible with all the blood and muscles and bones that are somehow helping me exist in this shaky body.

I watch him disappear through the doors.

And I don't know what I expected when I fell in love with Xander Butcher. Passionately intense. Intensely passionate. So, even if he breaks in that room, forgets me, forgets himself, I will never regret the month we spent being messy together.

I will never regret the hours we spent in volcanic emotion, being everything we were taught not to be. Being loud, overbearing, angry, opinionated, and rude.

Will never regret the bruises from his lovemaking that threw us both around, that flared our muscles, that burnt us from the inside out.

Never regret that in the aftermath of our explosive passion, his tongue would slide up my spine or his gaze would soothe my soul in adoring licks.

I will never regret him.

And me.

And when we chose each other.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

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kaya



THE FEELING of being empty continues as my weak, careless strides take me from the corridor to the seat beside my mum. I look at her eyes, heavy with sleepy weight. She is trying to keep them open for me, but the sluggish bat of her lashes shows she is losing her fight.

Absently, I return my gaze to the room full of Butcher men looking utterly destroyed. I touch the chain around my neck, the habit a comfort as I dissolve from the present. I imagine staging a scene with my Sylvanians.

The girl rabbit would walk into the hospital room, and the boy rabbit would be awake to help her through this moment—the moment when they need to cut into his brain in order to fix the problems inside. She would be staged sitting on the bed with him, facing each other.

“WHAT IF YOU FORGET ME?” The little rabbit girl would ask, and it wouldn’t be selfish. He would understand.

“How could I forget you, Baby?”

Tears of fear will fall. “Don’t.

“You’re in here.” He would beat his chest. “You’re in so deep. In every cell.”

She would whimper. “No.”

“I can't forget you.”

She can't find more words through the sobs. “No.”

He would cup her cheeks. Ground her. “What do you want to do when I wake up, Baby? Tell me where the Sylvanians are going first?”

She'd smile around her tears. “To the moon.”

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CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

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THE PHENERGAN HAS WORN OFF.

Xander has been in the theatre for one hour and fifteen minutes, and during that time, Mac picked Mum up; Chloe has come with a coffee and gone, but she'll be back to check on me; the Butcher men have left to find Bronson who is still AWOL; and I've refused to move from my chair in the waiting room outside his hospital room.

My feet are up on the chair, my arms form a protective band around my knees, and I squeeze them in tight.

I've been breathing, of that, I'm sure. Each inhale strains, waning from large shudders to quick shallow pulses, depending on the daydream my mind creates.

Stacey and Clay's fiancé—the blinged-out butterfly girl—joined me somewhere after Chloe left but before the Butcher Brothers did.

The three of us sit in a kind of triangle with two seats separating us, the distance allowing us privacy from each other. Isolation for our grief. It's awkward.

"I'm Fawn," Butterfly Girl says to me, twirling her long blonde hair around her finger, which is an odd habit for a society girl. We are taught to not fidget.

I half smile. "Kaya."

Her eyes shift around the room in time with her bouncing left leg.

Was she close to Xander?

How close?

“Jesus, I really wish Cassidy was here,” she says. “She always knows how to start a conversation and just... like, make things comfortable.”

Stacey stares ahead, her unfocused brown eyes a vortex of sorrow and sadness. But she adds, “It’s too late for her daughter. Kelly will be in bed.” Her voice is monotone.

“Yeah,” Fawn acknowledges, but still reaching, keen to spark an interaction. “I’ve got a lot to learn about kids.” She touches her lower stomach. “Seven months away.”

“And Stone, too. Shoshanna’s son... It’s too late,” Stacey states plainly, and the discomfort only thickens during these forced words.

Let’s not try.

Silence is nice.

We know him.

Not each other.

“You know Xander was the first person to ever be nice to me.” Fawn braves the topic, her eyes scanning us, hoping we will take the hook and open up. “Here, I mean. The first person here. In this part of town.”

Stacey blinks into the distance. “That sounds like him.”

It does.

Fawn’s leg stops bouncing. “He’s really wise.”

He is.

“He’s always been that way,” Stacey adds, still detached, her armour held together by the distance she places between us. I understand that.

She has this long past with him...

Finally, I force my mouth open and say, “And intense.”

“Yeah. Super intense,” Fawn agrees. “Tell us about him, Stacey. How long have you known him?”

She asked Stacey.

Of course, she did.

I have a month...

Don't tell me more.

I can't handle it.

Knowing I may never have stories, memories from months and years to draw on and—

On a deep exhale, she leans back into the chair. Slowly, she blinks over at us. My eyelids mimic hers, wrestling with the burning need to cry even more.

Don't cry.

Not again.

I want to twist to face her, want to listen to everything she shares, but if I do, I'll fucking unravel. They don't know *my* Xander. The one that shares a soul with me, that is a rabbit *for me*, a contronym like me, and a hothead—and mine. They don't know him.

"We met his first day of high school," she begins. "His first hour, actually. I was held back. I was also born at the end of the year so I'm nearly two years older than him." She swallows thickly, and I look at her.

Quietly, I want more. Want it all. What was he wearing? Did he have a dark floppy fringe? Yes. I think he did. Wishing the memory was mine and Xander's and we met in high school. High school sweethearts. Kaya and Xander. I would own every one of his kisses and he would have all of mine... all the perfect scenes.

She draws me from my fairy-tale when she says, "We were in class. Doing the dumb introduction thing, the teacher asked us to say our name and a favourite quote. I said, 'Stacey Grange, and you attract what you are, not what you want.' I wanted to get it all over with, but Xander's hand shot up. And he said to me, 'What are you?' Everyone cracked up laughing, but he didn't mean it as a joke. He was so serious. He stared at me like he

needed the answer desperately. So, I said, 'I don't know.' I couldn't believe this kid. Only 12-years-old. Just so intense. So pensive. He said, 'Yeah, me neither. So how can we attract what we want?'"

A smile pulls across my lips as tears burn a track down my face. That is so my hothead.

They do know him.

I can picture him...

The floppy fringe.

The crooked smile.

Intensely passionate.

Passionately intense.

Stacey wipes at her eyes. "I just couldn't shake him after that. I didn't want to. He had the purest heart and darkest journey. And when we were in high school, we were inseparable. I've been busy, ya know? I haven't been there for him... I've been with my girlfriend, Flick. And just life. Work gets in the way—" Her voice cracks open on the word *way*. "It doesn't mean I can live without him, ya know? I just— Not sure what my life looks like without him on speed dial."

Fawn's lower lip wobbles. "He's going to be okay."

"His mind is my favourite thing about him," Stacey says, her voice a solemn cadence, and I can't cope.

Can't listen anymore.

I jump to my feet, needing space, a ticket to the moon, to him, just... away. Unbidden jealousy stabs at my insides. "I have to get something." I don't explain. Can't.

My legs tremble as I stride away. I don't look back, but my skin prickles under their gaze. It's warm. Like Xander.

I head straight through the sliding doors, lengthening my stride, needing to get my case that holds all my critters and sets. *Desperate* to hold two rabbits in my palm.

Clutch them.
Together.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

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kaya



IT'S BEEN four hours and twenty-nine minutes since Xander was wheeled away from me, and I'm thankful the nurses and doctors let me occupy my time with this... plan.

It won't work.

If he forgets, he forgets.

I never will.

"I feel like I don't even know you," Chloe says, scrutinising the Sylvanian sets laid out on the thirty-centimetre-deep ledge that spans the entire length of the hospital room's window. The moon isn't on this side of the building, but the stars create a glittering backdrop. The perfect stage for my critter creations.

"They are cute," the blonde nurse says, just popping her head in to check we aren't doing anything weird...er than what we are actually doing.

"I like them," Fawn agrees from the doorway, not stepping inside, while Stacey has avoided the room entirely. She is happier in her isolation, clutching her coffee and flipping pages of a magazine faster than she can read them. She's waiting for the Butcher Boys, staying here as a kind of scout, I imagine, in case the doctor comes out with news.

Chloe lifts a small bottle of red wine from set one—the night he forgot—the piece no bigger than her fingernail.

“You have been doing this for... how long?”

“Pretty much since I can remember,” I admit, twisting the miniature bathtub until it faces the perfect angle, away from the window, the foam balls inside emulating bubbles.

“*Right.*” She curls her nose and lies through her teeth. “Cool. They’re cool. I get it.”

I crook a brow at her. “They aren’t cool.”

“Thank *God!*” She exhales hard, a laugh of ridicule riding her breath. “They aren’t. They really aren’t. This might be the most uncool thing I have ever seen anyone do... *ever.*”

“I know,” I admit, but—

“WHICH ONE WOULD I BE? *If you ever deem me important enough, which Sylvanian would I be?*”

“*I don’t have a panther. So maybe a wolf or a fox.*”

“*What are you?*”

“*I’m a rabbit.*”

“*Well, then I wanna be a rabbit, too.*”

THE MEMORY of Xander wanting to be a part of this world spurs me on to complete my set for the entire hospital to see. The Butcher Boys. Luca. I don’t care. It’s him and me. We are rabbits, and these are our scenes.

Finished with the laundry setup, I step back and take in the five meticulously staged sections. Luckily, my obsession with these toys means I have entire houses, décor, cutlery, and all, for my families; it wasn’t hard to find different items to display our memories.

The first time we met.

The trampoline.

The motel chain.

The bathtub.

The washing machine.

He won't forget...

"What is this one?" she asks, pointing her finger at the little laundry room display. "How is doing laundry romantic?"

My heart warms, the sensation spreading the length of my body. "That's when he said he was keeping me."

"Keeping you?" She presses two shellac-embellished fingers between her brows, massaging. She is so tired. I can see it in the shadows below her eyes, but she can't sleep. Not when I'm here. She really is my best friend. "*Fuck*. Love is so dumb. I never want to feel it. Speaking of *not* falling in love, I have to go back to Kenno's. I left him in bed for this. And he's still pissed at you, but we are working on it with me sitting on his face."

I roll my necklace against my chest, eyes still trained on the windowsill, to the first thing Xander will see when he wakes up. When he wakes up perfectly fine or... I'll have them there to help. To jolt his memory or... laugh at. I'll take any of the above as long as he is breathing and... *him*. "Kenno is one million dollars richer now, so he—"

"No." She ambles towards the door, her purse hanging over her shoulder, bumping her hip against her slow gait. "He donated the money."

Shocked, I turn to look at her. "What?"

"Yeah." She grabs the hospital door. "The site is closed. And so he just donated it to, like, a charity for domestic violence or something." A smile twitches at the corner of her lips, betraying her feigned indifference to Kenno. Rolling her eyes, she adds, "Guess he's kind of okay."

I smile a little at that. "Love is so dumb."

She is back to Chloe, pretending to have walls made of diamonds and confidence as potent as Intense by Gucci. "Whatever. Thanks for insisting I see"—She waves at the windowsill, overly projecting judgement that she

only half feels— “all of this weirdness. I’m so glad you felt the need to share it with me at, like, four in the morning.”

“I wanted you to see it because I love you.”

“Yeah, and as I said, love is dumb.” She leans in to kiss me on the crown and leaves, but not before peering over her shoulder to shake her head through a smile. “So weird.”

As Chloe turns the corner, the raps of heavy, authoritarian shoes pulse down the hospital corridor like a forewarning to the staff that the Butcher men are back.

I watch Max, Clay, and Luca pass the room, a blur of black and denim, before suddenly blocking the corridor is Bronson Butcher, who halts in the open hospital room doorway.

I'm met with huge glowing turquoise-coloured eyes, red-lined, swollen and completely unhinged. And his head... He's bald—a shaved scalp to match his brother's. If I wasn't still empty inside, I'm sure the ache in my chest would be my heart writhing in pain. I've never been a part of anything so sad, so devastating—this kind of anguish is a thing of nightmares.

I don't know what to say to him as he surveys the room, his jaw muscles threatening to bust through his skin. My eyebrows lift in surprise but not in confusion. He's not okay. None of us are.

Luca still doesn't have a tie.

Clay has tears in his eyes.

Bronson shaved his head.

Max wants to rip his off.

And I'm staging Sylvanians.

Bronson walks to me—six-foot-five inches of tattoos and dangerous energy—and drops to his knees at my feet. Shocking the hell out of me, throwing my pulse up my neck, I lean backwards on instinct as he gets close, forcing intimacy. Wild blue-green eyes patterned in red marble stare directly into mine with a message.

I hold my breath as he says, “I like this space. The dolls. I like it all. And I like you.”

I nod, muted by shock.

“Will you give him this?” He stuffs a letter into my fist. “If I’m not here when he wakes up or if I can’t—” His pause has ominous meaning. “If I’m not safe to be around when he wakes up, please give him this, *from me*.”

My voice is small. “Why wouldn’t it be safe?”

“I’m not safe.” His eyes are so wild—*explosive*. “Not right now. Read it. If you want. You’ll understand better.”

I slowly nod, fighting my body’s response to be intimidated—fuck that—*down-right* terrified of the volatility sparking in Bronson’s flaming blue-green gaze. “I’ll give it to him.”

I close my hand around the pages.

“Read it,” he states again.

“Okay,” I accept.

When he rises to his full height, releasing me from the arresting state he caused, I crane my neck to watch him. Sad. Slow. He disappears through the door like his body is acting on one impulse while his mind is set on another.

Fuck.

CHAPTER FORTY

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bronson's letter

HEY LITTLE BUDDY,

Firstly, everything is going to be okay. I promise.

And you're reading this, so fucking ey, you got through surgery with your literacy intact. I knew you would—see, that's a damn lie. I didn't know. I even prayed on it. And I think that's when you know you're really shit scared, more shit scared than you've ever been before, when you pray to a God you don't believe in.

So, that leads me to the point of this letter, because you're gonna be okay, but you're gonna have a badarse headache and a few screws rattling around that beautiful head of yours. What you need to do is this: talk about it. Tell us what's happening.

Because, I should have told you so many times, buddy. I should have told you before today. And I'm doing it now because I want your words. I want you to talk about it with me. Don't be like me... Don't keep it in your head, beautiful brother. When those demons come, talk about them. I should have. 'Cause, I'm not right in the head, but you already know that. One day, I was fine and the next, I couldn't stop the laughter in my mind. I'm sorry I never talked about it with you. I really should have. When it hurts too much, the laughter is hysterical.

The laughing starts whenever things get tough. I heard it when Shoshanna left, when Cassidy was attacked, when Max was locked away, and I heard it the moment that doctor told my baby brother he might lose his mind. You wanna know which was the loudest? That last one, buddy. That. Fucking. Last. One.

‘Cause, you’re the light of my life, beautiful brother. You’re the thing that kept Maxipad and me from becoming inhuman bastards. We didn’t keep you alive—you kept us alive. You are our kid brother. You’re our kid. Our first love was with you, buddy, when we saw you in that bassinet all alone. We sat on the floor beside it and played with our Transformers. We ate dinner there. We slept there. We rocked you when you cried. We kissed you goodnight every damn night. Even Max did. Don’t fucking laugh, buddy. It’s true. He loves you.

And I don’t want this for you.

It’s hard to cope with mental illness. You’re meant to trust your mind, but, buddy, now I need you to trust your gut. And... your girl.

Don’t be stubborn. I know you can be. You might feel stoned. You might feel drunk. Remember, your brain is not always right, but that doesn’t change who you are inside. You’re there. I’m here. When I’m lost, I see Bronson in Shoshanna’s eyes, and you’ll see Xander in Kaya’s. When you can’t feel him, look into her eyes. He’s in there. I promise. I promise. You’ll find him. Be patient with yourself, and don’t expect too much.

You’re going to be okay.

You’re going to be okay.

You’re going to be okay.

I promise.

-Your brother always,

Bronson

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

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kaya



FOR HOURS, we dwell in the ominous current of our pained emotions, but when the wives and children arrive, the energy shifts for them—mellows to the undeniable sadness none of us can stifle.

It's strange to have Cassidy's daughter, Kelly, and Stone interacting and giggling with ignorant bliss. Fatigue builds in my forehead and around my eyes. I wish for sleep. For innocence. For carefree days. I envy them as they play on a picnic rug that Cassidy laid out between our green chairs. Fresh-faced. Unaware.

Fawn is sitting there, too, cross-legged and speaking quietly with Kelly and Stone about fairies.

"They grant wishes," Fawn whispers.

"I wish for Uncle Xander to get better..." Kelly pauses. "And for five cookies after dinner."

"Those are good wishes," Fawn agrees gently.

To the right of me, Shoshanna sits with her hand in Bronson's lap, her fingers through his. He stares at their weaved fingers, never looking up. His letter is burning a hole in my jeans... I wonder if the words are on repeat in his mind.

You're going to be okay.

You're going to be okay.

You're going to be okay.

Across from them, Cassidy is tucked into Max's side, Stacey stares at the same magazine she has been lost in since she arrived, Konnor and his girlfriend, Blesk, share headphones, and Clay and Luca are arrowed to the corridor as though by plain Butcher-will, they can make Dr Matthews appear.

"Nonnu." Kelly bounds to her feet. Welcomed immediately by Luca Butcher's arms, she slides onto his lap. "Don't be sad." She cuddles his neck, and he sighs into her hold. "I gave Uncle Xander my wish."

Stone's high-pitched giggle bounces around the waiting room. And if I weren't so selfish, I would show him the Sylvanian scenes I set up in his uncle's room, but I don't want him to move anything in case... Well, Xander might need the reminder of when we fell in love and...

All the other moments, too.

The clock circles slowly.

When Dr Matthews pushes through the double doors that lead to the theatre, it has been six hours and thirty-eight minutes since the surgery began.

His strides are fast and confident, his hands working on rectifying his scrubs and stethoscope.

Bronson doesn't move, except for his eyes that drag upwards from his lap. Max, Clay, and Luca are on their feet before Matthews stops walking, meeting him in the corridor, expectancy clouding them.

I can't breathe.

Somehow, I manage to stand on shaky legs and follow them, halting just behind but close enough to hear every word, watch every gesture and analyse every tell.

Ready.

I'm ready.

For anything.

Good.

Bad.

I'll stay with you, Hothead.

"We believe the surgery was a success."

I nearly collapse as my heart begins to pump again, wild and convulsive, as if it had been stalling all this time, hardly servicing my body.

"The bleeding has been controlled, the pressure has been managed, and he was responding to our instructions while we had him under mild sedation."

The Butcher men all exhale.

"This doesn't mean he is the same Xander, but it does mean he is alive and responding well and now, he's groggy, but he made it very clear that he wants to see *'his woman.'*"

I inhale fast.

What?

Me?

He knows me?

The emptiness in my cavernous body floods with relief, all the blood and bones and muscles working again in a way I can feel and rely on. I feel alive again.

The Butcher men stare back, their shoulders parting to allow a direct run between me and Dr Matthews, who, last time, told me to get down from Xander's bed and leave. My heart skids to a stop, then levels out.

"That's you, I presume?" he says to me, and I blink at him, still lightheaded. "He wants to see you first without anyone else." Matthews smiles, then risks Clay's attention, adding, "Patient's orders, Mr Butcher."

"I'm Kaya," I say stupidly.

"Well, Kaya," Matthews acknowledges me kindly, "I'll collect you once he's in his room. He's tired. I'm not sure how long he'll be conscious, but

he wants you. We will have a bed, we call a cot, in there for you, too. On the side. You can stay with him while he recovers.”

I nod fast as if to show how eager I am, how well-behaved I’ll be, just a stupid nodding mess of need and appreciation. The bed is for me. I’m the one who gets to stay.

For a moment, the old Kaya considers rushing to the restroom to fix her hair or cloak herself in perfume or— I remember he likes me messy just as much as he likes me poised, and I don’t want to be clean without him.

So, I wait and wait. It might be an hour or two, but I wait. And when Matthews appears again, I’m on my feet, trailing him towards Xander’s room.

My stride is fast, ready to get there, for this to end, but the unknown causes my palms to sweat and my heart to thump between my ears.

Rounding the doorframe, I’m struck speechless by the vision of him staring at the windowsill—at the Sylvanians—with tears in his eyes. There is no mistaking his fatigue, the haze around him evident in the slow swaying of his head from side to side and the distant look in his striking blue eyes. I swallow over a lump in my throat.

My hothead.

Slowly, I approach him. “Baby...” The low utterance falls from my lips like a desperate plea, a gush carrying unrelenting emotion and significance.

His gaze rolls to mine, and I whimper under his tangible attention, swept up in the brutal beauty of this man. Everything inside me vibrates. Even in this state, he’s the same, tragically stunning, a devastating vision of a man composed of both violence and charm.

He has machines hooked up to him, tubes and cords covering his body. The sheets are pulled up high to keep him warm. On the left side of his scalp is a drain filled with red fluid. It doesn’t bother me at all. That’s my hothead.

“Baby,” he murmurs like his jaw is too heavy to work, his voice weak, leaking from his lips. The sound burrows right into my chest, but I know it’s just for now.

His fragility is not forever.

He’ll be strong again.

Not forever, Kaya.

The shaking, the tremors, the vague expression, it’s all to be expected. He’s alive. That’s what matters.

Without a second more, I climb onto the bed and gently tuck myself beside him, careful not to tangle in the tubes. I wrap my leg over his, not able to connect us further without hurting him. Miraculously, more tears spill from my eyes.

He sighs. “My head hurts.”

I almost laugh, ‘cause... *Of course it does, Hothead.* I don’t know what to say. Words halt around the tears. It feels like it’s been years. But, in reality, it’s been less than a day. It feels like I’ve been dragged to Hell and back, but I’ve hardly left the hospital. I feel...

I just grip his hand.

“I’m so sorry,” he tries to speak, but it’s slurred and lazy, the end of each word trailing off with fatigue and confusion.

A sob hiccups from me. “I love you, Xander.”

His hand squeezes mine, reassuring authority in it, but not with the same strength he usually holds. He winces. “I heard it. I heard you. I knew. I know.”

God.

I cry quietly into his side. “Are you in pain?”

“My head...” is all he says, the words dwindling to a long, deep exhale. Then he’s heavier on the mattress, his hand is limp in mine, but his breath... is strong, intense, passionate—fighting.

He sleeps.

And I stay.

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CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

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xander



Three days later

“CLAY. SHE HURTS US, CLAY.”

“Get up. I need to tell you that I love you. I forgot to tell you. I forgot to say it. You have to hear it before... God, please, you should hear it before...”

I hear you.

I love you, too, Baby.

So much.

Don't cry, Kaya.

I'm going to be okay.

Please, Baby.

Don't cry.

THE PAST THREE days sit in my mind like murky liquid, sloshing around and mingling together—nothing is linear, nothing is clear.

I'm on slow mode. My brothers walk in and then leave just as fast, the nurse, too, a blur—fast-paced energy. That's usually me. Fast. Hot. Not right now, though.

But I know things: I know that I've had surgery on my brain; that Kaya set up Sylvanians in my hospital room; that my brothers and Stace have visited me twice a day, more, perhaps, maybe they never actually leave; that my dad is back; that Bronson wrote me a letter; and that Kaya stayed. She's always here, for all the minutes I'm awake, for the ones when I'm unconscious. I feel her hand in mine every time I'm lucid. I'm never alone.

Kaya stands beside me as my mind swims through a foggy channel, the sun from the window creating a silver halo around her silhouette. It pulls me to her. I blink. She's my woman, and I failed her. I said I was going to protect her, but she's always gathering the pieces of me together.

I fight the murkiness in my mind and use the image of her to find my centre. The feeling of my toes. Of my breath. It's clear. The present. The room. I can see the flowers, the machines, and the cream-coloured furniture—minimalistic and clinical.

Be present, Xander.

I remember a conversation from yesterday; the nurses said that this would happen. The painkillers and anti-inflammatories were lowered late last night.

So today, my mind seems awake. I'm no longer trying to understanding simple tasks and experience, but instead, I have questions about my environment. Concerns. Emotions. More of *me* in my perception.

This is good.

I feel real.

With a groan, I push upward until I sit with my back to the elevated bed. Kaya jumps to press the button, inclining the bed further.

"Baby," I mouth the word. *Water.* I grab a cup from the tray, down the liquid and swirl it around my arid gums and stiff tongue.

My gaze catches on the first scene on the windowsill, having been freaking the fuck out that I forgot it. That is us. In a bar. Drinking wine. I don't remember that, but did I remember it before the accident? Or is that the time I was blackout drunk? "Tell me about scene one. Should I know it?" My voice shudders; I fucking hate it, growling the weakness away. "Fuck! Should I know that one?"

"No." Her hand touches my thigh, warm and soothing, the sensation seeping through my skin to my cells. "You don't remember that one. You were way too drunk. We met in a bar. Drank, like, three bottles of red wine. And you came back to my house. You—" She looks around, lowering her voice. "Used your Clit Positioning System skills on me for like two hours. It was really greedy. I passed out."

A smirk builds around my lips. "My Clit Positioning System?" Blinking, it takes me a few moments to reach the context. Then I get it. *Ha* — Like GPS. I laugh, my throat so fucking rough from disuse, it hurts, but the noise lights her entire goddamn face up, and that damn near bursts my heart.

That girl... she was alone. On the street. *Fuck*. I left her alone again. My laughter dwindles. Sadness rolls up my body, dwelling on the weakness in my limbs. I'll be strong again.

My smile drops and I stare at my woman, this stunning woman who didn't need this shit, but here she is. Lovely. Sexy. Cute. Sassy. Everything. Mine. Mine to keep.

I remember some parts of my brother's letter: to see myself in Kaya's eyes when I'm lost.

You're going to be okay.

You're going to be okay.

"Kaya," I breathe her name, hoping she can see the *I'm so sorry*, the *please forgive me*, the *thank you, Baby*. "I'm... Just— Fuck. Sorry."

I reach my hand out to her.

That's for you, Baby. Take it.

She feeds her finger through mine, those killer baby-blue eyes shining with her tears and affection. Her lashes beat slowly, collecting small beads that escape. "I love you, Hothead. Did you hear that enough?"

"Never enough." My brows pinch. "I fucked up so—"

"No. You didn't." She slides her sexy arse up on the mattress, lifting our hands into her lap. My head pounds, but I ignore it. I focus on that body, those rolling hills, valleys, and curves. Even in just faded light-blue jeans and a white tank top, her shape teases the fuck out of me. What I'm going to do to that body when I'm strong again. *Goddamn it, Woman.* Dirty, fucked-up things. That's what.

"You walked away," she says, dragging me from my attempt to regain some fucking masculinity. *Dammit.* "You walked away from them in the end."

"What have I missed?"

"Well, I told you this yesterday, so I'll do the CliffsNotes version. Dr Matthews said it's normal for the first few days to be a blur. You have been heavily drugged. So, Clay... fixed the problems—*both* of them. And the site is down. The money went to a charity. My mum has filed for a divorce, and Clay has found clean assets. When they divide their assets, your brother's lawyer is going to make sure she gets those businesses. So... we'll have money again. A little bit, anyway. And..." She thinks, and my head swamps. "Oh, Stacey smiled yesterday. Your dad is back, and he's wearing a tie again," she says that last bit like it's a miracle, but fuck knows why. She adds, "Bronson looks like he understands right from wrong, and Max isn't at odds with his own head, so—"

"Right," is what I can manage. I'm struggling. In pain, disassociation and loss dripping from me, but she can't see it. I know it's just for now. Her excitement is what I hold on to. Her smile is what I need to survive this. So, I will fucking fight the pain, the burn, the loss, the sadness, the confusion,

and I'll win. I always win the fight. That is what I do. The fight has changed, but, who I am, has not.

I'll fight for her now.

"And you..." She exhales through a wide smile. Tears start to spill freely from the corner of her eyes as they sweep over me, reverent and excited.

I don't like the tears, quickly using my thumbs to brush them away. "Don't cry, Kaya."

"You're talking to me." She smiles. "You have said a bit here and there, but you're actually talking to me. Say something smart, Hothead."

"You're beautiful," I gush, and she giggles. I sigh roughly as the lovely cadence works to massage my mind and warm the base of my spine, the sensation wrapping lower, making me hard for her, and that sexy sound.

"Well, fuck me." She beams. "It's poetry."

"Soon, Baby." I lick my lips and reach for the water again, suddenly fucking parched for other reasons. It's been days. "That I can assure you. Poetry. Prose." I take a mouthful. "And the fucking you, that, too. Very, very soon. But for now—" I lather my lips, still dry, not quenched at all. "Give me a taste."

"Of water?" Her perfectly shaped brows pull in, so I mentally shred her tight denim jeans. She feels it. "What do you mean?" A flush travels up her neck, around her cheeks and she takes a quick look over her shoulder at the door, then meets my stare again and slides from the bed.

"I mean..." I groan, just thinking about her juice bursting on my tongue. "Look after your boy. I'm thirsty. Slide your fingers inside your pussy. Feed them to me."

She gasps and smiles. "I can't—"

"You were going to take care of me."

"Xander—"

"Buy me flowers."

She motions to a red and white bouquet of roses and lilies on the bedside. "I did."

I pretend to pout. "I'm thirsty." Rolling my tongue along my lower lip, thinking about her pussy, her taste, I say, "I need you."

"Hothead," she protests, while unbuttoning her jeans. A pretty mouth of defiance. A lush body of obedience.

My gaze wanders to watch her slide her hand down the front of her jeans. The shape of her knuckles at her pussy, fingers cupping and the small amount of movement as she slides a few inside, hardens me to an acute ache.

I lift my knees to hide my boner from unwelcome guests. "Are you wet?" I shuffle. "Baby? Are you clinging?"

Her eyes stray around the room. "A little."

"Look at me," I order her. She anchors her blue gaze in mine, but she's blinking fast, way too in her head, too distracted to be enjoying herself. "You know. You know what you do to me. Make my muscles tight. Make me want to bite. Not just lick you. Not just suck you. *Eat* you. Really, really, eat you." She is panting now, following the imagery, joining me in my fantasy. "Slide your fingers around your pussy. You're juicy. The way I like. Feel that silky fluid. It's soft. Clear. Clean. So beautiful. I want it, Baby. I *need* it."

Her chin rises, her mouth opens, her eyes lose focus, and I can almost feel her pleasure, taste it in the air, smell it.

She works her pussy for several minutes. I'm raptured by the sight of her cheeks growing pinker and pinker, of her mouth slack, wider and wider, and of her legs shaking until she releases a throaty whimper. Comes. Quietly.

It's the sexiest thing I've ever seen.

She wets her mouth; I follow her tongue. Then she pulls her fingers from between her thighs. Hesitantly, she lifts them to my lips.

I snatch her wrist and devour her fingers, sucking them into my mouth and sliding my tongue between each digit. Humming as her sweat and juices slide around my tongue, I nearly blow my load just from the taste of her.

“Good boy,” she says. I lap at her fingers, and fuck me, those two words do things to me. I’m her good boy.

Fuck yes, I am.

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CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

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xander



Seven days later

I DROP my hospital bag on the marble tiles, studying our massive three-storey home. It looks different. The blinds are open today, the sun setting over the vast Connolly rooftops, dropping low and creating colours across the District horizon that seem almost too vibrant to be real.

“Welcome home, son.” Carter, my bodyguard as a child, greets me with an emotional smile. It’s nice to see the old boy back in this house.

I nod my hello, still realigning myself with reality, wearing real clothes, jeans and a black tee-shirt for the first time in a week.

“Welcome home, Boss,” Scott and Bolton, our senior *Cosa Nostra* soldiers, say from the doorway before turning back to brief the seven new recruits already suited and kitted up.

What’s going on here then?

He hired new staff?

Kaya answers my thoughts. “Luca said, ‘we can’t have a lady living here without guards.’ Though, I think he’s just nesting... ya know? Do men nest?”

Fuck no.

Maybe.

“Luca Butcher doesn’t nest, Woman.” I roll my shoulders, flexing the muscles along my arms, pleased as they expand with control. It’s good to feel stronger, not The-Legend-level strong, but still capable of crushing a motherfucker and fucking my woman all night.

A melody moves into my chest, playing with my heartstrings, a tone reminiscent of my youth. Of the good days. Of the days when my dad was home.

Nesting, ey?

The classic sound of Frank Sinatra cascades from the third-storey renovation, along with giggles and the not-so-subtle shushing from two women—Cassidy and Shoshanna, I can only presume.

“My wish came true!” Kelly’s screech precedes a hushing sound and then another giggle.

My gaze sweeps from the staircase to Kaya, a blush creeping across her cheeks. She knows what I want—*need*. To get her naked and spread her wide, but other plans are obviously laid out before me.

“What’s going on here?” I say, jutting my chin towards the stairs, the quiet collective sharing more hushing sounds that drop to absolute silence.

Butchers are not subtle.

My woman lifts her bare shoulders with a shrug. “Welcome home party in the new extension.” She leans close, the perfume of her soap and skin enveloping me. I dip into her hair, skating my lips and nose along her neck, inhaling.

Fuck.

I reel over her smell, the heat that lifts from her, the flutter of her pulse beneath her skin. It all possesses me.

Gripping the top of my blue beanie, Kaya leans back and pulls it down to above my brows, reminding me it’s there. I don’t want Kelly or Stone to

see me with the Frankenstein scalp. Since I woke up, they haven't visited.

"I like the beanie," she says, her lush lips sliding into a smile. "You look boyish. And the blue"—her gaze dives into mine—"makes your eyes so fucking beautiful. It's not fair that you're more beautiful than me. It's kinda rude, Hothead."

She thinks I need compliments, 'cause that's what she would want and maybe—I feel a grin tug at my mouth. I do like the way she's looking at me.

But look at *her*... I'm damn arrested by her. I think she's fucking blind if she doesn't see that nothing has ever been created with more perfection than her face. From the fan of dark lashes, the drilling blue eyes and satin skin, the slope between her nose and her top lip, each feature fashioned perfectly. For me. For me to keep.

I reach up to grasp her throat. Reminding her of the monster beneath this '*beautiful*' face, I squeeze until her lips part and a tiny gust of air escapes from her. "I wanted your tongue on my piercings and my nose, chin, and lips buried somewhere between your legs, Baby."

Her chest rises and falls, breasts swelling over her low-cut black dress that clings to every inch of her spectacular figure. How I want to peel that fucking dress off...

I feel her words within my palm as I hear them leave those pretty lips. "*After*, Hothead."

"*During*, Woman."

From above, Frank Sinatra's voice sails down the staircase, "*Fly me to the moon, let me play among the stars.*"

"Alright then, to the moon?" I ask, holding my hand out for her to take. Leading her up the staircase, we brace ourselves.

We are greeted at the top level by a loud "Surprise!" and my entire family scattered across the floor.

Stace and her girlfriend, Flick.

My niece and nephew.

My sisters-in-law.

Everyone who matters.

My brothers and my dad: with Konnor in a rugby jersey; Max in a white shirt, long sleeves bunched at his elbows; Bronson's Olaf shirt stretched around his large torso and a beanie that matches my own on his shaved head, Clay in a three-piece navy suit, and Dad in a white shirt and tie like a fucking beefed-up tax agent, they look characteristically like my family. *The Butcher Boys.*

"Prise. Prise," Stone chants, waddling around.

"Were you surprised? Were you?" Kelly asks, bouncing around my feet with her hair fashioned in the famous golden sprinkler atop her crown. As a baby, her hair was thin and wispy. Cassidy would pile it on her head in a scrunchy, but as the years went on and her hair thickened to its current abundant condition, she kept the style.

"I was. You,"—I grasp my chest animatedly— "scared the living *frog* out of me."

"You can say *frick*, Uncle Xander." Her expression is serious and schooling. "I know the real word. Daddy says it. And *frog* doesn't make any sense."

Laughing at her sass, I say, "Oh, okay." *When did she start talking like that?* "Niece Kelly."

She tilts her head. "Just *Kelly*."

"Well,"—I walk to the left towards Max and Cassidy, grabbing Max's hand but am pulled in for a rare-as-fuck hold— "then I'm just *Xander*."

Max taps my back as Kelly says, "No, *Uncle Xander*."

Shaking my head, I chuckle. "Okay, *Niece Kelly*."

Frank Sinatra's signature saxophone solo bellows out, and the memory of Dad dancing to this with his cigar stuck to his lower lip, whiskey spilling

on the floor as he shuffled to the tune, projects behind my eyes. Happy—we did have happy times as children.

Frank sings, “*In other words, I love you.*”

Releasing me, Max grips my shoulders and holds me in front of him. His turbulent grey-blue eyes glisten with emotion and tell me everything I need to know. He loves me. “Love you, too, Dickhead. Don’t say anything. I’m kind of sick of your voice.”

Max grunts, and Cassidy giggles before sliding between us and banding her slim arms around my middle. *Fuck*, she’s tiny. I always forget how trim she is. I hold my sister-in-law to me, squeezing her, wondering how long I have before—Max tugs Cassidy from my arms, and I laugh.

“Menace! I was cuddling your brother,” Cassidy scolds, studying me with a soft smile on her lips and her freckles bunched above her nose. “You look frickin’ good, Xander. You look strong, and your skin...” She sucks a wobbly breath in, and I fight the way it flicks at emotion in my chest. “It’s so clear. Hardly any bruises.” She reaches up and touches my cheek. “I never liked seeing them, Xan.”

Staring at her, I nod slowly against her warm palm.

I’m sorry, Cassidy.

All this time, I was wearing the bruises like warpaint, liking their message, their warning, but the sight of them hurt my family. I never saw it... through their eyes.

Kaya joins our side. I inhale her presence, finding comfort in it immediately. Grounding. Gravity. My person.

I want to pull her away and take a moment, but there is expectancy around the room, where everyone chats but, ultimately, waits for me.

The last time we were all together like this was my mother’s wake. Now... they all want to be real with *me*.

I tap my beefcake of a brother on the arm, making a show of checking the floor over now that it boasts furniture and décor. I didn’t want to bust

Kaya's bubble because she had so much fun shopping, but it's a damn stereotype. The entire floor looks like a modern spin on a 1920s saloon—it's gangster as fuck. The walls have wooden cladding. The ceiling is feature-painted cement. The furniture is leather and rich. Masculine.

"Nice renovation, Max. Is Cassidy pregnant?" I laugh at that last part, but when the corner of his mouth ticks up, I freeze. "*Wait...*" I dart my eyes to my beautiful, sweet sister-in-law. "Are you pregnant again?"

A blush creeps up her neck. "We wanted to wait. We didn't want to take away from your homecoming or Fawn's pregnancy."

"I didn't want to wait," Max makes clear, and I grin. That's why he pulled Cassidy away from me. My big brother stomps straight over the line from possessive to pathological when she's pregnant. It's a surprise she's not being carried around, fanned, and spoon-fed.

Fawn screeches from somewhere in the corner of the room and appears in front of Cassidy, her long blonde hair swaying down her back. "Are we pregnant together? Oh. My. Fuck!" She covers her smile. "*Whoops*, sorry. Ignore that word, Kelly. But, yay. That is so exciting. I'm so happy."

"I didn't want to,"—Cassidy holds Fawn's hands in front of her— "take away the spotlight from you and your pregnancy."

Fawn snuffles. "Don't be silly."

Near-black hair swirls beside me. Shoshanna emerges, her lips touching my cheek, chaste but with meaning. "Hey, Xan. Good to have you back." She embraces Cassidy and says, "Congratulations," before stepping away to smile at them.

For a moment, I see the rise of regret in Cassidy's and Fawn's gaze as they stare at Shoshanna. She has battled through IVF for years, with Stone to show for her efforts, but I know my brother. Bronson wants several children. A house full of them. Shoshanna blames herself for not being able to give him that.

Suddenly, Shoshanna lights-the-fuck-up, tears spitting from her amber eyes, and *fuck me... Is she pregnant, too?*

The girls squeal along with the saxophone that sails around us, and Shoshanna nods in answer to my internal question, confirming, “Yes.”

Cassidy gasps. “Oh, *Shosh.*”

Fawn cries, “You’re pregnant, too? *Oh my God—*good things come in three! That’s so special. All three of us are pregnant.”

Christ. Women crying everywhere.

My sisters-in-law engulf each other in a huddle of tears, emotion, and shared hormones that are sure to challenge my brothers. *Right, have fun with that, lads.*

“Fuck, I hope it’s not contagious,” I joke, stuffing Kaya behind my back in a mock display. Grinning, I step backwards with her shielded from them, but really, I let them have their moment together.

Bron.

He’ll be ecstatic.

My throat tightens, so I search the gathering, hunting down the blazing green-blue gaze of my brother Bronson.

“Don’t get any ideas.” I guide Kaya towards the six-foot-five tattooed beast that is my nutcase of an older brother.

“Don’t worry, Hothead.” She squeezes my hand. “I told you that I am all yours.”

As I approach him, I think about his letter. All the things he never said aloud sprawled with emotion along those white sheets. All about his insanity, his laughing demon, *the monster they made.* The truth.

As I reach him, I release Kaya’s hand to embrace him the way we both need. The kind of hold that connects two men who share a past, demons, monsters, and trauma.

Bronson’s arms tighten around me. “Well, you’re still a handsome son-of-a-Butcher, aren’t you?” This man spills emotion—it seeps from his pores

unconditionally.

“Hey, Bron.” I hold him to me and feel his breaths shift and become uneven. Meaningful. Over his shoulder, I say, “I will talk to you, brother.” Chuckling deeply, I use his term of endearment. “I will talk to you, my *beautiful* big brother. When my monster comes, I’ll reach out.”

An emotional groan leaves him, a rumble I feel against my chest; I love this man. His voice is strained as he says, “And I’ll reach back.”

I sigh. We don’t let go, not yet. I don’t want to. “I’m going to be okay. I’m going to be okay.” My throat tightens. The words were his chant, *for him*, to convince himself, not me. “I’m going to be okay, beautiful brother. Congrats on the baby, mate. All that humping worked out.”

He laughs.

This wasn’t what I expected when I got home, and the overwhelming greetings suddenly weigh me down. I need a minute or two. A breather. Or I might cry. I feel like our lives have levelled out on a plain of contentment and stability. That’s a lot to accept when we have been through so much.

So, I’ve got Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy, but that’s a liveable state. I can manage it. I will fight it. And my mum and our legacy might have made the monster inside me, but I broke myself to feed it. The disease will come for me one day, pull on my memories, and torment my reality, but that’s not today. That’s not tomorrow...

And my brothers, Max and Bronson—hell, even Clay—have families to keep them alive, safe, and living for a better future. That is all I ever wanted for us.

Pulling away from Bronson, I tap his beanie and he taps mine, then I stroll casually to the bar. Overwhelmed, I hold my tears in, but my body weakens with the need to set them free.

With a drink soon in my hand and a moment of reprieve, I look out over the room scattered with my family. Clay is staring at a glass of water with expectation, while Fawn lifts it to her lips and drinks from it.

She huffs at him. “I’ve had two glasses already, Sir. I’m going to pee myself.”

“I would rather you *pee* yourself, sweet girl, than be dehydrated.” Clay taps the bottom of the glass. “Now, let me see you take another mouthful and then you can do as you wish.”

Shaking my head at him, I finish my whiskey, finding Kaya’s eyes on me suddenly a boiling hot distraction. My near tears evaporate as I heat up. Her gaze penetrates my skin, a sultry hint at something I am desperate to give her. Have been for fucking days now.

She is across the room beside Konnor, her burnt-caramel hair lit from behind by the moon. She is staring at me. I set the glass down on the bar top, narrow my gaze on her, and watch her squirm under their lust-filled meaning.

Come here, Baby.

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CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

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kaya



CONCERNED THIS WAS TOO MUCH, too soon, I follow Xander through the party. He nearly died. He could have. But they just wanted to show him they care. That they listened to him and want to be real.

We walk down the hall, but as we pass a door, Xander swings it open, grabs me by the elbow, and drags me inside the small powder room. It's adorned with more marble tiles and red-wooden cabinetry.

Before I can react, I am eating his groans as they gush into my mouth, wrapping my legs around his waist as he lifts me by my arse, gripping his shoulder muscles as they flex and pulse.

"Xander," I pant, taking his air and feeding him mine.

My dress rides up and his erection bruises between my thighs, firm and hot against my knickers. *Fuck*, he is always so hard and hot where I am soft and cool.

I close my eyes and let him take what he needs. What I need. What feels so utterly comfortable now, as though he is meant to be here, between my thighs, kissing me.

That is his place.

And mine.

His mouth devours my ear, throat, dragging messily down my chin and to my lips again. My hothead is a noisy lover, growling and groaning.

“Kaya.” My name is uttered with darkness and yearning, dangerous and possessive. “You look so fucking tasty in this little dress.”

People might hear us. I gasp as his hands squeeze my thighs, drawing my attention to their intent to slide upwards and reach for my underwear. My hesitation dissolves in devastating need when he drags the fabric aside so he can push two fingers inside me.

“Fuck!” I cry out at the quick invasion that begins with a punch from his fingertips and continues without pause, diving in and out, making me wet and ready.

“Do you want my cock?” He taunts darkly. “Do you want my piercings rubbing inside your juicy pussy, collecting up all that sweet wetness, so they glisten with your cum?”

My back hits the wall of the powder room, hard tiles knocking a beat of air from me.

He goes on roughly, “I want you walking around that party smelling like me, with my cum dripping heavily from your hot, plump cunt.”

God, his mouth.

“*Hothead.*” I allow him to position me, and move us around. “Slow down,” as I say it, though, I know it’s stupid—it’s not in his control to slow down. This is how he exists.

His fingers slide out wet and hot. He presses one palm to the wall beside my head, the other long powerful arm banding around my waist, cupping my backside, and holding me up. I work on his jeans, the button and zipper open and down in a frenzy of movements.

Too fast, I have his heavy, dripping cock in my hand, the ladder beneath snug as the skin bulges. He lowers me onto his cock, impaling me in one utterly brutal thrust that scatters my vision into a starry haze.

“Kaya!” He takes me roughly against the wall, his body a scorching machine made for fucking and fighting—for passion and intensity.

Overwhelming pleasure collects in my core as his pace creates friction, each inward thrust and outward drag, burning me from the inside out.

I hold on for dear life, beat against the wall by his hips, taking his fire while accepting his wet kisses and devouring tongue. The possessive rhythm torments me as he works towards his own orgasm; using my body to wring him the right way has *everything* to do with him and not me.

I don't mind. *Actually...*

I release his shoulder with one hand and slide my small palm over to possess his throat, the way he does to me. I squeeze with little strength, feeling the thick column of his neck fight back, retaliate, and undulate within my fist. It's like a rabbit standing up to a panther.

He growls, bucking his hips harder, liking the pressure there, so I lean in and talk against his ear. "Slow down and fuck me nicely like a good boy does." The raspy, deep whimper that leaves his throat when I say '*good boy*' is utterly unravelling.

And the words feel amazing purring through my lips—powerful and intimate—the way he tenses under my smooth cadence stirs inside me. I love him.

I love *us*.

"Yes," he agrees, groaning. His hips slow down but deepen, curving in that way that spears his cock through me with absolute precision. He finds the parts inside me that even I can't find, the places deep and throbbing.

My mind lulls to the pleasure.

And I can feel him everywhere.

Rubbing my internal muscles as they squeeze for more, he builds our orgasms in unison. We become one rolling entity.

When his breaths grow strained, I cup the back of his neck again, panting against his ear. "Good boy. That's perfect. You're perfect."

More deep groans that squeeze my heart blow across my hair. His thrusts in and out are rough but measured, skilled and building heat,

collecting pressure, lifting our desires higher and higher to the point that I can't talk through my long, desperate moaning.

Crying out, I come around him, trembling and arching, my pussy clinging to his cock with such force he hisses and starts to shake against the impact of his own climax.

My bad boy, who likes to be told he's a good boy, fills me with cum and shakes with passion while I hold him to me and love him so deeply I don't know where he starts and I end.

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CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

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xander



AS THE NIGHT PROGRESSES, I notice that Kaya is quiet around the other women in my family until Stacey starts sharing stories about me as a rebellious teenage boy. “He would do everything in his power to stir shit.”

“Oh, I bet. He’s a fucking hothead,” Kaya says, through a soft, lush chuckle that makes me want to drop to my knees and lick her from toe to crown. *I’m fucked.* If I’m not careful, she’ll be the one fastening the damn dog collar on me.

She gravitates towards Stacey for the rest of the night. It seems so natural for them to be friends. They have the same sass, the same punch and protectiveness. They have me in common, seemingly passing me from one girl to another.

Was I Stacey’s growing up?

In a way, perhaps I was, but now, I’m Kaya’s.

And she is mine.

It’s late now, and I’m sitting around the new poker table with Konnor, Max, Bronson, Clay, and my dad. The Butcher men earned ourselves eye rolls when we sent the women away so we could drink whiskey, smoke cigars, and play poker.

They do as they’re told. As if any of my brothers were going to allow their pregnant women anywhere near cigar smoke. That would never

happen.

Grey clouds hang above the chips and cards while Frank sings about doing things “my way,” and I stare over my decent hand at Dad. We haven’t had a chance to talk at all, but that’s Luca Butcher. Same as Max. The words rarely come.

“When was the last time you did this? Been all together?” Konnor asks, sipping his espresso. He’s the only one of us not drinking. He doesn’t touch a drop these days.

“Never,” Bronson muses, putting his cigar out, the ribbons of smoke hanging over the ashtray.

“Se, never,” Dad answers, organising his hand. “I have never played poker”—he stares up from his cards— “with all five of my sons.”

Of course.

Mum—*Victoria*—couldn’t stand the sight of Konnor. Called him ‘*the bastard.*’ We didn’t grow up with him.

My half-brother reaches out and grabs my dad’s forearm, squeezes it, and then goes back to his cards. They have a different relationship to the one my brothers and I share with our dad. Softer.

It’s still new, too.

You can’t clean an old wall without throwing white paint on it. Maybe that’s what this extension is, what Victoria’s absence is—it’s the fucking white paint.

Dad cracks his knuckles, drops his deal in front of him, inclines backwards with a sigh, and says, “Fold.”

I grin. “Losing hand?”

Gazing across the table at us, a powerful smile set on his lips, he says, “Not today, son. I’m winning today.”

“Will you be winning tomorrow?” I ask, but I’m not sure why. I guess I want to hear him say that he is staying this time.

“My boy—” Dad’s eyes fix on something over my head, so I twist to follow what has his attention. “I’m staying.” I stare over my shoulder. On the wall, hung for all to see, is a framed picture of a couple cloaked in shadows. On closer inspection, I can see it’s Konnor’s mother, Madeline, who died when he was still young, and my dad.

It’s a close-up. The photograph is old, their faces mostly shaded, but the outline of my dad’s smile moves an ache through my chest. They were in the dark—their relationship was hidden as they were both married to other people—but the love he felt is clear through the shape of his eyes and smile.

“You know, she was the wife of a very powerful man, and so,” he begins, and I return my gaze to him. “To protect her, I had to hide, *se?*” He exhales roughly. “I had to hide my affections for her for so long that...” He pauses, reaching for the words. Maybe he doesn’t know the right ones to use. I get that. “I missed when it changed, son. I missed when I didn’t have to hide anymore. That, I could love her. Feel her. I suppose leaving the city was leaving the pain, and hiding became part of who I was.” His thoughtful blue gaze drops from the painting to me, and he forcibly swallows. “I’m sorry, son. *Sons*. She would want me to be here with you. It’s where I want to be, too. I always did. It just... *hurt*.”

Well fuck.

Luca Butcher just said that.

Fuck.

Don’t cry.

I can’t even make eye contact with my brothers to see how they responded to Luca Butcher owning pain and loss, or my resolve will crumble. So, I inhale, pinch between my brows, and quickly wipe at my eyes.

I have no fucking idea what to say.

Konnor releases a hard breath, catching my attention. His eyes are glued to the image of the mother he never really knew. “She looks happy up there.

Can I have a copy?"

"Of course. And I like to think she *was* happy. I like to think I made her happy when I could," Dad says, smiling. "Over in the cabinet. There are more. Go have a look, my boy."

Konnor drops his hand. "Was losing anyway." He walks to the other side of the room, retrieves a book from the wooden cabinet, and takes a seat on the leather couches that Kaya picked out for us.

Longing holds Dad's gaze to the picture frame overhead. "I would have done anything for her. I was obsessed—*am* obsessed."

"Speaking of obsessed," Bronson clears his throat. And *here we go...* "Who remembers when this big dickhead"—he knocks Max on the shoulder— "fell madly in love with a sweet ballerina but pretended she annoyed him?"

I grin hard. "Yeah, he was like a dog with a bone," I taunt. "No one was getting near that girl without losing a finger."

Max hums, unimpressed. "Yeah, well, at least I didn't have to kidnap her." He smirks over at Bronson.

"*Lady-nap*," Bronson, Clay, and I say in unison, and the entire table rumbles with laughter, the deep tone rolling around the new extension, filling it with warmth. I'm not sure I've heard them laugh like that... *Fuck*. I don't know.

I pick up another card. A king. "So," I begin, leading, "I'll get to see a lot of you then, Dad. More of all of you?"

"Well, that depends on you, Xander." Clay smiles smoothly at his cards, a message in his tone. He looks up at me, clear blue eyes like arrows fixed on my face. "When will you be back?"

I frown across the chips piled up around him, then over to Max and Bronson, who mirror a meaningful smile. "Huh? You having me committed? I haven't lost my mind yet, arsehole."

A chuckle leaves my brothers.

Clay's grin grows as he says, "I thought you were going to travel. Isn't that what you wanted?"

Needing something to distract my senses from this pointed turn in the conversation, I take a sip of my whiskey and talk around the burn. "You telling me that the moment Dad declares he's staying, I'm allowed to fucking leave the District?"

Dad is staring at me now as he says, "I was wrong to make you feel as though you had no choice."

Clay sets his cards down. "I was wrong to make you feel as though this legacy didn't burden you. It did."

I stop smiling. Overcome by his honesty, I just stare at him as he continues.

"I didn't want you to leave. I wanted to watch you. *Control* you in an attempt to protect you. I was wrong to do so. I don't own you, Xander. I couldn't see that. So, I'll be here when you need me, for once. And you can go wherever you want, with whomever you want."

I lean back in my chair without a clue of what to do or say to that, either. *Fuck me*. When they decide to be real and raw, they go balls deep. Maybe, I don't need to say anything. This is enough for us.

Clay takes a mouthful of his whiskey, a more generous amount than he usually allows himself unless alone. Letting himself be, just Clay, for the night, he loosens his tie.

I smile at that.

Clay continues, "I don't own any of you, and neither does the *Cosa Nostra*. Not while I am Don. So, I'll ask you all a question I never thought to ask you. What do you want from this Butcher legacy, Max? Bronson?"

Max flicks a card into the centre and grabs another from the dealer's deck. "The District is my wife's home. Her family is here. She grew up here. So, you run this city for her, and I'll be here when you need me."

Bronson puffs on his third cigar like wisdom lay in smoking its port aromatics. He speaks through his exhale. "I'm a dad first, slave to Shoshanna second, gorgeous motherfucker third, but... I'm a Butcher always. And I'm here for my brothers."

Clay raises a brow at me. "Xander?"

I lay my cards, face up, on the table: three kings, an ace, and a ten. Three of a kind. I'm not the same. I never was.

"I'll think about it." I consider, already pretty fucking sure I'm taking my woman and her damn toy rabbits to every inch of the globe. I'm also damn sure I'll be back.

When the time comes to settle down, I'll be in the District with my family. As Bronson said...

A Butcher always.

THE END

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CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

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kaya

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EPILOGUE



DURING THE DAY, Krakow is such an underrated city, but at night, when lit by low streetlamps and buzzing with people and perfumed with cuisines, it's immeasurable.

My backpack taps my spine as Xander and I amble hand in hand through the square. The ancient Romanesque buildings circle us, a horse and cart clips and rolls along the cobblestone roads, and even though a cool breeze shifts around us, every fourth pavilion is an ice-cream parlour.

I squeeze Xander's hand and inhale the fresh Polish air. I think Krakow is the most romantic city in the world. More so than Paris or Venice or Rome or any of the other stunning cities we have visited in the last two months.

Krakow square is the one.

Under the café lit lamps, we stop to set a scene in front of St Mary's Basilica. The hub of Krakow may be small in comparison to other cities, but the vibe is reminiscent of a busy medieval market square. Cafés line the streets. Low lamps border and guide. There is very little modern technology or reminders that we are in the 21st century. I could easily forget.

I slide my backpack from my shoulder and reach inside, flutters of excitement rush through me as I remove my brand-new Canon. *Damn*, it's pretty.

I haven't used it yet. I woke up this morning, like most mornings, to Xander's body on top of mine and his cock already sliding inside me. After we had both come, twice, he sat beside me on the hotel bed and gifted me this camera.

But I want the first image snapped to be a special one. This is the perfect space. The vibe outside St Mary's is everything. The lighting is soft and amorous. The tone of Krakow in the evening is rich with the wavering notes of chatter and the percussive sound of horses' hooves.

Turning the camera over in my hands, I look at all the complicated buttons, some of which I understand, and others I'll need to experiment with. For that, I have YouTube. I've learned so much by watching free photography courses online while in transit—on a coach, plane, or train. And it has meant we haven't had to stop. We keep moving. From city to city. I keep learning, Xander keeps busy—we are free.

"Wait, Baby." Xander touches my hip as I begin to retrieve my Sylvanian rabbits, but I don't want to wait, because the horse and cart have stopped right outside the Basilica. I want them in the background.

"No." Playfully, I turn my back to him and keep searching for my set. Today moved slower than most. So unlike Xander, who generally crams as many activities into a day as possible until I am exhausted, and then he fucks me into a coma. But today, we rode the cart, ate ice cream, and lazily made love. It was such a sweet, easy day.

I need this scene.

So, I find my miniature horse and cart. "I have to set it up now. I want to get the horse and cart as the backdrop."

He tries to turn me around. "You don't need the horse and cart for this one, Baby," he presses.

I shake him off. With my head stuffed in the bag, I riffle around with my back to him, needing the other bridle. "I do. I need it because—"

"Goddammit, Woman, will you turn around!"

I whirl to face him. “What?”

And my breath catches.

Xander is on his knee on the cobblestone road with the graceful yet gothic presence of St Mary’s as his backdrop and a circle of tourists lingering to witness this gorgeous man at his most vulnerable, at the feet of his lover.

In his hand is a navy box, and it’s open. Sparkling from within the case is a huge heart-cut solitaire diamond.

My mouth parts.

He clears his throat, and I clear mine. “I’m so fucking nervous, so give me a break and say you’ll marry me, Woman.”

I press my hand to my chest, unable to feel my heart beneath my palm as it skips around my throat and between my ears. “*Xander.*”

“I told you I would ask you on a slow day,” he says, his stunning blue eyes, showing flecks of warmth—orange and gold—reflective of the surrounding lamps. “I told you it wouldn’t be fast and spontaneous.”

I’m speechless.

“We are both walking contronyms, Baby,” he starts, staring at me with the passionately intense gaze he wears so comfortably. “Not just contradictions... that’s too obvious. We are all the extremes at once. Hot-headed. Romantic. Fragile. Stubborn. Rude. The thing I’ve realised about our messy personalities is that they make sense to each other.”

He swallows. “What you hate, I hate. How you see the world, I see it, too. And the way you want to love me is the way I need to be loved. I was lost, Baby. I didn’t fit, and I was looking for something, but I didn’t know what. And all along it was *you*.” He stands to close the gap between us because my feet won’t work, and he feels the pull of our gravity, too. “You answer the question of me.” I look down and watch him slide the golden ring on my finger as tears glide down my cheeks. “So, tell me,”—he adds,

and I crane my neck to meet his possessive gaze— “do I answer the question of you?”

Now, I can barely see him through the wells over my eyes, the lamps from the cafes creating a dull glow in the blur. “Yes, Hothead. You do. I’ll marry you.”

He holds my hand between us, using his thumb to tilt the diamond, catching small specks of light in the many facets. I study it adoringly. “Do you like it, Woman? There is this big inclusion in the top corner. I know you’re not meant to have them, but the rest is flawless. I kinda liked it. It’s messy. I thought that maybe, the imperfection made it... *us*.”

WOOD IS worthless without the grooves. Wine is cheap without the tannins and the grippy texture. We appreciate imperfections in some things but not in others.

Not in diamonds.

Not in people.

Definitely not in Lovit daughters.

BEAMING, I ADMIT, “IT’S *PERFECT*.”

“Your mum helped me choose it. She didn’t see the inclusion...” His words trail off with hidden meaning.

I look from the ring to his face, finding a strange grin on his lips. “What’s that look for?”

“Well, when I called your mum”—his voice is amused— “she was with Mac. I heard him from the other side of the phone. He called you a crook, and she laughed like a schoolgirl. I think they’re dating.”

My beach-bum and my mum?

The four daughters didn’t keep him away...

Adapting and moving on.

I'm proud of the Lovit women.

Leaping into Xander Butcher's arms, I cup the back of his neck, feeling his powerful shoulder muscles bunch as he holds me to straddle him.

I dip to nuzzle his nose with mine, our mouths skating together. I can feel the sexy callous on his lower lip—a small reminder of the monster they made.

But he's not out today.

And when we kiss, all of Krakow fades, and the perfect scene blurs around us. We get lost in the motion of our lips, in the love, because we are the answer to *us*. Not a place or a perfect scene or set.

My body floods with warmth, and my world narrows further, fading—finishing—with him.

We are finished.

The contronym for done—*complete*. We have found that word, that meaning, that place, in our messy love.

THE FINISH

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review time...



HOW DO YOU GET SOMEONE TO LEAVE YOU A REVIEW?

You ask them to.
Please leave me a review.

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Meet other Butcher Boy lovers on Facebook. Join [Harris's Harem of Dark Romance Lovers](#)
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where it all started...



Have you read book one?

Max and Cassidy's story.



Blurb:

The city's golden girl falls heart-first into a dark underworld.

I want two things in life: to be the leading ballerina in my academy—

And Max Butcher...

A massive, tattooed boxer, and renowned thug. And my very first crush...

I may be a silly little girl to him, but he's intent on protecting, possessing, and claiming me in every way—his little piece of purity.

But there is more to Max Butcher than the cold, cruel facade he wears like armor. I know; I saw the broken boy inside him one day when we were only children.

So, even as I stand in the shadows with him, as people get hurt...*as people die*... I refuse to let him believe he's nothing more than a piece in his family's corrupt empire.

There is good inside Max Butcher, and I refuse to let him live in the dark forever.

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butcher brothers

“There is a connection between the four brothers that can’t be measured or taught and stretches farther than proximity. It is intrinsic in their souls. A construct of who they are at the core, above a partner, lover, father, or friend—they are a Butcher Brother.”

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nicci who?



I'm an Australian chick writing real love stories for dark souls.

[Stalk me.](#)

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[Stalk us.](#)

It's taken three years into my author career to write a biography because, let's face it, you probably don't care that I live in Australia, hate owls, am sober, or that my husband's name is Ed—not Edward or Eddie—Ed... like who names their son 'just' Ed? (love my in-laws, btw). Anyway, you probably don't really care that my son's name is Jarrah—not Jarrod or Jason—to compensate for his dad's name *Ed*...

I ramble...

Here's what you really want to know. I'm a contradiction. Contradictory people are my jam. I am an independent woman who has lived her entire life doing things the wrong way, the impulsive way, the risky way... my way. I'm not from a rich family but I've taken wealthy people chances... I'm my own boss. I'm a full-time author, an Amazon best-seller, all despite the amount of people who said I couldn't, shouldn't, wouldn't... I'm that person.

So while I live a feminist kind of life... I write about men who kill, who control, who take their women like it's their last breath, pinning them down and whispering "*good girl*" and "*mine*" and "*you belong to me*" and all the red flag utterances that would have most independent women rolling their eyes so hard they see their brains.

I write about men who protect their women. Men who control them because they are so obsessed, so in love, they are terrified not to... Do I have daddy issues? *Probably*. Did I need to be controlled and protected more as a child and this is my outlet? *Possibly*.

So... if you don't like that... if you don't see the internal strength in my heroines, how they are the emotional rocks for these controlling *alphahole* men... then don't read my books. You won't like them. We can still be friends.

But I want both. I want my cake and to have a six-foot-five, tattooed, alphamale eat it too.



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from the head butcher girls

GOODBYE NOTES

To Nicci. You have created a world that I simply couldn't get out of my head. Your men crawled into my heart and claimed it. They've shown what unconditional love and devotion is; to soulmates as well as to family. There will never be another family written that will captivate my life the way these brothers did. This may sound silly, but I feel like I'm letting go of a part of my heart with this series ending.

To Max. Thank you for showing the world that it's ok to let people in. It's ok to let go of some of the things we hold on to. I have loved and will forever love you so fiercely.

To Bronson. You showed the world that everyone needs love. You taught us how to love ourselves and those around us so deeply and unconditionally. Family is deeper than blood and you proved it through your whole book.

To Clay. Thank you for letting go. Your tough, controlled, and never failing wall was fun. But seeing the raw and vulnerable side of you when you finally shattered and let Fawn in, drew you deep into our hearts forever. Thank you for showing us that it's ok to crumble and need to depend on others sometimes.

To Xander. Your positivity in a world full of negative was just a light into our dark and broken souls. You taught us it was ok to feel and that we can't blame ourselves for everything. Finding that thing in our life to hold onto and make our everything. To need that someone to love and to cling to them with our all. To feel safe. To be heard.

So to the readers who haven't started this journey yet and want to meet the boys, just know, "you're going to be ok". These beautiful boys will be your family. And family comes first. We are Butchers after all. "A Butcher always".

-Jasmine

The emotions are flowing! Nicci and the Butchers have been a part of my life for almost 2 years!

To my Butcher boys: You were the gateway into my romance reading journey. I thank you so much for getting me to love reading again! Your lives are chaotic but your chaos calmed me when I needed it. The love that you all share breaks barriers and draws us in. Bronson, my psychotic teddy bear, please never change. Clay, my Daddy, your care knows no bounds. Xander, my sunshine, keep shining bright. And my baby Max, my first book boyfriend, your love is so strong and fierce. You are one of a kind, my love!

To my friend Nicci: Not only am I lucky to be on your team, but I am so blessed to call you a friend. You brought us love, passion, family, devotion, and so much more with the Butcher boys. Your stories have brought excitement into my life. I'm so proud

of you and I can't wait to see what else you knock out of the park!

Love, Chanel

Dear Nicci,

Where do I begin... I discovered your books by reading *Our Thing*. I devoured those books in less than a day. I was beyond obsessed. I'm sure you were thinking "here comes the crazy girl again tagging me in all her crying pictures." What's so admirable is how active you are with your readers. I remember thinking how amazing you are for taking the time to comment on my posts or just a simple emoji and that would make my whole day.

When you asked me to join your team, I thought I was getting pranked. I couldn't believe Nicci Harris wanted me to be one of

her PAs. Working with you has been the absolute best. You have taught me so much not only about this industry, but also about myself. You're always patient with me when I'm going on one of my rants and giving me the best advice. I cherish our conversations more than you know.

Now let's talk about what brought us here. Kids of the District will forever be one of my all-time favorite series. You have not only set the bar high for the perfect man, but you also wrote one of the best! Clay will always have a special place in my heart. I'm constantly thinking about him. I envy people who haven't read him. That is how much your books have affected me! I can't wait to see what the future holds and be on that journey with you! Thank you for trusting me. Thank you for giving us our Butcher boys and thank you for

being the queen that you are. Here's to 100
more books!

With all my Love,

-Sharron

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from the official butcher girls

GOODBYE NOTES

"This series ignited my love for mafia romance, and although this series is coming to an end -which is devastating- I know they'll always be safely tucked on my shelves waiting to be re-read. You know an author kicked it out of the park with a series when you genuinely can't choose a favourite character!!"

-Jamie Kennedy

The way the Kids of the District series has carried me through my roughest of days. Reading the books, and being a part of the

process has given me such great joy. Watching these characters grow has given me solace. The whole series has carried me through a lot of emotions and I'm forever grateful to be a part of it. I'm sad to see it go but I know there's greatness to achieve in the future, and I can't wait!

Sincerely, Allie Mckissack

Dear anyone who has the utmost pleasure to read the Butcher Books,

You will fall in love with the characters.

You might cry. (I did, it's ok.)

You will laugh.

You will stay up reading till 3 am just to finish a book as you can't put them down.

You will be wishing that you are living in the series.

You are a Butcher girl now.

I'm so sad to see this series end but
I'm so freaking happy I found them. And
I hope you are too, you won't regret it.

-Raegan

Nicci,

Thank you so much for creating an amazing
series that took me through a rollercoaster of
emotions. Thank you for bringing joy back into
my life. Because of this series I found my
love of reading. I also want to thank you,
your team, and the other Butcher girls. You all
have been so kind, welcoming, and so uplifting.
I can't thank you enough.

With thanks and love,

-Connie H.

It's always an amazing feeling when you
find a series that sucks you in from the start
and won't let go. His Pretty Little Burden was

my introduction to this series and this world and I haven't been able to forget it since. I've loved getting to know these characters and I'll miss them, but I can't wait to see what you write next Nicci.

-Talía

Nicci! Thank you for sharing these boys with us! I was rec'd Clay because of my love for age gap romance and damn girl he tossed me around like a rag doll and I fell in love. Then I met Max and he made me bend the knee like a good girl ;) then it was our beautiful nutcase Bronson and he was perfection and stole my heart! I know Xander will be amazing and I'm sad it's ending but you've made a hype girl for life! Much love @drifter.readz (Drita)

-Drifter.readz

Nicci. These are the kind of books that make you wish a series would continue on forever. Thank you for creating such a beautiful story and thank you for bringing back my love of reading. I will miss my Butcher boys. I am so sad to be coming to the end, but Bronson will live on forever in my heart.

-BethAnne

For Nicci ,

Thank you so much for introducing the butcher men and sharing them with all of us, I honestly didn't know I'd love a family of boxers as much as I do hehe.

To the butcher men,

Continue to love as hard as you do, fight as hard as you do .We can all use a hard ass like Max, a Nutcase like Bronson, a mf daddy dom like Clay and a smart-ass like Xander in our lives.

Butcher brat for life!!

-Briana

I can't believe we've come to a close with the Kids of the District series. These Mafia men are tough on the exterior but soft on the inside for their women. Thank you Nicci for bringing us this world. As soon as I read Max and Cassidy's story I was hooked. All the feels! I'll miss them!

-Susan

Nicci,

Thank you for the Butcher Boys, they are sexy as hell and the best book boyfriends a girl could ask for. Most of all, thank you for Shoshanna. She came to me at a time when I needed her the most.

-Jolene

As sad as I am for this series to end,
I am forever grateful for finding it. Not only
did it bring me out of a book slump but it
also helped keep me out of a dark place. I
not only gained a favourite book series but a
favourite author and an amazing book family.
I am forever thankful for the Butchers.

Love Kirsten MacKinnon.

To Nicci,

Thank you. Thank you for writing these
stories and sharing them with us. Thank you
for giving us the Butcher Boys for us to fall
in love with. Thank you for giving us female
leads who show strength and that show it's
possible to survive what life throws at you.

Thank you for connecting us and giving us
a family.

Thank you for being you.

Your brats adore you.

-Louise xo

Nicci, you have no idea how much the Butcher Boys helped me! This series was a part of getting me through a really rough time. Saying "thank you" isn't strong enough but it's all I've got so, THANK YOU!

-Frankie

Thank you Nicci Harris for creating this amazing series for us to fall in love with. Each book has been magical in the way it pulls you under the Butcher Boy's spell and never lets go. Definitely will always be one of my all time favorites!

Thank you,

-Wendy Kairschner

"Cassidy hooked me, Bronson melted me but you Nicci have a place in my heart forever!

Thank-you for creating such a beautiful family that reignited my love for reading again!"

-Kristie Kennedy

Thank you Nicci for creating such a beautiful and tragic world with such an incredible family. The Butchers love so deeply and I love them all so much. Thank you for bringing together such a lovely group of brats. You have such a great core group. All you ladies are great at making me laugh but are also great shoulders to lean on. Thank you for the stories. Thank you for the love. Thank you for the friendship. P.S. Papa Butch is mine.

-Ari

To the Butchers: each of you will always hold a special place in my heart (sorry but Clay and Fawn are at the top of it) and seeing

the end of this series is bittersweet but know you're still living in all our hearts.

To Nicci: I am forever thankful I found you on tiktok and you gave this series to the world, and to have brought us Butcher Brats together. We've made our little community and it all started with you. I can't wait to continue on this journey of your future books with you.

To the Butcher Brats: you know who you are and I love each of you, we've seen each other through really deep lows and really bright highs and I can't imagine not having each of you in my life.

-Blanca

To Queen Nicci,

Thank you profusely for this family,
They're in my heart for eternity.

Goodbye Max, Bronson, Clay, and Xander.
Don't fret, I wouldn't forget Konnor.

With guns, humour, passion, and fists
you've filled my heart with this precious gift.

Now its time to turn the last page, the
end has come for the Butcher Boys.

All my love,

-Gigi

Nicci,

So this is it, the end of the road. I'm so
happy to have followed you on this journey.
And those boys, oh those boys, they've had
my heart, tears, and laughter.

I'll never forget the feeling of finishing
Konnor's books first and then immediately
diving into Max's. Then the wait for Bronson,
Clay(my daddy), and Xander. Each with their

own beautiful story, each with their own struggles.

You write so beautifully, and I can't wait to see where you go from here.

As a follower and friend from the start, I love you so much and am proud of you.

-Anna (annasbook.nook)

This series may have come to an end but I'll forever be with me. Nicci, thank you so much for Cassidy, Soshanna, Fawn and Kayla; I found different parts of me in each one of the. Thank you so much for some of the best book boyfriends i have. I cherish every laugh, tear, shout and smile this books have given me but more important, the people I have met through them. Thank you for letting me be part of this.

-Lizzie

Nicci, how do I even start this,
When I first got asked to come onto your
team so long ago I never knew what a big
family we would all become. I'm so happy to
call you a friend as well as an amazing
author. Being part of your team has given me
some of my best friends and I will always
be so grateful ❤️

I can't believe this is it for the Butcher
Boys. Reading Max first I didn't know what
to expect but as soon as I dived into the
world of the Butcher Brothers I was addicted.
They are all so different but equally amazing.
And now the end is here with the beautiful
Xander.

Just remember Bronson is mine and I
deep throated Clay first 😊

You will never get rid of me as I love you
and your creative brain. I'm so excited to see

where you go next. Thank you for everything.

-Lorna (Dooniereads)

To be honest I don't know what to say...

You have changed my life with these men.
Not only because of their story but also of
your lessons through your books.

To the Butcher boys:

Thankyou for being the most dysfunctional
people but the most loveable family. The love
you have for each other is pure and powerfull.
Never change and lookout for each other.

To Nicci:

You were the first person who accepted me
on your street team, you created such a close
and beautiful team. You treat people with much
such kindness. Your heart is big and your soul
is pure. Thank you for these men who have
changed my life.

To the readers

When you read Nicci's books you are going to get angry, furious and even cry but I promise, it will all be worth it in the end.

That breath you are holding while reading will release itself. If there ever is a part of you that hurts or is wounded, I'm sure Nicci will heal a part of it.

Love each other a little more and hate a little less.

With love,

-Reniel

To Nicci.

Thank you for breathing life into these beautifully flawed and broken characters. For showing us that everyone is worthy of love and their desires. & lastly, for showing us that merely surviving is not the same as actually living. I hope we all learn to live, as our Butcher boys did.

-Morgan

Nicci.. where do I begin, Your books have brought so much joy to my life that this series has become my comfort read! I've laughed, cried and cried some more. It will forever hold a special place in my heart and all the butcher boys will forever be a part of me. Thank you for writing such an amazing series where we all feel connected to each and every character. To the butcher boys themselves. Max, Clay, Bronson, Xander and Konnor. You have each shown me that even if life gets tough that I'm stronger than I realise and that it's okay to be soft and emotional with the people I love! You butcher boys might have come to an end but you will forever be loved.

-Emma

from the editor

Words from the editor:

First, I want to thank Nicci for trusting me with the Butcher Brothers. Being a part of this journey with you has been fantastic. You make my job easy by writing the best words. You have such a unique voice and talent for storytelling, that I can't wait to read your books (especially the extra late words).

I'm not alone in loving the characters you create. You take all your readers on a rollercoaster of highs and lows, of anguish and utter pleasure. I'm not a reader who easily cries, but you wring out all the reader emotions in your writing, and I have cried and panted in every book. I mean, who wouldn't want a Butcher Boy to throw you over their shoulder and claim you as 'MINE.' And I wouldn't be able to choose either. I fell in love with every Butcher Boy you wrote: Max with his silent brooding, Bronson's determination, Clay's utter control, and Xander's honesty—not to mention that they're drop-dead gorgeous, the epitome of men, and can bring a girl to her knees with their mouth...

So, thank you, Nicci, for all the late-night writing, the worrying about deadlines, the tears, and the absolute best sex scenes a reader (editor) could

ask for. Don't ever stop writing, and I promise to never stop reading—and deleting your ellipsis'.

Lastly, I'd like to end with a contronym Xander and Kaya, and Nicci will appreciate:

We, the Butcher Boys' fan club, are bound. Bound together and secure in our bond of forever rereading this series and ready to move forward with your next release!

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