A close-up, high-contrast photograph of a shirtless man's torso and face. He has a dark beard and mustache, and his gaze is directed directly at the viewer with a serious, intense expression. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting his muscular build and facial features against a dark background.

FEROCIOUS. WILD.
AND STRANDED WITH HER.

LOCKED

NEW YORK TIMES & USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
CLARISSA WILD

.....
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DESCRIPTION

People say I'm ferocious. Wild. Dangerous.
They're right. That's why I live on an island alone.
The jungle is my home. My personal prison.
Until she arrived.
The moment her helicopter crashed on my land, everything changed.
She's the only survivor ... And I'm keeping her locked up in a pit.
It's been too long since I last touched a woman, especially one so beautiful.
It makes me hunger for her.
I want her ... So I'll keep her ...
And I'll make her *mine*.

MUSIC PLAYLIST

Music played a BIG part in the creation of this story. You can listen to all the songs involved on this [Youtube playlist](#).

“Muddy Waters” by LP
“No Witness” by LP
“Touch” by Marz Léon
“Hungry Faces” by Mogwai
“Believer” by Imagine Dragons
“If I had A Heart” by Fever Ray
“Again” by Noah Cyrus
“Paper Love” by Allie X
“Devil in Me” by Halsey
“Close” by Nick Jonas ft. Tove Lo
“One of Twelve” by Johann Johannsson
“Hydraulic Lift” by Johann Johannsson
“Xenoanthropology” by Johann Johannsson
“Sapir Whorf” by Johann Johannson
“Arrival Trailer Music” by Johann Johannsson
“The Rocket Builder” by Johann Johannson
“On the Nature of Daylight” by Max Richter
“When She Came Back” by Max Richter
“She Remembers” by Max Richter
“Deep End” by Ruelle
“Bad Dream” by Ruelle

“Devil in Me” by Halsey
“The Void” by IAMX
“Triggers” by IAMX
“Coachella” by Lana Del Rey
“Legendary Lovers” by Katy Perry
“Kaval Sviri” by The Mystere Of the Bulgarian Voices Volume 2

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DEDICATION

To my betas and editor. Y'all are the bomb diggity.

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PROLOGUE

Accompanying Song: “One Of Twelve” by Johann Johannsson

Lock

My stomach churns as the twisted, metallic bird plunges from the skies and crashes into the earth. A loud screeching and thundering noise make me cover my eyes. The ground underneath my feet quakes.

When I look up, I can clearly see the rift in the earth between the broken trees, not far ahead.

With my heels digging into the ground, I slide down the rocky hill, disappearing into the forest beyond.

Soot whirls through the air as I make my way toward the tower of smoke. Flakes of fire waft through the trees, the scent of burning wood filling my nostrils.

A loud scream stops me in my tracks.

I’m getting close.

I glance around, looking for the source, but all I see is the fire blazing, scorching the earth, changing the luscious jungle into a literal hell.

Another gut-wrenching scream prompts me to move.

Like a tiger, I take off. Rushing through the jungle, I jump over broken branches and avoid falling trees. Dread grows inside my heart as I realize I'll have to approach that ... monster.

The mangled metallic beast that wrecked my domain.

The moment I lay my eyes on it, I stop for a brief second and glare in awe.

The blades at the top look razor sharp, and judging by the marks left in the ground, they did a lot of damage.

What if it's not done yet?

I clutch the spear in my hand tighter, realizing I have to be vigilant.

There's no telling what could happen. But fuck ... I've never seen anything like it.

The sheer size of this thing makes my jaw drop.

However, a voice up ahead forces me to focus again, and I hone in on the sound.

I run to the side of the blazing fire roaring in the metallic beast. Ignoring the scent of burning flesh, I hop over bits and pieces of shredded shrapnel and bent wood until I've circled it completely.

Near the front of the metal bird, shattered glass litters the ground ... and right next to the metal beast's nose, something groans and coughs.

A woman.

* * *

Accompanying Song: "Hydraulic Lift" by Johann Johannsson

Juliet

Darkness surrounds me.

I can't see. Can't open my eyes.

My ears ring with terror. Sounds are dampened ... as if I'm partially deaf.

Turmoil runs through my veins, but when I try to move, everything hurts.

My muscles cramp, and a metallic taste lingers on my tongue.

Blood.

My blood.

I can feel the indents of my teeth from when I bit my tongue.

And my head ... bangs with pain as if it's about to explode.

I force my eyes open. That's when I catch a glimpse of the destruction around me.

The earth is scorched; trees are completely destroyed.

Everything is burning.

Fire and smoke as far as the eye can see.

It fills my lungs when I gasp, and I cough.

I can hardly breathe.

A groan escapes my mouth when I try to yell. It's like a knife sliding down my throat, the sharp pain making my eyes tear up.

And I still can't see.

Nothing ... but vague, blurry images of wrangled metal and the hard ground beneath my body. An engine whirs behind me, and the sound of blades

whooshing in the air makes my stomach drop.

I try to scream once again, but my voice fails me, and nothing but a faint shriek leaves my throat.

I smell the fire as the heat eats away at everything around me.

Soon it'll be me.

I have to get away. Have to escape.

But no matter how hard I try, I can't find the strength to crawl. With nails digging into the soil, I try to force myself forward, but I manage mere inches.

It's not enough.

And the longer I try, the more exhausted I become.

Oxygen is slowly leaving my body and along with it, my consciousness.

The last thing I see before I pass out is a shadowy figure, appearing from the thick, dark smoke ... And piercing gray eyes as two strong arms pull at my body.

Coaxing me into the beyond.

CHAPTER ONE

Accompanying Song: “[Xenoanthropology](#)” by Johann Johannsson

Juliet

I blink, but nothing seems to register.

My body moves, but I’m not initiating the action. I’m not the one in charge.

I can barely keep my eyes open, but I persist anyway, needing to know what happened. In front of me, a large fire rages, and the sky glows red. The scent of smoke and burning metal fills my nostrils ... and another scent I can’t place, but it makes me want to puke.

However, something pulling on my arms keeps the bile down.

Not just something ... a person.

My muscles are too weak to resist as he drags me along the rough terrain away from the fire. The stranger props me against a tree and leaves me there, running back into the fire.

I try to scream, but my lungs lack the oxygen, and it hurts so bad. I cough and heave as the smoke that entered my lungs has coated them with soot.

I don't know what's happening. I just know I need to stay alive. Nothing's stronger than the will to survive.

And I realize that the moment the man turns and walks back toward me.

Because the face I see doesn't look human.

A beastly, almost bear-like person marches toward me. His whole face and body covered in black mud ... and he's holding a weapon.

For a split second, I'm frightened.

Is he going to kill me?

I've never had this thought, this urge to run. But I do now, more than anything. I want to run.

Maybe it's the blurry vision causing me to see things, or maybe I'm hallucinating, but my body is telling me to flee.

So I do.

I crawl up from the floor with the last bit of strength I have and force my legs to move.

Despite the pain in my knees and the blood running down my arms, I bolt as fast as I can.

Through the thick jungle in front of me and past the branches that cut into my face.

I can't see more than five feet in front of me.

Can't hear more than the sound of my own heartbeat drumming in my chest.

Can't do anything but feel my way through the jungle, hoping I can find a path.

Hoping to get away from this ... monster.

Because that's exactly what he looks like.

The monster from my childhood nightmares.

However, the farther I run, the more exhausted I get. My legs can't keep up the pace. I'm counting breaths, listening to the rhythm of my own heart practically beat out of my chest. Everything around me begins to spin. I'm nauseous.

My body collapses to the ground.

The last thing I hear is his approaching footsteps as I fade out of this world.

* * *

Accompanying Song: “Hydraulic Lift” by Johann Johannsson

I don't know how much time has passed before I wake up again.

All I know is that my head hurts ... badly.

I open my eyes and blink a couple of times, but my vision is still blurry.

Groaning, I reach for my scalp, rubbing the sore spots. It doesn't feel like I have a gash, but I can't know for sure until I look in a mirror. When I bring my hand back down to my face, I don't see blood ... just dirt.

It's everywhere. Around me. Below me.

I'm in a pit.

Looking up, I'm momentarily blinded by the sun, and I block the brightness with my hand. That's when I notice the bars on top of the pit.

It's a cage.

My eyes widen, and I quickly pull myself off the ground, backing my body against the wall made of earth.

Where am I? Why am I here? ... And who put me here?

When I try to think about it, all I feel is pain.

Nothing comes to mind.

My memories feel lost. Vanished in a thick fog I can't seem to wade through.

All I remember is *him* ... that beast of a man.

Just thinking about it makes the hairs on the back of my neck stand.

Why do I feel this way?

My whole body is shivering.

I touch the earth around me, but it doesn't make me feel grounded. Not anymore.

I look up at the sky, wishing I knew where I was, wishing I remembered what I came here to do. And what that man has to do with it.

Because I'm almost certain he was the one who put me here.

Inside this ... cage.

Because that's what it is.

A pit to keep something from fleeing.

And that something is me.

But why? Why would he do this? Why would he keep me here?

And why does my body feel like it's been flung around like a sack of sand?

Did he hurt me?

All my muscles tense up from the insecurity of not knowing. I wish I could remember, but all I have are bits and pieces ... of horror.

My brain immediately forces them to leave.

Like it's protecting me from reliving everything all over again.

I stare up at the sky and narrow my eyes, focusing on the bars until I can see clearly again. I can't find out where I am or why I'm even here if I stay cooped up in this pit. There must be a way out of here.

I jump a few times, which hurts, but I push on. However, it's no use. I'm not nearly tall enough to reach the bars, let alone the edge of the pit.

So I resort to using my voice instead.

"Help!" I yell, my voice still hoarse and croaky.

I wait a few seconds before screaming again. "Anyone? Please, help!"

The longer I wait, the more my nerves take over.

I jump up again, trying to reach the ledge, with no such luck.

Right then, two feet appear on the ground right above my hands.

My eyes follow slowly, panicked. Lips quivering. Limbs frozen.

It's him.

That same man I saw before. Eyes as bright as snow. Skin marked with glistening mud. A bristly beard and matching dark brown hair ...

And a scowl that could make predators flee.

I almost tumble backward but manage to recapture my footing just in time. Because he was in the middle of bending over. He stops and narrows his eyes at me, but I can't help but notice the spear in his hand.

What the hell?

I can't just stand here and stare, so I force myself to speak. "Help me."

He stares back at me.

That's all he does ... just stands there and stares back at me.

So I add, "Please." My voice weakens under his rigid gaze. I sound like a damn mouse.

His lip twitches, and he arches his back, towering over the pit like some kind of prison guard.

Why won't he help me?

"Let me out," I say.

Still, no response. All I get is that same stare ...

I swallow it down like a tough pill.

If he won't help me, then I'm *sure* he's the one who put me here.

"Who are you?" I ask, my voice still barely audible. I'm finding it very hard to even open my mouth with that ... man staring at me. His mere presence gives me the chills.

He cocks his head slowly, but still no response.

Why won't he answer me?

What's his problem?

I need to get out of here, and he's looking at me like he doesn't even know whether I'm human. Like he ... doesn't want me out.

I swallow away the lump in my throat and ask, "Did you put me in here?"

The stern look on his face speaks volumes, and I back away slowly, huddling close to the other side of the pit. As far away as I possibly can from him.

* * *

Accompanying Song: ["If I had A Heart" by Fever Ray](#)

Lock

Her eyes bore into mine with equal ferocity. I wonder what she thinks when she sees me... if she's afraid.

She should be.

I'm not here to be the nice guy.

I'm protecting my land.

Who is this woman, and why did she come here?

I have so many questions, but when I open my mouth, I stop myself. I don't want to give her the idea that I'm going to be gentle. I'm anything but gentle.

She came into my jungle with fire and destruction, and I don't trust her one bit.

Judging from the way she's huddled in the corner of the pit, that feeling is mutual.

Good.

I want her to be scared.

For now, at least.

I don't know what I'm going to do with her yet.

If I should let her go, or if I should kill her.

Kill ...

Normally, it comes so easily to me. However, her eyes make me question my own judgment. I wouldn't bat an eye at killing a man. Not a single second spent on regret.

But a woman? I've never killed a woman.

And I've definitely never thought of killing one as pretty as she is.

"Answer me," she says out of nowhere.

Right ... she's asked me a few questions, but I have no intention of answering. Not until I decide what to do with her.

Especially not if she's already forgotten why she's here in the first place.

"Why did you put me in here?" she growls from her corner. "Where am I?"

I love the sound of her voice.

It's very ... innocent. But raw too. I can sense the insecurity. Smell the fear.

It makes my blood rush.

Does she even know what she did?

Did she forget how she ran away and then attacked me out of the blue? I still have the scratch marks on my face and chest.

From the looks of it, she probably doesn't even remember.

Maybe she was in shock. Or maybe she really is dangerous.

She doesn't look like it, though.

In fact, she looks very appetizing with those plump, red lips, short, wavy, dark blond hair, and that sweet, round face.

But what if she brings more destruction and ruins my only home? More ... people?

I shake my head and look away. It's hard to make decisions when she's gawking at me like that. This is the first time in a long while I've been faced with something, and I don't know how to proceed.

Guess I'll take some time to think.

CHAPTER TWO

Accompanying Song: [“Hydraulic Lift” by Johann Johannsson](#)

Juliet

The longer he stares at me, the more pissed off I get. Why won’t he answer me?

My body feels as if it’s been through a garbage disposal. If he knows something—anything—I need to know.

Regardless of whether he put me here. Which is strange, to say the least.

Because who in their right mind would trap another human being in a pit?

I frown, watching him watch me.

I wish I could force him to talk, but I don’t have any leverage.

The only thing I can do is wait until he finally decides what he’s going to do with me.

I hope it doesn’t take long because I should see a doctor. I don’t know what happened, but I remember the fire ... and the pain.

Everything about this is wrong, and he's probably the only one who knows what happened.

However, the moment I open my mouth to speak again, he turns around and leaves.

"Hey! Wait!" I yell, running to his side of the pit. "Don't leave! Please!"

I jump up and down, but it's no use. He won't come back.

"Please! Let me out!" I beg again even though he probably can't hear it.

I let out a sigh and back away from the side. I sit down in a corner and stare up at the sky, wondering how long I'll have to stay buried under the ground. He can't keep me in here forever because I'll make his life miserable if he does. I'll continue talking until he gets tired of me and finally lets me out.

It's the only option I have left if I ever want to see the world again.

Unless ... he doesn't actually plan on keeping me here ... alive.

I swallow down the lump in my throat and force the thoughts out of my mind.

I can't think like that. Everything will be okay. I have to calm down and put my brain to use.

There must be something I can do.

Suddenly, he appears again, this time carrying something other than a spear. He throws it down between the bars and into the pit. It lands right between my feet.

When I look down, my eyes widen.

It's ... a piece of meat.

What the fuck?

My jaw drops, and I cringe.

Why the hell would he throw that at me?

I pick it up and stare at it for a second. Yep. Definitely meat.

What am I supposed to do with this?

“Eat.”

My eyes immediately dart to the dark, husky voice.

It was him.

He finally talked.

But he didn’t say what I wanted to hear.

And he can’t stop staring at the meat either.

What ... he actually wants me to eat *this*?

I make a face and throw the meat on the ground. “No. Fuck no. What the hell is this?” I growl. “Let me out of here.”

He raises a brow and sighs out loud, then turns around again.

“No, no, wait!” I yell again, bolting to his side and jumping up and down again, but it’s no use. He won’t turn back around.

This is insane.

Some guy I don’t know locks me up in a dark, damp hole, refuses to speak to me, and then he throws meat at my face.

What the hell is happening here?

I thought this island was uninhabited. Guess we were all wrong.

Or I’m losing my mind.

I groan out loud, hoping he can hear. Then I stomp back to my usual spot and sit down again. I poke the meat a few times and feel the bile rising in my throat, so I close my eyes and pretend nothing ever happened.

Who the fuck does he think he is, chucking meat at me? Talk about barbaric.

I sigh again, wanting to scream. Not that it’s any use. I doubt anyone could hear me where I am.

Instead, I lie down and stare at the sky. Then I close my eyes and drift off into a different world. I fantasize about being back home in my own comfy bed, watching movies and binging on a bag of popcorn and a Coke.

I'd do anything for a can of Coke.

Anything for a box of chocolates ... a warm shower ... anything to make me forget I'm here in this deep, dark pit where nightmares are made.

Because that's the only thing that keeps me from breaking down right now ... the sheer hope that I will be able to go back to my old life again.

But I don't even know where I am. Or how I got here. Or why.

All I know is this place isn't my home.

It's *his*.

* * *

Accompanying Song: “One Of Twelve” by Johann Johannsson

With sticky, salty tears glued to my face, I wake up from a horrible nightmare.

Only, it wasn't a nightmare.

It's reality.

The ground is still dirt.

There's no comfort of a pillow, no bottle of water to drink from, no cell phone to check, no light to turn on.

Just this same old pit where he left me.

No wonder I slept so badly.

As I get up, my whole body is stiff and painful from lying on the hard ground.

I don't even remember falling asleep. I must've passed out from being so tired after everything that happened.

The sun has already gone down.

Is it night already? I'm not wearing a watch. All I have is the moon to know what time it is.

Barely any light shines into the pit, and the more I look up, the scarier this place becomes. There's no way out. What if I die of hunger or thirst? Or worse ... What if some predator comes here to get me?

I shiver at the thought, and I clutch my legs and pull them up, trying to make myself as small as I possibly can. It makes me feel a little bit safer even though I know how ridiculous that is.

There must be something I can do. Something to save me since that beast of a man obviously won't help me.

I stare at the walls in front of me and at the bars above me, and then I get up and start jumping. Up and down. Again and again. I don't give up. Not as long as I see my fingers go higher each time I try.

"C'mon, Jules, you can do this," I say to myself.

I'm sweating like crazy because I'm exerting so much of my energy. That, and it's so freaking humid here, it's almost impossible to move without getting drenched. This isn't at all like the climate at home.

I want to go back there. To my happy place. My comfy little home.

If I can just reach the bars and grab them, I might be able to push it open. I'll figure out what to do next once I get to that point. But I have to focus on getting it right.

Focus on not losing my shit because I still can't reach the damn bars.

"C'mon, Jules, you've got this," I say, blowing out another breath before I continue jumping. "You did this in school, remember? This should be easy."

I keep jumping. I don't know for how long, but I refuse to stop, even if my feet ache. I need to get out.

When my fingertips touch the bars, a rush of excitement shoots through my veins. One more jump and I manage to hold them with just the tips of my fingers.

I groan and pull as hard as I can, trying to lift my body, but the moment I do, one of the bars snaps in two.

I fall to the ground with a smack, hitting the back of my head.

Shit. That hurt.

Another groan leaves my mouth as I rub the back of my head.

As I open my eyes, there he is again. Staring straight back at me with that dark gaze.

For a second, I stop breathing entirely.

He's glaring at the damaged bars.

Will he punish me for breaking them? Hurt me for trying to get out?

Or worse ... kill me before I run?

Goose bumps scatter on my skin, but I refuse to let him know how scared I am. My body remains rigid on the floor as I watch his every move.

His hand rises ... and then he tosses something at me again.

It lands in front of me.

More meat.

The moment I look at it, I snap.

In a moment of rage, I pick it up and throw it back at him. "Stop throwing meat at my face!"

It slaps him right in the chest and flops down on the ground again.

He doesn't even seem fazed.

“What do you want from me?” I snap, my voice fluctuating even though I don’t want it to. I can’t control myself anymore. It’s so hard when this asshole is standing there, watching me as if my struggles amuse him.

Why does he keep throwing meat at me? What is his deal?

Does he actually want me to eat that?

I wince at the thought.

I haven’t eaten meat in years, and I don’t intend for that to change anytime soon. I don’t like killing animals for food, let alone eat the meat that’s already available. I don’t like the taste anyway.

But it doesn’t matter.

If he’d thrown carrots at my face instead, I still wouldn’t have eaten them.

I’d rather die than be kept in this hellhole like some kind of pet.

I cross my arms and refuse to look at him. If he won’t answer me, so be it.

He wants to play this game?

Fine ... I’ll play.

And I’ll win.

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CHAPTER THREE

Accompanying Song: “If I had A Heart” by Fever Ray

Lock

Why won't she eat?

If she wants to live, she needs food.

Maybe she doesn't like the food I gave her. But why? Who doesn't like meat? It's succulent, soft and chewy at the same time, and the salty taste always makes my mouth water.

I don't understand why she's making strange faces when she looks at the meat. As if the smell alone turns her stomach.

I've never met a person who didn't like meat.

Then again ... I haven't met a lot of people.

And I don't intend to either.

She's already a handful.

I cock my head and take a good look. She seems to have a small wound on the back of her head that she hasn't even noticed yet. My eyes skim over the top of the pit and find parts of the wooden bars snapped in half. Apparently, she's been busy.

I let out a sigh and contemplate it.

If the wound stays open like that, it might get infected. I need to take care of it.

Guess I've already decided then ... I'm keeping her.

But *where*?

She can't stay in that pit. It's too deep for me to reach in to, and she doesn't seem to want to keep herself alive, seeing as she's ignoring all the food I'm throwing at her.

What other options do I have?

Should I take her to my home? But what if she tries to attack me again?

I shake my head. Can't let that happen.

Guess I'll have to figure something out.

I turn around and walk off again. She screeches from all the way down in the pit, demanding to know where I'm going and when I'm going to let her out. She's probably anxious, but there's no need. Now that I've decided it'd be stupid to kill such a fine young woman, I'm dedicated to keeping her safe.

I had my doubts first, because she was so violent, but now I understand why. She was probably scared, and I get that.

Hell, I'm violent too, and that never made me think twice.

She'll fit right in.

I go back to my wooden crate where I keep my stash of tools and fetch the rope ladder that I made for climbing the tough terrains. If she's calm, I'll lower it into her pit. If not ... well, we'll have to wait until she is. I don't

like a lot of noise. I prefer things quiet. But I guess that's going to change now that there are two of us.

I march back toward the pit, and I can hear her voice before I get halfway there. She's shouting all kinds of things, probably cursing me, but I don't even know half the words she's using.

My feet are dangerously close to the pit, but I never fall in. I know this thing all too well. I know it won't collapse under my weight ... because I built the damn thing.

With a smirk on my face, I stare at that pretty little face down below, wondering what she's thinking. She keeps looking at me with those big, scared eyes as if she's wondering whether I'm going to hurt her.

I'm not dangerous.

At least not when I don't want to be. And I definitely don't want to be with her.

Because the more I look at her ... the more something starts to change inside me.

Looking at her fills me with a need I haven't felt before, and I don't know what to do with it. All I know is that I have this urge to keep her. So I will.

I go to my knees and cut the rope holding the bars together, then I lift it up. She gets up from the ground and walks closer to me. Now that the bars are gone, I can finally take a good look at her. She's even prettier than I thought. Thin and frail ... but very pretty. And tempting.

"Are you gonna behave?" I ask, my voice low and rigid.

I don't want to give her the idea that she actually has a choice.

She doesn't.

She puts her hands on her hips and snaps back. "Fuck you for putting me in here in the first place. How dare you?"

I shrug and grab the bars again, but the moment I start to lower them again, she speaks.

“No, no, wait!” She holds up her hand. “Don’t.”

I pause and listen.

“Fine, okay. I’ll behave. Now let me out.”

I narrow my eyes, not sure if I can trust her words or not.

She’s angry with me even though I haven’t done anything but keep us both safe from harm.

“Please?” she adds softly.

Fuck.

The sound of her voice when she begs me ...

It sets off all my senses.

Ignites a fire in my heart.

I want to hear it again.

“Please, let me out. I’ll do anything,” she says with tears in her eyes. “I just want to get out of this pit.”

How am I supposed to say no to those beautiful, glistening eyes? I can’t. No one could.

“You won’t run?” I growl, hoping she won’t make this any more difficult than it already is.

She nods.

I let out a deep sigh and drop the bars again, then I roll out the handmade ladder and hold it close to the edge of the pit.

* * *

Accompanying Song: “Sapir Whorf” by Johann Johannson

Juliet

He looks at the ladder and then nods at me as if he wants me to climb up that thing. But it looks unsteady ... and unsafe.

Still, it's my only way out of here. And I know I have to grasp this chance before he takes it away again.

So I walk to it and hold on tight as I step up the ladder. It's shaky, and the bristles of the woven rope scratch my skin, but I ignore every sensation right now in favor of survival.

If I can avoid dying here, wherever here is, I'll try.

However, the moment I come face to face with my captor, my heart starts beating in my throat and I can barely stay steady on the ladder.

When he grabs my wrist and pulls me up easily, as if I'm some ragdoll he can throw around, adrenaline rushes through my body.

He's bigger than I thought ... taller ... broader ... more muscular than I could ever imagine.

He leans in ... to sniff me.

My whole body tenses, and a shiver runs up and down my spine.

Did he actually just sniff me? What kind of caveman does that?

I'm acutely aware of how close he is and the way he's looking at me ... as if I'm something new. Something he's never seen before. A brand-new toy.

And right now ... he has his hands on me.

Dark mud stains right where his skin touches mine.

What does he intend to do with me?

I can't stay with him. He's the one who put me in this damn pit, so he's dangerous. I have to get out of here. Have to flee. Have to get to safety. Anywhere is fine as long as it's not with him. I can't trust him.

So the moment he releases my wrist to pull up the ladder, I bolt.

I don't think. I run.

My feet take me as fast they can, past the trees and into the jungle beyond.

I don't know where I am or where I'm going.

I just know that I need to get away from *him*.

Anything to stop him from putting me back into that pit.

Or worse.

I don't know what he's planning, and I don't intend to find out either.

I just want to go back home.

So I run as hard as I can, hoping I'm going in the same direction and not in circles. I don't want to get lost, but I have no freaking clue where I am, and this place ... it's like a maze.

Thick trees and bushes everywhere, not a path in sight.

How am I ever going to get home?

I need to find a marker. Someplace I can find my bearings like a large rock or a hill.

But how do I find one if I don't know where to look?

The only place is up, so I grasp a thick tree and try to climb it. It's tough, and the trunk is coarse, leaving scratch marks on my skin, but I ignore the pain and push upward, reaching for the next branch.

I manage to grasp it and pull myself up. On and on until I get as high as possible. Until I can look at the ground below me and see the vast jungle stretching for miles.

There's no city. No village. No boats or a harbor. Nothing but trees, beaches, and the endless sea.

Holy shit ... what is this place?

And then I see it ... in the distance ...

Smoke through the trees.

Scorched earth.

A part of the jungle completely ruined.

And in the middle is a mangled helicopter filled with smoke and bits of metal all over.

I swallow away the lump in my throat and let my eyes roam. I gaze at the horizon and the sea beyond, and I finally come to the realization ...

I'm on an island.

And the mere sight of this place instantly brings back all the memories.

They come pouring into my head at full throttle as if I'm watching a movie at high speed with images flashing by.

Everything from the flight to this island where I was supposed to run tests and explore with fellow wildlife biologists to the deafening sounds of destruction.

My hands tremble ... releasing the branches I'm holding.

My body tumbles backward, and I faint midway through my fall.

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CHAPTER FOUR

Accompanying Song: “Hungry Faces” by Mogwai

Juliet

Before

From my tiny window, I gaze at the ocean below. The horizon is spectacular with no land in sight. I never get used to its beauty. Traveling always makes me feel like this ... as if I'm becoming attune with nature itself.

I don't know why; I just like getting out there. In the real world.

Not being inside the lab.

I shiver at the thought of having to spend every single day of my life cooped up in some refrigerated basement chem lab. I don't know how my co-workers do it, but I guess they really love the microscope. Me? I much prefer to go into the wild.

Study the animals and the plants in their own habitat where they belong and coexist perfectly. Like a well-oiled machine but without the pollution or noise.

I smile to myself, thinking about all the things I'm going to see. I wonder if I'll discover a new type of plant or even a whole new animal species. That'd be amazing, but I shouldn't get my hopes up.

Even if what my boss said about the uncharted island part is true, that still doesn't mean there will be anything we haven't seen before.

I can't help but feel a little excited at the prospect of doing some research out there. When my boss told me I was selected for the program and that we'd be going to one of the most remote areas in the world, I practically peed my shorts from excitement.

Normal people would be terrified but not me.

And he knows that. I'm pretty sure that's why he asked me to go.

I prefer it out here, anyway ... far away from the bustling cities and loud noises.

Into the wild.

"Approaching," a voice resonates through my headphones, and I clutch them tightly to my ears to be able to hear him.

When I look out the window, I see an island come into view. A grin from ear to ear appears on my face as I can't control my giddiness anymore. I'm that excited.

"So ... excited?" a fellow researcher asks.

He told me his name before we got in together, but I forgot again. I don't mean to; it just happens. I have memory problems when it comes to remembering things about ... people.

"Of course," I reply with a grin, trying not to sound totally distracted even though I was.

“Don’t get too excited,” another one chimes in. “We have to set up camp first.”

I nod.

“A little foraging won’t hurt us,” the researcher says, winking at me.

“Foraging?” The other man laughs. “Jesus, Ollie, this isn’t some LARP game.”

Ollie ... that’s right. That’s his name.

He grins. “Why not? I know we’re there for research, but we can have a little fun too, can’t we? I mean, what’s the harm?”

“We aren’t paid to have fun,” the man says. “We’re there to work.”

“Who says I can’t do both at the same time, Pete?”

Pete raises his brow, grimacing.

“Dude, chill,” Ollie says. “I’m joking. Relax.”

“Right ...” Pete says. “As soon as we land, we’ll set up the tents and our gear, then get to work.”

“Aye, aye, captain,” Ollie jests, but the moment he sees Pete’s stern grin, he immediately stops smiling.

I look away, not caring for their petty arguments.

I just want to be there already.

And from the looks of it, we almost are.

“Seat belts on,” the voice rumbles through the headphones. “Prepare for landing.”

I can already see the beach up ahead, along with the trees and the thick jungle they’re a part of. We’re flying across the island to a designated spot on a hill with a flat surface, so it’s easier to land. The pilot expertly flies us across the luscious jungle and closer to the hill.

Just as we pass over it, a loud bang jerks me from side to side in my seat.

* * *

Accompanying Song: “Xenoanthropology” by Johann Johannsson

“What happened?” Pete screams as the pilot tries to stay in control.

There’s no response.

Another bang follows.

With a pounding heart, I look out the window.

Something flies right at me, smashing into the front and side windows, and I scream.

I can barely keep track of what’s happening. From the corner of my eye, I spot the pilot... unconscious. Something is lying on the controls ... a mangled animal.

My mind must be playing tricks on me.

Adrenaline rushes through my body as we make a turning maneuver, barely avoiding a ledge. Panic shoots through my veins, and my stomach curls into knots.

The metal around me creaks.

Bile rises in my throat.

We’re flying sideways.

Floating through the air.

Squeals mix with loud warning beeps.

I close my eyes as the metal scrunches and screeches against the cliffs.

Something breaks off. At the moment my eyes flash open, a piece flies past my window.

A piece of *us*.

While I hold my seat for dear life, the door is ripped off.

Ollie's seat belt comes undone, and he falls out like a piece of paper flying away with the wind.

Just like that, he's gone.

There's no time to process.

No time to think about what just happened.

Because we immediately crash into the trees.

Leaves and branches bounce off the windows, scratching them, marking them ...

A few rocks on our way break the last bits off.

The windows crack and shatter.

My seat belt comes undone, and I'm flung toward the front.

Everything happens so quickly. I can't do anything but feel.

I always thought death would be a fight. That I'd be able to struggle, to overcome it.

But this ... this is like being swallowed alive.

In pain and barely conscious, I lie on the ground.

There's nothing but screams.

An explosion right behind me follows.

Then ... nothing but silence.

* * *

Accompanying Song: ["Xenoanthropology"](#) by Johann Johannsson

Lock

Now

I grasp my spear and immediately bolt after her.

If I wasn't so busy rolling up the ladder, I would've noticed she ran, but I didn't.

Stupid.

I should've paid more attention to her, but I honestly didn't think she would run. That she'd be too scared to even try.

Guess I was wrong.

I track her down by following her footprints in the mud. They're messy and completely random. It's as if she ran without knowing why or where. As if she panicked.

I fear I may not get to her in time, but I can't let the jungle and its animals swallow her up. Not now that I've finally decided to keep her.

But the animals here are wild.

They will attack at any moment, without warning, and it's messy.

And bloody.

Fuck no.

Over my dead body.

She's mine now. I decided to keep her, so the animals will have to stalk some other prey. If they get in my way, I'll hunt them down.

The closer I get, the more agitated I feel, and I'm getting pumped up by the chase. I need to find her quickly before the sun sets. She doesn't know how to navigate this jungle like I do, especially not when it's dark.

I run as fast as I can, darting through the jungle like a tiger.

However, the moment I spot the red color of the top she was wearing, I stop in my tracks and turn.

I approach the bushes and push them aside.

There she is, in the middle of the overgrown leaves and plants.

Her body limp, and her eyes closed.

She's out.

Did she fall?

Or did she pass out from something else like a wound?

I grasp her and pull her up, but she still doesn't come to.

Damn this woman. If she stayed put, none of this would've happened, and she'd still be awake. What if something happened? I wasn't there to save her. She shouldn't have run.

I sigh as I lift her and throw her over my shoulder.

Nothing I can do to change it now.

She ran even though she said she wouldn't.

I guess I can't trust her words.

So I'll trust my own strength and intuition instead.

CHAPTER FIVE

Accompanying Song: “Hungry Faces” by Mogwai

Juliet

When I come to, my head hurts a lot less than it did, but I feel so hot.

Something's on top of me. Something heavy and thick. I don't know what it is, but it feels... furry.

I blink a couple of times and focus.

It's a blanket.

Actually, it looks more like a dead animal.

I shoot up, but I'm immediately bounced back down again to the bed I'm on. Pain shoots through my arms.

“Aww ... shit ...” I hiss, biting my lip.

I try to pull my hands toward my face to check, but I can't.

They're tied to the makeshift bed.

“What the ...?” I try to jerk free, but it’s no use.

He actually tied me up?

I try to sit up and check my surroundings, but it’s damn hard when your arms are tied to the bed in a way that makes it almost impossible to move. With some flexible and weird moves, I finally manage to get my legs off the bed and my hands awkwardly inched to the side.

I look around to see where I am.

I was right; it is a bed, made completely of wood and fur.

Are these real dead animals underneath me?

I cringe at the thought and immediately nudge the blanket away by moving out from underneath it.

What the hell is this place?

Everything in this hut is made of wood. The door, a bench, a table, even the thing that could pass for a kitchen, but not really.

Does he live here? Did he make a house all by himself?

It’s tiny but not too tiny. Like a home you’d rent for vacation.

Only this isn’t a vacation ... not for me.

I shiver. I wish I’d never got on that helicopter. I should’ve said no. Should’ve turned back.

But here I am. It’s too late for wishing. No one can turn back time and change what happened. I made a choice ... and now I have to live with it.

But I still can’t stop wondering if I’ll ever get off this island. I can’t stay here. People must be worried sick about me. They’re probably wondering what happened to the helicopter.

I’m alive, and they don’t even know it. I have to do everything in my power to let my family know.

But what about Ollie? And Pete?

I make a face and swallow away the lump in my throat.

I don't even know what happened to them. If they made it out alive or not.

I should go search for them.

I try to get up, but the rope around my wrists is a stark reminder of my position.

He did this.

That bear-man.

The same one who put me in the pit now keeps me in his makeshift hut as if I'm some kind of ... pet.

I'm not a plaything. I don't get why he thinks this is okay. I'm not an animal; I'm a human being, and he has no right to lock me up like this.

My eyes scan the room, looking for something I can use to free myself, but all I've got is a used unlit candle standing beside me on the wooden nightstand. Who knows what material he made the wax with. I'm not going to touch it—not that it'd be of good use, but still.

Guess I'll have to bite my way through.

I lower my head to my wrists and start chewing on the rope, trying to ignore the sharp pain in my gums as the fibers poke me. Fleeing right now is of bigger importance than the pain can ever be.

A sudden bang makes my eyes flash up in the direction of the sound.

The door slammed open.

And in steps a man ...

No mud.

No dirt.

Just abs. And hair. All hair ... everywhere ... on his broad legs ... his hard abs ... his solid pecs. Dark brown messy hair and a short, bristly beard.

Holy shit.

Did he wash off the mud?

Maybe I was really out of it ... because he certainly doesn't look like a monster anymore.

He looks like a buffed up alpha male with protruding veins and all.

He stares at me with a raised brow, and his eyes settle on my lips.

I've been caught red-handed.

I immediately stop chewing the ropes and smile like an idiot.

I don't want to give him any reason to put me in that pit again.

But no matter how hard I try, I can't stop staring at his body.

And that the only thing covering his junk is a banana leaf.

Well ... you don't see that every day.

* * *

Accompanying Song: "If I had A Heart" by Fever Ray

Lock

I place my spear in the holder and fold my arms, glaring at her.

She was trying something again ...

Biting her way through the ropes, eh?

Won't work. I know how to tie a knot.

Guess she has yet to find out how determined I am to keep her right where she is.

If she thinks she can escape, I've got bad news for her. There is no escape.

None.

I open the wooden box in the corner of the hut and throw in the meat jerky that I made. It'll make for a nice dinner this evening. I grab the flask of water and take a drink. Some of it spills, but I don't mind. The cold water on my body makes me less overheated.

But then I notice her eyes, and I immediately stop drinking.

Is she thirsty?

I don't know whether she's gawking at the flask ... or at me.

She looks thirsty, all right. I never asked her if she wanted a drink back when she was still in the pit. And from the looks of her tongue darting out to wet her lips, she is clearly looking for a sip.

So I march over to her and hold out the flask. She inches back a little, glaring at me as if she doesn't trust me. As if I'd poison her or something.

If I wanted to kill her, I would've done it already.

So I grab her hands and push the flask into her palm. "Drink."

She greedily accepts it and glugs down the water as if there's no more to drink. Even though I've saved a whole barrel full of rainwater. Plus, I'm working on running a pipe all the way from the mountain to my hut, but it isn't ready yet. In the meantime, she'll have to make do with what I give her.

And I intend to give her everything I have.

The moment I sniffed her, I was convinced. Damn, she smelled so nice.

Though I have to admit, it's very different on this island with another person.

I never had to share it before, and it's proving to be quite difficult to just have to deal with her, let alone take care of her. But I will manage. I've been taking care of myself for all these years. She just doesn't know this, and I can see it in her eyes.

The mistrust.

I don't blame her. I put her in a pit, but it was for a good reason. I don't like being attacked out of the blue, and she was volatile after I rescued her. It was as if she wasn't really there. I don't know how to explain it to her, so I won't. I don't want to frighten her any more than I already have.

If we're going to be on this island together, we'd better start trusting each other.

And where else to start than with a good meal?

She must be hungry after all that running and fighting. She hasn't eaten since she came here. Maybe she didn't like the jerky because it had been on the ground. But I'm more than willing to give it to her straight out of the box.

When she hands me the flask back, I place it on the table and go back to the box, fishing out a few pieces of jerky. The moment she sees me holding them, her face contorts. I still attempt to give it to her. With a smile too.

Still, she shakes her head at the meat.

What is wrong with this woman?

Why won't she eat?

I even gave her a smile and everything. What else does she want from me?

Does she not want to live at all or what?

I push it against her lips and say, "Eat."

"No ..." she mumbles, leaning back as far as possible.

I growl, "Eat."

Her eyes dart up to mine, so I gaze at her with equal ferocity. I haven't met a lot of women, most of them were just as scared of me as she was, but none of them were this fiery. This one's gutsy. I like it.

What I don't like is how she keeps refusing to eat. She has to eat something. Otherwise, she'll die.

“Eat,” I say again, losing my patience.

I hold it up to her mouth and wait until she opens it. She takes the tiniest of tiny nibbles and chews on it with a face that reminds me of the ones I saw before I was on this island ... back when I still thought I could adapt to *their* world.

My face darkens as I watch her chew with reluctance until she swallows and coughs immediately after.

I nod and hold out the meat again.

“No, no more, please,” she says, her voice croaky.

I grunt and place the jerky on the nightstand beside the bed. Frustrated, I turn around and leave the hut, slamming the door shut behind me.

I wish I understood women, but I don’t. I don’t fucking understand any person, at all.

That’s why I live on my own, and having her here only reminds me of that fact.

Maybe I should’ve gotten rid of her, after all. It would’ve saved me the trouble of looking out for her, feeding her, giving her my bed.

Goddammit.

I grasp the ax from the box outside and begin chopping wood. It’s the only thing I can do when my mind is going in circles. I need to get this shit off my mind and focus on work. Things I can actually fix, instead of ... women.

Why do females have to be so complicated?

I gave her food, and she’s not even thankful.

She won’t eat, she didn’t thank me for rescuing her, and she keeps running away.

I sigh and ram the ax into the block, letting out all my anger on the wood.

I refuse to give up. I made my choice, and I'm sticking with it. I will just have to tame the girl.

One way or another, she will eat, and she will adjust. Maybe in time, she'll learn to appreciate the island ... and maybe even start cooking for me.

Yeah, that'd be nice.

Her, me, a spit-roast on the beach, and a fur blanket to cuddle on.

My mouth waters at the thought.

Maybe this girl destroyed some of the jungle, but it doesn't have to all be bad.

She could be my woman.

That'd definitely be nice.

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CHAPTER SIX

Accompanying Song: “One Of Twelve” by Johann Johannsson

Juliet

After rubbing the back of my head with water and a piece of fur, he gave me more jerky, but I refused. I still don’t know what he was doing when he rubbed the water all over me, but as it was a wound that had only just started healing, it hurt.

I just let him do it so he’d let me be afterward, and he did, luckily.

I’ve been sitting here hungry all day long, but I still prefer that over eating that jerky again.

I can still taste it in my mouth even though I’ve tried to wash it down with water plenty of times. Nothing works.

I wish I could go out and find some herbs or something, some plants, anything. I could cook them and make a veggie stew with a fire. I know how to find the good ones, the plants you can eat. But he won’t let me walk around in his hut, let alone untie me so I can go search for real food.

I grumble and lie down on the bed. I have to admit it's comfortable with this fur on top, but I can't help but feel bad for the animal that had to suffer. Did he make this on his own, like everything else in this hut? Is this how he lives? Like a savage in the jungle? A wild man?

Goose bumps scatter on my skin.

I can't imagine what it must be like if he has ... he's been alone for all this time.

No one's on this island. I remember that well enough from all the research we did before we decided to make the trip to come here to study the wildlife. We specifically chose this location because of no human interference.

But it has ... because he's here.

Living on the island as if it's his home.

Maybe it is.

But why would anyone want to live here? So desolate and far away from any human contact? He must've chosen here for a reason ...

But why?

Does he want to be left alone?

Or did something happen that made him flee here?

I take a deep breath and sigh. There's no point in worrying about things I can't change.

We're both stuck here now on an island that won't get any more helicopters or ships until the call is made for a pickup.

Suddenly, I shoot up from the bed.

That's it.

The call.

That's my way back to my own life. My own home.

A telephone.

I frantically search my pockets but find nothing. Of course, I left mine in my bag ... which must still be in the helicopter somewhere.

What about Ollie? And Pete?

I haven't heard anything from this ... man. No signs that they've been found.

Could they still be alive?

They had phones on them too; maybe they've already called for help.

I can't sit here and do nothing. I have to try to find them. Or at least the helicopter. Anything to get back home. Waiting it out isn't good enough. I have to act *now*.

I immediately start chewing on the rope again, not giving a crap about it hurting. I'll bite through the pain, literally, just to free myself.

Asking that brute is no use. He keeps glaring at me as if I'm the stranger here. As if he doesn't know what to do with me. I know he can talk—I've heard his English—so he knows how to speak. The problem is that he *won't*, and I don't know why, but I don't care either.

If he won't help me, I'll do it myself.

While he's off looking for more prey to hunt, I chew through the rope. I don't stop. Not even when I hear him open something outside and making lots of noise with something that chops. I don't care what he's doing. As long as he doesn't see me, I'm good.

The moment the rope snaps, my heart skips a beat, and I find it hard to contain my excitement. But I have to lay low. He can't know I'm free, or he'll tie me up again. No, I have to wait until it's nighttime before I make my escape.

So I lay down on top of the rope and pretend it's still attached.

When he comes inside again, I don't get up.

When he feeds me, I chew through the jerky and swallow it down without complaints.

When he smiles, I smile back, feigning thankfulness even though I'm more worried and scared than anything.

Although I can see in his eyes that he won't hurt me, I'm still afraid he'll throw me in that pit again if he finds out I freed myself. And I refuse to go back in there. I'm not an animal. I'm a human being ... and apparently, he hasn't had contact with a lot of them to know how to treat them.

Still, watching him toil around the hut, making things neat and tidy again, and crafting little pots and spoons from wood makes me feel for him. I don't know if it's pity or sadness in my heart, and I can't think about it too much because I know I shouldn't get attached.

I don't know him, but he captured me as if I was a treasure he found in the wreckage. I have to keep in mind things can go bad at any moment.

And I really, really want to go home.

More than anything.

When the sun has been gone for a while, and the only remaining light in the hut is the small candle beside my bed, he starts prepping the bed. He places a pillow made of fur on top, blows out the candle, and attempts to crawl behind me.

"Wait," I mutter, which makes him pause. If we're going to share a bed, the least we should know is what to call each other. "What ... what's your name?"

He frowns. "Lock."

Lock. What a strange name for a man like him.

Not that it matters. Biting my lip, I respond, "I'm Juliet Baker."

"Jul ..."

He seems to have some trouble pronouncing it.

"Juliet," I repeat.

“Julet.”

“No, Juliet.”

“Jule,” he murmurs, his voice lower than usual.

I shake my head. “Ju-li-et.” It can’t be that hard, can it?

“Ju-et.”

I roll my eyes and sigh. “Jules is fine.”

“Jules.” He smiles. “Jules.”

I don’t know why, but every time he says my name like that, my whole body tingles. Shit.

Don’t let his husky voice get to you so much, Jules.

He’s just a man.

Who captured you.

And is still keeping you as a pet.

I take a breath and sigh. He keeps staring at me for a few more seconds before crawling onto the bed as well.

I tense up the moment he lies down beside me, and I can feel his breath on my skin even though he doesn’t touch me. There’s no telling what he’ll do if I don’t fight this, so I force myself to stay vigilant while I hear him fall into a deep sleep. He snores while I refuse to sleep.

When I’m sure he’s far beyond the possibility of waking up, I slowly inch up from the bed. He groans, so I stop momentarily and watch him roll over on the bed, facing the ceiling. His face is quite rugged but in a good way. Handsome, even.

What are you doing, Jules? Get out of there!

Right, I shouldn’t be thinking about this at all.

It’s time to run.

I quickly rid myself of the rope around my wrists and throw it on the ground. I put on my shoes again, which he took off and placed underneath the bed.

I go to the kitchen area and grasp the flask, then I bolt for the door. There's no lock, and it opens without making too much sound. I hope he doesn't wake up soon because he'll probably chase me, which is why I have to make a run for it.

Now.

* * *

Accompanying Song: “[Arrival Trailer Music](#)” by Johann Johannsson

I hastily fill the flask with water from a barrel outside. Next to it is a torch, so I grab it and light it with the fire outside. Then I run. The torch guides my way through the jungle, through the thick bushes and trees. When I find a big trunk, I stake the torch in the ground and climb up again. When I'm high enough, I scour the area until I find ground zero.

It's not far, so I immediately jump down, grab the torch, and run toward it. If I go in a straight line, I'll reach it eventually, and if I'm uncertain, I can always climb another tree to check my bearings.

I know how to navigate my way around the land. If I need water, I know how to find it; if you just go down, all the water flows from mountains to the rivers down below. And if I need food ... well, I can tell which plants are edible and which aren't. Guess the survival skills the teacher taught me back in college are paying off.

But I'm not thinking about food or water right now. I need to get to the helicopter. I want to know if Ollie and Pete made it out alive. And I need to find a cell phone, so I can communicate with the outside world and let them know I'm okay.

So I keep running—past a tiny creek, over some rocky terrain, and into the deep jungle—until I finally come across a few charred trees. Not far beyond is an entirely scorched area ... and in the middle of it all is a helicopter ... or what's left of it.

The metal wrangled and molten, I can barely recognize it as a helicopter. It's turned upside down with pieces of metal hanging by a thread. The whole thing looks as though it's about to collapse.

I take a deep breath and venture forward, determined to find what I'm looking for.

With the torch to light the way, I avoid debris and tree stumps, navigating around to the helicopter. There's no good way to get inside, other than through the window on top of the wreckage, so I plant the torch in the ground again and grasp the wreckage and pull myself up.

The metal makes weird noises. Creaking and screeching, as if it's about to collapse completely, but I push through. A small piece breaks off where I grasp it, and I almost tumble down, but I manage to catch myself before I fall. I grab a sturdier ledge and pull a bit before I actually make another move to make sure it doesn't snap.

After a few more steps, I'm near the window, so I tear off a piece of my shirt and wrap it around my hand to knock away any remaining shards of glass. Then I hoist myself inside.

The whole thing quakes the moment I land inside the blackened cockpit, but a few seconds of pause keeps things together. For now.

The moon provides a small trickle of light into the helicopter.

That's when I notice the seat in front of me.

Or at least, what used to be a seat. And buttons. And a stick.

Nothing's left of it.

Or the human who was in it.

It's as if the pilot melted together with the seat.

I cringe and try not to touch anything as I pass by. It could all be evidence for when the police come to investigate, and I don't want to be blamed for messing up a crime scene. Because who knows what happened ... I don't.

The last thing I remember was our flight and that we were just about to land ... and then a lot of noise and banging, and me being thrown out of the helicopter.

And then *him* ... finding me. Taking me.

The rest is history.

I blow out a deep breath and force myself to concentrate on the here and now.

Slowly, I crawl across the floor beyond the cockpit and look up.

My jaw drops the moment I see Pete ... and the metal bar that pierced his body.

No matter how hard I try to suck in the air, the oxygen won't enter.

My throat clamps up before I can squeal.

Fuck.

This is horrible.

Pete's dead ... and Ollie ... Where's Ollie?

I think as hard as I can, and then it hits me. He was flung out of the helicopter before it crashed.

I quickly move to the left and climb up to the window on the rolled-over helicopter. When I gaze outside, the moonlight is enough to show the bits and pieces of metal scattered on the ground ... and pieces of clothing ... and flesh.

My hand flies to my mouth, and I struggle to keep the bile from rising.

I force the image out of my head.

That is not how I'll remember him.

I have to tell their families. I have to let them know what happened. Give them a proper funeral. Something ...

I gather my courage and move back to Pete's body, frantically searching for my bag or his. I push my hands underneath my seat but to no avail. When I turn my head, I spot my phone ... under Pete's seat.

Despite swallowing, I can still taste the sourness in my mouth, but I push on anyway. I have to get that phone, no matter how horrible it is. Crawling as low as I possibly can, I push my hand underneath and feel around, trying not to touch the body. The smell is so vile; I have to stop breathing while I'm trying to find the cell phone.

When I've got it, I quickly pull back and lean backward as far away as I can against my own seat. With unsteady fingers, I ram the buttons, but no matter how many times I press the start button, it won't turn on.

Of course, it won't.

The phone's completely blackened with stuff leaking out of it.

The batteries have long been drained or burned.

“Fuck!” I yell, smashing it down onto the floor.

Tears well up in my eyes as I stare at the body in front of me, wishing he could speak and tell me what to do. How can I ever bring them back home if I can't even get us off this island?

Fucking useless.

As I sit here, contemplating on what I should do, the helicopter begins to creak.

The sound makes me uneasy, so I slowly start to move back to the cockpit again. Every time I place my hands and knees on the floor, the metal screeches. It chases adrenaline through my body and makes my heart pump faster. I need to get out of here before this thing collapses. I can barely see, as the moonlight is my only source of light right now. But if I keep going in the same direction, I'll surely bump into stuff I'll recognize.

First the door, then the seats, and then the stick and buttons on a dashboard, which I use to push myself up from the skewed floor. As I crawl out the window and hold it tight to make my descent, the metal screeches louder than ever before.

“Jules!”

In shock, I turn my head toward the distressed voice.

There he is, a few feet away from the wreckage, holding a spear in one hand and a lit torch in the other.

He tracked me all the way here?

Suddenly, the slippery surface of the helicopter makes me lose my grip, and I squeal as my feet fall off the ledge. I barely manage to hold the broken window, but glass punctures my skin.

“Jules!” he yells, rushing toward me, dropping the spear and torch.

I try to grasp the ledge of the window with both hands, but I’m swinging from the helicopter right now ... and it begins to sway.

My eyes widen as the whole thing comes apart at the seams right beside where I am.

The tremors make me lose the last inch of my grip.

I fall.

My feet hit the metal, and I bounce off, my body turning toward the ground headfirst.

Shit.

I close my eyes before I hit the ground.

Except I don’t.

Two strong arms catch me right before I do.

It all happens so fast.

The wreckage creaks and contorts, collapsing under its own weight.

One moment, Lock clutches me, holding me close to his body.

The next, he stumbles and falls.

I'm thrown forward into the scorched grass.

My body rolls out away from the crash site. I groan and cough as I recover from the fall. When I lean up, I blink and look around.

There's nothing left of the helicopter.

Nothing ... but a man underneath a large chunk of metal.

I don't recognize the agonizing sound that leaves my throat.

“Lock!”

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CHAPTER SEVEN

Accompanying Song: “On The Nature Of Daylight” by Max Richter

Juliet

In shock, I stare at the scene in front of me.

Grass burns from the dropped torch.

Metal lies scattered on the field.

Nothing's left of the helicopter except the blades, ripped apart.

And there, right underneath one of the plates, is Lock.

As I crawl farther up, my body tumbles over, still weak from the fall.

Then, his body rises from the ashes, lifting the metal off his body with just his weight. He grunts and roars, his face red and his veins bulging as he pushes it off him. With every ounce of strength in his body, he crawls out from underneath the scorched debris, and I am in awe... my breath stolen by the sheer power he exudes.

I can hardly believe what he just did ...

As I blink, all the memories of what just happened flood back in.

Him, wrapping his arms around me.

Saving me from the fall.

Throwing me to prevent me from being crushed.

Sacrificing himself for me.

I suck in a breath and shiver, gazing around me.

Should I run? He's here, right here. He could lock me up, throw me in the pit, or tie me up again. Do I want to risk it? I should run ... I should definitely run.

For a moment, our eyes connect ... but then he collapses.

First to his knees. Then his hands. His face hits the dirt, and his eyes close.

Silence.

A sharp pang pokes me in the stomach.

My brain is telling me to run ... but my heart ... my heart bleeds with guilt.

I can't leave him there. I just can't.

If I run now, he'll probably die.

And even though my mother always said I should be my own savior because no one else will be, and that I should always choose myself over anyone else, I push myself to do it.

No matter how hard my brain tells me to stop thinking about it and just run, run for safety and find another way off the island ... I can't.

I simply can't let another human being die if I can prevent it. Even if it means saving the bad guy. He saved me.

So I get up from the ground and stumble toward him, forcing myself to keep moving toward *him*, the man who captured me and kept me as a pet ...

Toward ruin.

But I face it with pride.

I grasp his heavy arms and lift them over my shoulder, gathering the inhuman strength I need to carry him away from here. I already know my feeble muscles won't be enough to get him to safety, let alone patch him up.

But I don't care.

I don't care if I can't because I *will*.

I *will* do this.

I have to.

I must.

Because he saved me.

And now it's my turn.

"C'mon, Jules!" I scream at myself as I force myself to walk with him hanging around my shoulders. I push and push, but his body only moves an inch at a time.

And I'm already dead beat by the time I've moved ten steps.

But I'm not a quitter.

Not on my life.

So I keep pushing, keep dragging him along until my whole body is covered in sweat and his in mud. Until my muscles feel as though they're about to tear and my bones feel like they're going to snap. And still, I push on.

To the edge of the scorched ground away from imminent danger.

Where the green grass meets the blackened earth ... and then I collapse under his weight.

I'm tired, so tired.

I can't move.

Can't even fight to get up from underneath him.
So I lie here and stare at the tiny plucks of grass and take in a whiff of their scent.

It reminds me of home.
Of resting and taking naps.
Maybe I should.

Don't give up now, Juliet.

It's too soon.

You're too young.

You haven't seen the world yet.

Haven't lived enough to know when time ends.

You need to see. Feel. Touch. Taste. Witness.

You need to find that perfect habitat filled with beautiful creatures and plants.

Throw eggs at that annoying neighbor's home, who's always searching through your trash looking for ways to report you.

Dance at your boss's wedding after you shoved three pieces of cake into your mouth.

Go on blind dates and kiss that random guy you don't even like but who has a great ass.

Find the man of your dreams and have babies with him, two, maybe three.

Grow out your gray hair and sit in front of the television, remembering the good life.

The life where you were loved.

Where you were deeply in love.

Where you had ... real love.

Go on ... for love and all that it entails.

Go on.

I force my eyes to open.

Blinking a couple of times, I gather all the strength I can muster and crawl out from underneath Lock.

Groaning, I turn around and go to him. I roll his body over and check his pulse with two fingers. It's still there ... but faint. I have to get him to wake up.

But how?

I do the only thing I can think of and smack him in the face. Not too hard, but enough to shake some sense into him.

Still, my hand lands harder than expected, and I suck in a breath, uttering, "Shit ..."

Suddenly, he groans.

My eyes light up as I watch him struggle to regain consciousness.

"C'mon, Lock. Wake up," I say, but he keeps his eyes closed.

A small rope is wrapped around his body ... with a leather flask attached to it. I tug it off the rope and open the lid, checking the contents by dabbing some on my finger and licking it.

It's water.

I open his mouth and pour some inside.

He coughs and spits it out, but his eyelids part too.

"Lock ..." I mutter. "Drink."

I pour a tiny bit into his mouth, and finally, he swallows it down, followed by a groan.

He grabs my wrist, and for a second, I think of pushing him away and running off, but I ignore the feeling and stay. He brings my hand back to his

face and greedily pours more water into his mouth until he's almost choking on it.

"Whoa, not so fast," I say, pulling it away before he drowns himself.

I screw on the lid and say, "We'll get more..."

"Jules..." he mutters, grasping my wrist again. "Jules..."

I nod, tears welling up again.

In the dark, I can still see the shimmer in his eyes. "Jules... you... ran." His voice is painful. Too painful.

I thought he'd be mad because he had to risk his life to save me. Instead, he's mad because I broke my promise. Because I ran away from him.

This man never ceases to surprise me.

Still, I feel guilty as hell for having put him through this.

"I know," I say, looking away. "Look, I can't..."

He cups my chin and makes me look at him. I'm acutely aware of every single inch of his skin touching mine. "You're safe," he mumbles.

My lips part, but I don't know what to say.

Is that all he cares about?

Not that I ran?

Not that I tried to get away from him and broke my promise?

Why?

But before I can ask him, he's already closed his eyes again.

"So... tired."

For a moment, I contemplate leaving because he's okay now. He's alive. He'll be all right, won't he?

Still, I can't bring myself to actually move.

I lie down on the grass beside him and stare up at the bright stars and moon in the sky. I sigh and turn my head to look at him.

From this angle, and without the mud, he doesn't look dangerous at all.

He looks ... human.

* * *

Accompanying Song: "The Rocket Builder" by Johann Johannson

Lock

After a few minutes of rest, I'm much better. Saving her from falling was no easy feat, but I managed. Although I do feel like I pulled a muscle here and there, especially after lifting the metal.

I can't believe I actually went to that damn cursed bird.

What I wouldn't do for someone to talk to, huh?

Guess I've really lost it this time.

This girl ... the moment I discovered she escaped, I ran right after her. Didn't even bother securing the stuff at the hut so the animals wouldn't take it. I just grabbed my spear and torch and hunted down her tracks.

It wasn't hard ... but when I found her, she was already crawling out of that metal monster again. Why did she go there in the first place?

She's been running away from me ever since she got here. The jungle is no place for a woman like her.

I grumble as I rise to sit in the grass and look at what's left of the metal bird.

Not much, other than a couple of loose, broken plates.

“Why did you come here?” I ask, gazing at her as she sits up too.

“I was looking for a phone. Something to contact the outside world with.”

I nod. Figured. She wants to get off this island so badly ... while I’m doing everything I can to stay on it. Alone.

Guess that ship’s already sailed.

I shrug and get up off the ground, groaning when my muscles protest. I can’t be weak now. I have to get back to the hut first before I can rest.

Besides, I have someone else to look out for too now.

Someone who doesn’t even want to be here.

Sighing, I grasp the torch and the spear. Luckily, it didn’t burn down the whole jungle, just a small charred spot. After inspecting the area and making sure it’s safe, I turn around and start walking back. Or rather, stumbling. But I don’t care. I’ll get back to the hut anyway.

Her? I don’t know.

“Hey!” she says. “You ... you’re going to leave?”

I don’t answer. It’s what she wanted, right?

To be alone?

Like me?

“Wait!” she says, her pretty footsteps audible behind me in the dirt.

For some reason, they make my heart squeeze.

Fuck.

I told myself I wouldn’t ever do this.

People.

Never again.

Yet here she is, tagging along behind me, following me back into the thick lushes of the jungle.

It's quiet the entire way there except for our footsteps. I don't speak. She doesn't speak.

Exactly what I'm used to.

But when before it used to keep me calm, now it's just getting on my nerves.

She's never been this quiet before. She always threw questions at me whenever she had the chance, and now they're all gone. I kinda miss them.

Maybe she's finally learned I don't have the answers she seeks.

But when I glance at her over my shoulder, I realize that's not the case. Her brows drawn together, she keeps looking down at the ground as if she's trying to be invisible.

I don't understand why.

I don't understand a whole lot about people. That's why I wanted to get away from them in the first place.

But not her.

I want her to stay.

Suddenly, she stops and plucks something off a bush.

I frown, staring at her. When she sees me looking, she mumbles, "I can use this later."

A random plant? Right. Whatever she wants.

I sigh to myself as I turn and face the jungle again, determined not to let Jules distract me. First, we have to get back to the hut. I'll figure out what to do with her after.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Accompanying Song: “Again” by Noah Cyrus

Juliet

As we get back to the hut, I breathe a sigh of relief, which is quite a surprise. Lock lies down on the bed, and I fill up the flask in the water barrel outside and hand it to him. Then I grasp a wooden cup from the table and pour in a tiny bit of water. I throw in the herbs that I found and smash them with a stone, rubbing them until only the residue mixed with the water remains.

Together with a small banana leaf I found in one of his handmade closets, I approach him. He sits up right away, vigilant as I come closer. I don’t want to overstep my boundaries, but the wounds on his body definitely need to be examined.

I sit down on the bed beside him—not too far but not too close either. I dab the leaf in the mixture and try to rub it on his skin where the gashes and bruises are, but he immediately pulls back, throwing me a glare that could scare away wolves.

Standing my ground, I say, “It’ll help.”

I gently grasp his arm again and pull it toward me gently, so he won’t get agitated. He finally gives in and lets me rub it in. He hisses and sneers at me. “That hurts.”

“It won’t if you let it sit for a while.” I want to help him and repay the debt I feel I have because he saved me … But if he won’t let me, there’s not much I can do.

“What is it?” he asks.

“Just some herbs to numb the pain and rinse the wound,” I explain. There’s not much else around in this jungle, but I know how to use it to my advantage.

“Herbs …” he growls, and he turns his head away as I keep rubbing the wounds.

His arm rests on my lap as I work on him, and I can’t help but be amazed by the sheer size of him and the veins protruding from his skin. He’s probably the most muscular man I’ve ever seen. And touched …

God.

Why am I even thinking about this?

Shaking my head, I focus on the task at hand, but he keeps sneaking peeks at me and making me blush.

Shit.

He kept me in a pit like an animal. He’s not someone to pine over. Ever.

You need to focus on getting out of here, Jules.

I can’t be thinking about any of this right now.

I’m stranded on an island without communication with the outside world.

People died.

People are actually dead, and I'm sitting here, helping the one who's trying to keep me here.

Tears well up in my eyes as the guilt washes over me.

I should be doing something instead of sitting here.

Something ... but what?

My phone is dead, and I have no way to get back home.

How am I going to let everyone know what happened?

How am I going to do justice to Pete, Ollie, and the pilot and bring their bodies back to their families?

I clear my throat and put down the bowl. "Done."

When I look up again, he's staring right into my eyes, and it makes me inch back. His hand rises to my face, and I flinch. His thumb gently brushes across my cheek, and then his whole hand rests on my cheek and jaw. I stop moving. I stop breathing entirely because of the shock.

He's actually touching me ... softly.

Sweetly ... as if he wants to console me. As if he wants to give me more than anger.

I'm stunned by his sudden warmth. And I'm not even scared.

I should be. He's dangerous.

He could lunge at any moment and hurt me.

I shouldn't trust him.

I lean away from his hand and attempt to get up, but he grabs my wrist.

"No," he says, his voice not as dark and alarming as before but still stern.

Frowning, I bite my lip and say, "Let me go ..."

The face he gives me is not the same one I saw before. Not contorted, but with brows raised and a soft expression. Why? Is he pitying me?

“You’re sad.”

No shit, and part of it is his fault, but I won’t say that. Not out loud.

He wouldn’t understand anyway. Right?

“Don’t,” I reply, swallowing down the lump in my throat.

I don’t want to discuss it because it’ll only make me feel things I don’t have room for right now. I need to focus on survival first.

But that look he keeps giving me is impossible to ignore, and it’s pissing me off.

After what he did, he should not have this effect on me.

I shouldn’t feel this much when I look at him, but I do.

Why do I feel so much when I look at him … so much anger and sadness at the same time but also something else? Something I can’t describe?

He’s a savage living in a jungle …

How did he get on this island?

Why would anyone choose this life?

“Who are you really? What are you doing on this island?” I ask, unable to keep the questions at bay any longer.

The look on his face turns grim, and he grumbles, “I like to be alone. I don’t like … people.”

I nod, clutching my hands because I don’t know what else to do with them. “I can understand that. Did something happen that made you dislike people?”

He throws me a look and sniffs the medicine I rubbed on his arm, wincing. I never said it’d smell nice, but it’ll help.

“I ran … from something.” he says after a while.

“Away from your real home?” I ask.

He nods reluctantly.

“Why?”

Grinding his teeth, he spits, “I don’t wanna talk about it.”

He gets up and walks out the door.

Just like that.

Leaving me alone to think ... *what the hell was that?*

* * *

Accompanying Song: “[No Witness](#)” by LP

Lock

I’ve been carving wood with my sharpened stone for half the day just to get my mind off her.

But no matter how hard I work on this new bowl, I can’t stop thinking about her and the things she asked me.

Why would she be so interested in me all of the sudden?

I have nothing good to tell her.

Nothing to be proud of.

I spit on the ground and continue banging the wood until it’s the right size.

That woman’s going to be a handful. I already know it. But I made this choice, and now I’ve gotta live with it and stick to it, no matter how hard it gets. I’ll just have to keep avoiding the questions until she finally realizes I mean it when I say I want to be left alone.

I don't enjoy talking about my past, let alone thinking about it.

My memories from before this island are horrible, and I refuse to drown in them.

I prefer to focus on the here and now.

Or more specifically, her.

Because she's been waltzing in and out of the hut and roaming the jungle without restraint, and it's making me wonder if I should do something about that.

She might hurt herself.

Get stuck somewhere.

Or worse ...

There are predators out there.

Far worse than any of the danger I pose to her.

Granted, mine is different kind of danger.

Ever since she's been prancing in my life, I've found myself unable to look away any time she walks by. She has this impossible-to-ignore way of walking that grabs my attention. Hell ... that perky ass would grab any man's attention. Lucky for me, I'm the only man around right now.

And the longer I stare at her thick, juicy ass, the harder it becomes to resist the urge to just grab her and throw her on my bed and fuck her.

I don't know why I'm feeling this urge, but I am.

I never used to be this interested in sex, but this woman ... something about her puts all my senses on high alert. She makes me so goddamn frustrated I want to lash out and punch a tree.

She takes something from me that I can't seem to take back.

Control.

Maybe I should take it back.

As I turn toward the rustling sound in the bushes, she appears again, and my body immediately tightens at the sight of hers bouncing about.

Fuck. Me.

Why does this woman have to make life more difficult than it already is?

I still wonder what the hell she's doing in there. She borrowed my pouch and didn't return it. What is she using it for?

Is she trying to make more of that green sludge she smeared on my arm?

It was painful, but it did numb the wound after a while.

But what if she's doing something else completely? Something to undermine me? To get back at me for putting her in that pit?

Or worse ... what if she's trying to escape again?

I don't know why, but the mere thought of her leaving this island makes me want to scream.

I don't know what it is that makes me so protective, but I'm obsessed with her to the point of staring at her all day. I can't help myself ... or my body, for that matter. Because it's sure as fuck responding to her in every fucking way possible, and it's infuriating.

Guess it's time to jerk off again tonight.

Suddenly, the door to the hut opens, and when I turn around, there she is, standing in the opening with her head cocked slightly ... as if she's inviting me to come take her.

A devious smirk spreads across my lips.

"Um ... can you come inside for a second?" she asks.

Narrowing my eyes, I put down the wooden bowl I was working on and stalk toward her.

Her eyes widen slightly as I tower above her, and for some reason, they linger on my chest.

Is she ... checking me out?

Her face turns red, and she immediately spins on her heels and marches back inside, pointing at the table.

When I follow her gaze, I notice the whole array of berries and ... leaves on the table. I make a face.

“What is this?”

She pats the seat and grabs a bowl and chuck in some of the leaves and berries. “C’mon.”

Is this some kind of trap?

Still, I do as she asks, thinking it might make her easier to deal with. If it bores me, I’ll just take what I want anyway. I stare at the leaves and the berries in front of me as she does too. What is this supposed to mean?

“Well?” she asks.

I raise a brow. “What?”

“Eat.”

I frown. “This?” I laugh. “This is not food.”

Without a smile in sight, she leans back, folding her arms. “Really?”

I nod firmly. These are plants. They’re for other animals, not for humans.

“You can eat this. Trust me.” She picks up one of the leaves and puts it in her mouth, chewing it. “Tastes fine to me.” She shoves the bowl closer to me and adds, “Try it.”

“No.” I shove it back again.

“Why not?” She shoves it closer again.

I get up from the seat, open the box in the kitchen, and take out some jerky. I take a big bite and show it to her. “This is food.”

She sticks out her tongue. “Ew ...”

“Why don’t you eat meat?” I ask.

“I’m a pescatarian,” she says, sighing.

“A what?”

She sniggers but hides the smile from me with her arms.

Goddamn ... she actually smiled for the first time since she came here.

And it’s beautiful ... but she’s hiding it from me, and I don’t like that one bit.

“What are you laughing at?” I ask.

“You,” she says.

I frown. “Thanks.”

“You can eat berries and leaves, you know. Humans aren’t carnivores. They’re omnivores.”

“Yeah ...” I have no idea what she’s saying right now, but whatever. I don’t like grass. I like meat.

“It means you can eat a lot of things. More than just meat.”

“Nope,” I say, and I sit down with my jerky instead.

I’ve eaten enough green stuff in my past, and I never liked it. Not one bit.

“Fine.” She sighs again as she sits down in front of me and pulls the bowl toward her, eating her leaves and berries instead.

Why doesn’t she want my jerky? And why is she trying to feed me leaves and berries?

When I thought she might start cooking for me, I didn’t picture this.

Still, when I watch her eat the berries with glee, I can’t help but smile. She does really like that stuff. I wish I could share the enthusiasm, but deep down, I’m a meat man only.

However, there's still that sadness in her eyes that won't go away. I wonder if it's because of the people who died in that metal bird thing, or if it's because she's stuck here on this island ... with me.

I clear my throat and say, "Tell me why you're here."

Her eyes perk up, and she stops eating entirely. "Here? This hut?"

"The island."

She swallows down the food and puts down the berries, licking her lips.
"Research. I'm a wildlife biologist."

"A what?"

She chuckles, and it's the cutest sound I've heard in a long while.
"Someone who studies wild animals and plants in their natural habitat."

"Oh ..."

Her brow rises. "Oh, *what?*"

I'm surprised she actually had a reason. I thought this island was a safe place, away from the people, but apparently not. They even come here, to this remote island, just for ... studying. Whatever.

She shouldn't have come.

The jungle can be dangerous for fragile women like her.

She probably wouldn't survive a day out there without the comfort of this hut.

I gaze up at her from underneath my lashes. "This island isn't good for people like you."

"Why not?" She folds her arms. "I can take care of myself. I know how to survive. How to adapt."

She doesn't understand ... She didn't grow up the way I did.

Didn't fight her way through people just to be fed.

Didn't have to live in a cage for years on end.

Didn't have to survive—her *entire* fucking life.

This place is my home, but it's not always as pretty as it looks.

"This place ... it's dangerous."

"So?" She shrugs. "I can handle it."

I doubt that, but I like her tenacity. That alone deserves some points.

I wonder how she'd do with a spear in her hands. Probably not that well.

Of course, I'd be more than willing to let her handle my *private* spear ... but I don't think she'd be so eager.

"I get it," she says. "You wanna be left alone."

She's right about that. But I can make an exception.

"You can stay," I say.

I'm beginning to like her.

She gives me a weird look. "Um ... okay. Thanks, I guess?"

It's not what she wants, but it's not as if she's getting off this island anytime soon.

"Is that why you put me in that pit?" she asks out of nowhere. "To keep me as a pet?"

I cock my head. Is that what she thinks? That I put her there like an animal?

I'm not that kind of person. I don't keep people in cages just for fun.

It was for safety.

"No. You attacked me, so I did what I had to do," I reply.

She frowns, confused. "What?"

So she really doesn't remember.

"When I rescued you from that metal thing ... you attacked me." I point at the tiny scars on my arms. "This ... was you."

“Oh ...” Her face reddens. She sucks on her bottom lip, and for some reason, I’m completely fixated on it. Images run through my mind of sucking on them too.

Fuck, I should learn how to tame my own desires.

They’re getting out of hand.

“Sorry,” she says, clearing her throat. “About that. I didn’t mean to hurt you. I was just—”

“Scared,” I fill in for her, and I shrug. “The mud does that.”

“That’s what I thought. But why do you put that on?” she asks.

“To scare away the animals,” I reply.

“Oh ... I see.”

She nods, chewing on her lip, her eyes slowly drawing down my chest and back up to my face again like she caught herself even though it wasn’t in time. I saw it.

At first, I wasn’t sure if this would work ... me and her together.

I was worried she might attack me again, but she’s turning out to be a nice companion. After all, it did shock her when I told her what she did when we first met, so I’m sure she didn’t mean to. Besides, I can help her be more aware of her surroundings.

Tame her a little.

“So what now? Will you lock me up again?” she asks, putting a berry in her mouth.

Grinning, I scratch my beard and reply, “Not if you behave ...”

When she spits out her berry, I’ve decided.

I’m not just going to keep her.

I’m going to make her my woman.

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CHAPTER NINE

Accompanying Song: “Devil In Me” by Halsey

Juliet

At night, I lie motionless on the bed as he crawls in beside me.

It's the first night with a full stomach and without having to sacrifice my morals.

The first night without restraints around my wrists.

But not without mental restraint.

I'm growing increasingly aware of the mountain of a man lying right next to me. I hold my breath whenever he twists and turns. I'm terrified of him touching me, but I'm not scared he'll hurt me ... I'm scared of my own reaction.

Scared of how my body tenses whenever he breathes.

How goose bumps scatter on my skin when he groans in his sleep.

How easy it's becoming to forget about the outside world.

I shouldn't let myself slip.

Not here on this island.

Not ... with a man like him.

I shiver as his arm touches mine, blood rushing through my veins.

I immediately roll on my side and close my eyes, forcing myself to sleep even if I can't. I have to stop thinking about him. Have to stop being so aware of his rock-solid, muscular body mere inches away from mine.

What if he turns my way?

What if his ...

No, Jules, stop thinking about this shit.

He put you in a goddamn pit.

There's no way you should ever feel anything but anger for this man. And fear. Lots of fear. Hold it, because it's the only thing that'll ever get you off this island.

Not him.

Never him ... not as long as I can stop it.

When his hand creeps up along my waist in his sleep, I jolt out of bed.

I can barely breathe.

Memories of the way he touched me when I was crying flash through my head. The sheer need I felt when he did it terrified me. I actually wanted him to keep touching me.

But it's wrong. It's so damn wrong.

He captured me, imprisoning me.

I was supposed to do research, not hang around with *him*...

He's a savage, and I'm a scientist.

I'm not even supposed to be here. I'm supposed to be home, bringing the bad news about Ollie and Pete. I'm supposed to be doing something. Not just sit here and wait.

No one will find me here if I don't act. If I don't do something to be seen.

That's it. I've decided.

I grab the torch and light it, then grab one of the digging tools he made. Before I leave, I glance behind me to make sure he's still asleep. A loud snore is enough to know, and I shut the door behind me and walk off.

Through the jungle ...

Away from the hut, away from him.

My destination? The beach. The only place anyone would spot a light in the remote chance someone might pass by this island. It's my only shot.

It might be dangerous, and I don't know how long it'll take to get there, but I'll make it. The torch lights the way, and I clearly remember which way to go from the last time I climbed a tree and looked around.

It doesn't take me long to get there, but I'm still not prepared for the beauty of the ocean at nighttime. It's so quiet out here, and the sand is pearly white, untouched by human interference.

I stare up at the sky, marveling at the bright stars. I could never see them this clearly back at home. They're a sight to behold, and for a second, they make me forget where I am.

But I can't forget. I can't ever forget what happened here.

I have to get Ollie and Pete home.

So I take a deep breath and get to work.

* * *

Accompanying Song: “[Believer](#)” by [Imagine Dragons](#)

Lock

I wake up when I roll off the bed, smacking my face against the ground.

“Fuck ...” I groan, blinking as I come to my senses.

When I crawl up, I notice the bed is empty. No wonder I fell off.

But where’s Jules? How long has she been gone? Did she go outside to take a piss or get some water? Or worse ... has she ran off again?

Frowning, I search for my torch, but I can’t find it anywhere even though I’m sure I left it here somewhere. She must’ve taken it.

“That woman ...” I growl.

Fuck me. She’s going to pay for this.

Where the hell does she think she’s going? This is an island. There’s no place she can run where I can’t find her.

She’s stuck with me ... whether she likes it or not.

But this ... this pisses me off.

I try to be nice, I try to give her everything she needs and feed her, and this is how she repays me? By running off again? Even when she said she wouldn’t?

Grunting, I grab a stick from my stack, soak it in the wax I’ve scraped off the trees, then set it on fire. I’m going to find her, no matter what. I don’t care how long I have to search or how far I have to walk in the middle of the night.

I’m going to find her, capture her, and take her back to my hut ... or the pit.

If she can’t keep her promise, I won’t keep mine either.

I run through the jungle to the easiest tree to climb up and take a look around. Not far from here, there's a light ... something's burning.

It has to be her.

I jump down in one go and bolt off toward the place where the light came from.

The beach. What the hell is she doing there?

It doesn't take me long to find out. The moment I exit the jungle and see the ocean, I also see her ... stacking wood and leaves in the sand, then setting them ablaze with the torch.

Fuck me.

She's building a signal?

Not on my watch.

“What is this?” I roar.

My voice instantly makes her turn her face toward me, her eyes big ... with a look that says she knows I've caught her doing something bad.

Grunting, I march back into the jungle and jump up into a banana tree. Tearing off a leaf, I jump down, go straight to the ocean and fill it with water, then march toward the fire she made.

“Wait, what are you doing?” she asks, holding up her hand as I approach.

I ignore her and chuck it on the fire anyway.

“No!” she screams as the fire goes out. “Why did you do that? You asshole!” She kicks the sand into my face, but I don't give a shit about any of that.

I throw the leaf down on the ground and pick her up instead, throwing her over my shoulder.

“Hey! Asshole!” she screams, banging her fists on my back as I walk back across the sand. “Let me go!”

“No … you didn’t listen to me.”

“I don’t care if the jungle is dangerous; I want to go back home!”

“You said you wouldn’t run,” I growl back, trying to ignore her fists pounding on my back.

“That fire was my *only* way to contact the outside world! You ruined it!” she squeals, but I ignore her.

She’ll calm down once she’s in the pit again. I won’t be persuaded by her sweet little face anymore. No matter how much she pouts at me, I can’t let these feelings inside my body get to me. She’ll ruin me …

Ruin this precious island.

This place I call my home.

No one can come here.

No one …

Maybe it was a mistake to allow her in too.

“Put. Me. Down!” she growls, kicking my chest so hard I have to cough. In that same second, she manages to squirm through my arms like a little monkey and rushes off, back to the stack she made.

I turn and cock my head. “Come. Here,” I growl. “Now.”

“No!” she says, folding her arms. “How dare you? I’m not your goddamn pet. You can’t just throw me over your shoulder like some caveman.”

When I walk over to her, she hides behind the stack of wood, circling it, as if she thinks it’ll stop me from chasing after her. As long as she roams this island freely and tries to destroy it, I’ll never be satisfied. If locking her up keeps her from trying to lure in more people, so be it.

“What is wrong with you? You want to be left alone, but you won’t let me off this goddamn island!” she yells.

“A fire won’t get you anywhere,” I growl, still circling her, trying to get close.

“It’ll grab the attention of airplanes or boats passing by. But now it won’t because you put it out!” she snaps. “You know what? Fuck you. I tried to be nice, but you make it so goddamn hard. Why can’t you just let me be? I never asked for your help.”

“You come to my island and destroy the jungle. You did this. Not me,” I reply, getting all worked up.

“It was supposed to be temporary. And if anyone knew you were here, no one would’ve come.”

“Exactly,” I say. “I don’t *want* anyone here.”

“But I am, and I *want* to go home. That helicopter crash ruined all our supplies. I have nothing to build on.”

Helicopter ... that must be that metal bird.

“I can’t live here,” she continues. “On an island, with no other people, no proper food, no running water, no technology. Nothing.”

She makes it sound as if this island is the worst place you could ever be. As if she only likes it for the research but not the life. She doesn’t see the beauty in the desolation. The calm in the dark of the jungle.

My home.

She doesn’t like my home. The place that makes me feel like I’m allowed to live.

Maybe that’s why I feel like screaming and punching the trees behind me. Because she doesn’t appreciate this life. This jungle. Me.

Because even if I refuse to admit it, it’s nice to finally have a companion.

Too bad she doesn’t see it the same way.

She doesn’t have *nothing*.

I frown, growling, “You have *me* ...”

CHAPTER TEN

Accompanying Song: “Touch” by Marz Léon

Juliet

My lips part, but I don’t know what to say.

I’m stunned.

Completely incapacitated by his words. They’re so simple, yet they mean so much ... because they’re from him.

He doesn’t say much, but when he does, he means every single word he utters, including this.

Him ... he thinks having him is enough for me. That I could be happy here because he’s here.

And he wants me?

Is that what he means?

I swallow away the lump in my throat. My body has long stopped circling the stack of wood, my feet unable to keep trying to run.

Part of me wants to scream for having lost the only means to contact the outside world. For him blocking the way out and not wanting me to escape. But another part of me feels the pain, feels the hurt that bursts out of him the moment he looked at me with those eyes.

Those eyes that bore into mine with a need I haven't seen before.

A loneliness I didn't think I'd ever witnessed ... until I came here.

But is that all I am to him?

Something to take away the solitude?

I didn't come here for him, and I can't just stay for him ... can I? It's not right.

We aren't right.

And I don't believe for a second he'd even be remotely interested in me in that way ... in a way a normal human being would ... when he's kept me in a pit like a pet.

Normal people don't do that.

Then again, maybe he never knew what it's like to actually be normal.

I don't know where he came from, how he came to this island, and why.

Maybe he had a horrible youth. Maybe that's why he refuses to discuss it.

There must be an explanation as to why he hates people so much.

Still, he'd rather keep me here, miserable and unhappy, than let me go just for the sake of keeping this island from getting visitors. It's wrong. It's so wrong ... yet I can't do anything to stop him from putting out the fire.

Doesn't matter how many times I try to reignite it, he'll keep coming back to douse it.

He's that kind of man.

A man who won't stop until he has what he wants.

And I already know if I stay here any longer ... the same will happen to me.

There's no denying it. The tension between us is inescapable, which is why I wanted to run. God, I wanted to run so badly. Because this man ... he'll be the end of my world.

Holding on to the hope that I can go home keeps me safe, keeps me sane. But him? He crushes that whole desire and replaces it with a need I'm not sure I want to feel.

However, none of his reasons are more important than mine.

He has no right to stop me. No right to keep me here.

“What now?” I hiss. “Are you going to keep me here forever?”

He grimaces and shakes his head, then turns around and walks off into the jungle again.

Frustrated, I grab my torch and immediately follow him.

“Hey, where are you going?”

“Back home,” he growls, not even looking around.

He keeps stomping ahead.

“Yeah, well, I want the same thing, but that’s not going to happen now, thanks to you.”

“Go light your fire.”

“What?” I mutter, trying to keep up with his steady pace.

What is going on in his head?

“I don’t care.”

I don’t get it.

It’s as if he’s lost the will to fight me. But why now?

Is it because of what he said?

“But why?” I ask. “Why now? Why not let me be before?”

He shrugs and keeps on walking, completely ignoring me.

I don't understand this man.

"Answer me," I ask, trying not to sound harsh. "Please."

"Why?" He suddenly stops and turns around. "You want to go? Go!"

I'm shocked by his outburst and don't quite know how to respond.

"Go," he repeats. "I'm not stopping you."

I frown. "Lighting that fire will take ages now. The wood is wet. It'll take me an entire day to gather all that wood. Will you help me?"

He stares at me with a blank face, as if he doesn't give a shit.

Right.

I sigh. "Should I just go back to the helicopter and look for more cell phones then? Maybe something survived in the wreckage. Something with a battery. Maybe I could get reception if I go up higher. Up on a mountain or something?"

"No!" He grabs my wrist and pulls me closer. "No. Absolutely not."

I'm taken aback by his sudden abrasiveness. I don't get why he can go from uncaring to completely enraged in a split second. It's as if he cares ... and then he doesn't.

Or maybe he's trying not to but can't help himself anyway.

I swallow away the lump in my throat and say, "Why not?"

"It's dangerous. Lots of animals."

"So?" I shrug. "I'm a wildlife biologist. I know my way around animals and nature."

"You don't know this place. *This* jungle. I do," he says through gritted teeth. "You don't know the wilderness as I do. You haven't lived it."

I jerk my arm free and say, "But *you* have ... so you can take me there safely. Help me."

His brows draw together. "No. Absolutely not."

I put my hands on my side. “Then I’ll go by myself.”

He grinds his teeth and points a finger right at my face. “Don’t try me.”

“Or what?”

He cocks his head. “The pit.”

Is he threatening me?

I narrow my eyes. “You wouldn’t ...”

Out of nowhere, he picks me up again and starts marching into the jungle.

“No!” I yell, pounding his back. “You said you wouldn’t!”

“I will if you don’t stop putting yourself in danger,” he growls, still pushing through.

Goddammit. Why does he keep doing this? I’m not some toy he can play with and do whatever the hell he wishes with. I can take care of myself perfectly fine.

However, from the corner of my eye, I already see the bars on the ground, and it makes my blood rush.

The pit.

We were closer than I thought.

“No, no, no!” I say as he lifts the bars with one hand while the other is firmly on my ass.

“Please!” I beg as he pulls me off his shoulder and holds me in his arms.

But the moment I see his pristine eyes, I stop struggling entirely. The sheer dominance he exudes forces me to come face to face with my own limits. My own desires.

I can’t stop looking at him and neither can he.

We’re stuck in a battle of wits, both as headstrong as can be.

Neither of us will quit.

With his sturdy arms around me, protecting me, I realize something.

He's not trying to hurt me or put me there because he's mad at me for making that fire. He doesn't want me to hurt myself.

And we're both trying to run away from one obvious thing.

The sexual tension drifting between us.

* * *

Accompanying Song: “No Witness” by LP

Lock

For some reason, I find it hard to look away.

Those eyes keep making something tug in my chest, making me want to do things I really shouldn't.

This woman isn't healthy for me.

She flew into my life and hasn't stopped trying to ruin it bit by bit.

Yet I can't bring myself to hate her. Not even when she wants to leave so badly.

When she says this place isn't right for her ... when me being here isn't enough for her.

I sigh and shake my head.

Women.

I slowly put her down on the ground, making sure to hold her wrist in case she's thinking of running away again to start some other fire. I gave her a chance, and she followed me instead.

She made her choice.

Now she stays.

I'm tired of playing games. Tired of her wanting to stay, then leaving, then staying.

What reason could she have for being so indecisive?

Unless, I'm not the only one feeling ... things.

And the more time I spend with her, the more I'm eager to find out. But that headstrong attitude of hers sure makes things complicated.

“T-thank you ...” she mutters, sucking on her bottom lip.

I can't help but focus on how wet her lips are. Hot damn.

“For not putting me in the pit, I mean,” she adds, clearing her throat as she tries to jerk her arm free. But I'm not letting go. “Can I have my hand back now?”

I shake my head. “You're coming with me.”

“What? Where?” she mutters as I pull her along through the jungle.

“Home,” I reply.

“You don't have to hold my hand, you know. I can walk,” she says, sounding all vexed by the fact I'm taking back what's mine.

I don't fucking care if she wants to light a fire or not.

She had a shot to do whatever the fuck she pleases ... and now it's my turn.

I stampede back to the hut and throw everything aside, slamming open the door and pushing her inside.

She stumbles back against the table, her hands reaching for anything she can use to fight me, but that's not going to work. I don't leave sharp objects behind. I'm not that stupid. Especially not when it comes to a woman as volatile as she is.

“What are you doing?” she asks, reaching for one of the bowls. Interesting choice of weapon.

Frowning, I approach her, but she holds up one of the wooden bowls I made as if she’s going to throw it at me. “Don’t.”

“What are you going to do with that?” I ask, taking another step. “Hit me?”

She nods, hissing. “I’ll do it.”

As I stand before her, I grab her wrist. “No, you won’t.”

I slowly lower it.

She doesn’t even fight back.

Her breath hitches in her throat as I lean down and whisper, “See?”

She purses her lips, trying to hide the blush on her cheeks by hissing, “Because you’re holding me.”

“Am I?” I release her wrist and cock my head.

“You’ve been holding me in this hut ever since I came here. Like a prisoner.”

“I gave you a chance to light your fire.”

“Yeah, after you threw water over it and ruined it,” she scoffs.

“And you still followed me back …” A smirk spreads across my lips.

“So? Where else was I supposed to go?” she asks.

“Anywhere but here, right?” I say, raising a brow.

She narrows her eyes and looks away, breathing out a sigh.

So I lean over and whisper in her ear, “Lie.”

Then I turn and walk back to my kitchen area.

* * *

Accompanying Song: “Touch” by Marz Léon

Juliet

For a second there, I almost forget how to breathe.

Not because I was scared of him ... but because of my own feelings.

The way he approached me and towered over me was intimidating, but in a totally different way. Not threatening in a violent way ... threatening to my integrity. My morals. My heart.

He was so close to my face, I could feel his breath on my skin.

And deep down, I was desperately hoping he would kiss me ... right there ... beneath my ear.

I shouldn't let this affect me, yet it does. I'm his prisoner.

I'm not supposed to be pining for him, yet I am.

And he knows it.

Shit.

I could see it in his eyes, in the way he looked at me. His reflect that same hunger.

Maybe that's why I'm scared. Scared of what might happen if I let go.

I can barely turn around and face him as he's cleaning some of the bowls that we used in the kitchen area.

Why did he just walk away like that? Was it to taunt me? Get me to speak up? Admit what I'm feeling?

No, I refuse to.

He's playing with my heart, and I don't like being played with. Especially not when it comes to what happened to me on this island.

I'm not some girl he can use for fun and then discard. It happened before with other guys who only wanted me for my body and nothing more. They hurt me ... and he will too. I just know it, and I won't allow it.

He's pushing my buttons to see if I'll run, so it'll be easier for him to lock me up again. He's trying to make me give him a reason to tie me up and throw me in the pit.

Well, I won't give it to him. Not if I can help it.

He turns around to face me, and I clutch the table to get a hold of myself so he won't try to seduce me again. He throws me a look and then points at the bed.

"Sit down," he says.

I don't reply. Instead, I stare at him the same way he is staring at me.

But something about the way he looks at me makes it impossible for me to even react ... let alone refuse.

So I slowly walk to the bed, his gaze on me like a hawk.

As I sit down, he approaches me, and then I notice the thing in his hand.

Rope.

He grabs my wrist and pulls it toward the edge, tying one of my arms there.

"Really? Again?" I sneer. "I won't run. I promise."

He doesn't reply; he just grabs my other hand and ties that to the other edge of the bed, making it impossible for me to untie myself unless I go that same tedious route as before and start chewing again.

Goddammit.

Of course, he won't believe me. I broke my promise before, so who's to say I won't do it again?

I let out a sigh.

He hovers over me to make sure they're tied properly before sitting down beside me. When he places a hand on my leg, I flinch. He's never touched me there before. And fuck ... it made my pussy thump.

"You. Stay," he growls. "I'll be right back."

He gets up off the bed again and prepares to leave.

"Wait, where are you going?" I ask.

"Out," he says, slamming the door shut behind him before I can ask any more questions.

Shit.

He actually left me tied up and alone in a hut with no way to protect myself. Where the hell did he go? And more importantly ... what am I supposed to do now?

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

Accompanying Song: “No Witness” by LP

Lock

When I return, she's still tied to the bed, as she's supposed to be. From a distance, I check the rope, and I'm surprised to find it's still completely intact. She hasn't even tried to chew through it.

Nice.

She's finally learning how to behave. It's about time.

Although that look on her face makes me anything but happy.

She's still angry with me, and I get it. I did some bad stuff, but I did it for a good reason. Still, that doesn't make it any better. She doesn't wanna be here, and it's my fault.

Despite looking like a brute, I don't want to be one. I don't want her to be unhappy because it makes me unhappy too. So I've decided that the right way forward is to make sure she likes me first before I ask her to stay. Get her to warm up to me.

And I know just how.

I go to the kitchen area and throw everything I've gathered into a bowl.

"Welcome back," she murmurs from her little corner.

I grab a bowl and fill it with water outside, then come back in, only to find her staring at me curiously. "What are you doing?"

She'll find out quickly enough.

I grab the two bowls and walk toward her. She sits up as far as she can on the bed as I sit down beside her, holding the bowl close to my body because she's trying to peer inside.

I want it to be a surprise.

"Close your eyes," I say.

She raises a brow. "Why?" Her voice sounds insecure.

I smile. "Trust me."

She narrows her eyes, contemplating it for a second. Trust is the first step. The rest comes next. We're nowhere without it, so I want to teach her this. I don't want to be her enemy.

"Please?" I add as she did way back when.

It makes her blink a couple of times, but then she finally closes her eyes for me.

She sits there, waiting, her body locked in position, skin bare ... ready for plunder.

Perfect.

But I have to hold myself back if I want this to work, so I clear my throat and focus on the bowl in my hand. I take out a berry and push it against her lips.

"Open your mouth."

"What is it?" she asks, frowning.

“Do you trust me or not?”

After a moment, she tentatively parts her lips, and I push the berry inside. “Bite.”

When she does, her eyes flash open, and she grins. “A berry?” She glances at the bowl, so I guess the surprise is gone now. “You brought me berries?” She giggles.

“What?” I say, grabbing another one.

“Nothing … it’s just …”

I narrow my eyes as I push another one into her mouth and watch her chew meticulously. I can see her swallow, and I imagine her tongue and how good it would feel wrapped around my dick.

Fuck.

“You said you only wanted meat,” she says, pulling me from my thoughts.

I wish she’d want the meat …

And I don’t mean the one from my kitchen.

Fuck me, I’m getting too excited about seeing her tied up in my bed. I shouldn’t … not yet, at least.

“I do,” I say. “But you don’t.”

I push another berry into her mouth and watch her eat it with glee.

“So you’re feeding me now?”

“Shhh …” I stuff more into her mouth until she’s laughing. “Eat your food.”

“Or what?” she taunts. “I’m already tied up; what else are you gonna do?”

“Oh …” A deep rumbling laugh leaves my throat. “There are plenty of other *things* I could do.”

She almost spits out her berries. Almost. “Like what?”

“Curious?” I muse, lifting a brow.

“Maybe.” She licks her lips and then ogles the berries again. Or my dick. I’m not sure because the bowl is right between my legs. “More?”

Oh, yes … there’s definitely more.

And I can’t wait to give it to her.

But first, I have to woo her and make her see how amazing this place is.

“I see something else there too … leaves?” she says.

I hold one up. “Hope it’s the right one.”

She nods, laughing again. “You did good.”

“Thanks,” I say, scooting closer as I push the leaf into her mouth. “It’s my peace offer. Is it working?”

“Maybe,” she murmurs, chewing.

“That’s a lot of maybes,” I reply.

She cocks her head. “Well, you did tie me up.”

I swallow and let my eyes roam freely across her body, wondering what else she’d let me do … if I gave her the right kind of treatment. And when she catches me looking, I’m not even ashamed.

“We’ll see what we can do about that later,” I reply.

* * *

Accompanying Song: [“No Witness” by LP](#)

For a few days, I work on making the hut a suitable place for two. I’ve been carving a bed, and it’s shaping up to be nice extra seating too. Much better than the stumps I used for chairs.

When it's done, I wipe the sweat off my forehead and grab some of the leftovers fur and throw it on top. Perfect.

I grab the flask and chug some water. As I lower it and swallow, I catch her ogling my chest, but she quickly looks away again.

Grinning, I ask her, "What do you think?"

"About what?" Her voice fluctuates in pitch, so I'm guessing she thinks I'm asking her what she thinks about me.

But why would I ask that?

I already know she likes me even though she'd never admit it. She's practically eye-fucking me at this point, but it's obvious she would never let herself act on it since she's supposed to hate me. And I deserve it.

"Oh, you mean that *thing*?" she says, looking at the bed, so I nod. "What is it?"

"A bed."

"Oh ..." She frowns as if she's confused, but I don't see the problem.

It's nearly evening, time to sleep, so I throw some more furs on top of the new bed I made and lie down.

"What ... are you doing?" she mutters.

I turn toward her on my elbows and look at her from afar. "Sleeping. And you should too."

"No, I mean ... why there?" Her skin starts to flush, and I can't help smirk at that beautiful shade.

Is she really asking me why I'm sleeping here instead of with her?

"Thought you could use some space," I reply, winking.

"Oh, right." She nods a few times and looks away, turning around on her back eventually.

“Good night,” I say, closing my eyes as I try not to think about her too much.

“Night,” she replies in the sweetest voice. I still can’t get used to her being here.

I let out a sigh in the hopes I can concentrate on sleeping, but it’s proving difficult when I don’t hear her breathing right next to me. I never knew I could actually grow attached to hearing her sleep. Despite the fact she doesn’t sleep a lot, when she does, it makes me want to wrap my arms around her.

I’ve never given in to the temptation, though.

That might prove to be more difficult as the days pass by.

I wonder how long that resistance will last … for the both of us.

“Lock.”

I look up.

Did she say my name, or did I imagine it?

She’s staring up at the roof of the hut and murmurs, “I can’t sleep.”

“Close your eyes,” I say.

“It doesn’t feel safe,” she adds, then she turns her head toward me.

“What do you mean?” I ask, leaning up again.

She shrugs and lets out a sigh. “I don’t know. I … never mind.”

She rolls over to face the wall, so I turn around too. However, her words still gnaw at my mind. I can’t let it go, so I get up and go to her. I sit down on her bed and slowly lie down. She doesn’t move, doesn’t even flinch as I lay my head down beside her and breathe in and out.

Her whole body is covered in goose bumps, though.

I smile and gently touch her skin with my hand.

“No one can come into this hut. You’re safe,” I murmur.

She doesn't respond.

The electricity between us is undeniable as all her muscles tense up under my hand. So I tuck my hand underneath my head and focus on trying to relax even though I'm fully awake and struggling to control my growing hard-on.

Her hair prickles my face, but I like the sensation. Her hair smells so good, so feminine; I can't stop sniffing her. Is that bad?

It probably is. I don't want to scare her away again.

Not that she could run ... she's still tied up.

I'm not sure I should untie her yet. What if she runs? What if she tries to kill me? I'd understand if she wanted to. After all, I'm the man who ruined her chances to go home.

But then why do I get this feeling she doesn't even mind being around me anymore?

She likes me despite wanting to hate me all the same.

Guess we'll just have to deal with being complete opposites.

“Better?” I ask, as I don't know if I made the right decision by crawling in the same bed.

A soft, almost inaudible moan escapes her mouth.

“Better.”

But I heard it.

I definitely heard it.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Accompanying Song: “Muddy Waters” by LP

Juliet

For days now, I've been trying to put him out of my head, but it's proving more difficult than I thought. I'm still amazed he actually built a second bed so he wouldn't have to bother me by lying next to me.

It's nice, but ... there are animals in this jungle. And I'm all tied up and can't defend myself.

So I succumbed to my own fear and asked him to come into my bed again. Well, implied... asked is a strong word. I don't like to admit I need him for anything, let alone that I feel safe around him.

I shouldn't feel anywhere near safe. He's a savage who gets off on trapping a girl, yet I can't stop this heart of mine from beating faster and faster the closer he gets.

Goddammit.

I can't even stop looking into his eyes as he pushes berry after berry in my mouth in the morning. His smile is mesmerizing, but his eyes ... they're to die for. And I'm hopeless to fight it when he's feeding me like this. He's so proud of gathering them; I can't help but feel for him. He's really trying to be better, and I can appreciate that.

Especially when he's putting so much care into laying the berries on my tongue until I suck.

I'm not sure he's doing it to fill my stomach, though ...

When he's done, and I've swallowed the last berry, he says, "So are you going to behave today?"

"What do you mean?" I narrow my eyes.

He lifts my chin with one finger and says, "You *know* what I mean."

"I won't run away, if that's what you're asking. It's not as if I have anywhere to go."

"And you won't try to lure in other people either?" He raises a brow.

I sigh. "Fine. I won't start another fire. Happy now?"

A slow smirk spreads across his lips and makes me want to swoon. But it's wrong, so wrong. I'm actually negotiating with my captor right now. And I don't even mind. I just want to be free of this rope around my wrists.

"Good girl," he says.

I practically melt into a puddle when he says that.

Great.

There I go again, letting myself get carried away by men I shouldn't want. Men who aren't good for me.

Yet I can't help myself when he looks at me the way he does. So ... full of lust.

Or maybe that's just my own reflection I'm seeing.

He unties the rope that keeps me in place, and I rub my wrists. I swallow away the lump in my throat as he smiles and grabs my hand. “I wanna show you something … Come.”

I almost moan when he says that word but manage to keep my mouth tightly locked.

“Where are we going?” I ask as he pulls me out of the hut.

“You’ll see soon. It’s a surprise.” He grabs a torch and lights it, then pulls me along.

Surprise? I never liked those. They always ended in either a party where everyone got drunk and trashed the house they were partying in, or with me in an emotional wreck after a heartbreak.

Yeah, I’ve had some bad experiences with past boyfriends. We’ve all had them.

“How far is it?” I ask as we go deeper into the jungle.

I don’t like it. The last time I went this deep, I was searching for the helicopter. And we both know how that ended.

“Not too far,” he says. “Follow me.”

He doesn’t let go of my hand for a second. Warmth flows through my body. With our fingers locked, my attention span has been reduced to one percent—which is solely focused on physical contact and how much I would love for those hands to touch my body.

Jesus Christ, Jules, get a hold of yourself.

We trod through the jungle until we get to a thick tree, at which point Lock abruptly stops and spins around.

“Close your eyes,” he says.

I frown, but then do as he asks.

He grabs both my hands and guides me through the jungle, and I carefully take steps forward, hoping I don’t tumble. He’s so gentle with me that it

bewilders me. Why is he going through all this trouble just to show me something?

“Okay … open,” he says softly.

And when I do, I’m stunned.

My jaw drops as I look around and marvel at my surroundings.

From a steep cliff, a waterfall cascades down into the small lake below. Colorful trees and flowers surround the entire area, serving as a canopy to shelter from the scorching sun during the day. Birds and insects chirp all around us. A small ledge leads up to the waterfall, a natural diving board, and there’s something behind it in the corner.

“What do you think?” he asks, cocking his head as he watches my reaction.

“It’s beautiful,” I reply, still not sure how to respond.

The grin that appears on his face is nothing short of perfect.

“Come,” he says, grasping my hands and pulling me along up to the ledge.

Right at the top, there’s a small wooden cabin underneath part of the waterfall. Water pours in through a tiny hole, draining along the sides of the rock.

It’s … a handmade shower.

Flabbergasted, I stare at him and say, “You made this?”

He nods. “I’ve been working on it for a while now … for you.”

“Oh …” A blush spreads on my face, which I try to hide by rubbing my cheeks. “I don’t know what to say … but thank you.”

“You like it?”

He’s asking if I like it? I almost want to cry. He went through all that trouble just to make a shower for me?

“I didn’t want you to feel bad … being here,” he adds, swallowing.

In an instant, I wrap my arms around his body and hug him tight. I'm not thinking, and I don't want it to stop. I love this. It's a small comfort, but it's more than I thought I'd ever have. And he made it for me.

"Thank you ..." I mumble as I quickly pull away again, my entire face as red as a strawberry.

He nods again and points at the shower. "Go on then."

"What? Now?" I say, looking down at myself. I'm still dressed. "I don't want my clothes to get wet."

He shrugs. "Then take them off."

My lips part, but I have no idea how to respond.

All I can do is stare in amazement.

Did he actually just tell me to take off my clothes?

"What?" I repeat, for clarification.

"Take 'em off."

He's serious. He's dead serious, and that stern stare almost makes me want to do it.

But no, my morals have to get in the way again.

"No," I say, folding my arms. "I'm not going nude ..."

He frowns and shrugs again. "Suit yourself."

He seems genuinely disappointed as he turns back around again. As if he's upset that I won't try his makeshift shower even though I want to. I just can't ... not when he's watching.

"I'll do it," I say.

He stops in his tracks and glances over his shoulder, waiting for more.

"But you can't watch," I add.

His shoulders rise and fall, and he gives me a quick nod. “I’ll be down there.” He points at the small lake. “If you need me.”

“Yeah ...”

Wait, do I need him? No. Maybe.

Fuck. I don’t. I don’t know anything anymore.

I peek at the shower, but my eyes still revert to him. And they stay there ... glued ... because he’s untying the rope around his waist.

And the banana leaves drop to the ground.

My eyes widen.

Butt naked and in its full glory.

Cheeks squeezed together, thighs muscular and thick.

And an enormous dick dangling between his legs.

I struggle to keep my tongue inside ... struggle to even breathe properly.

Until he glances my way.

In shock, I quickly dive behind the wood and grasp my chest. As if that will help me from having a heart attack after being caught staring at a naked man.

And what a man he is ... Wow. I still can’t get that image out of my mind, and I don’t even wanna try. All I can do is grin as I start undressing, wishing I wasn’t so easily persuaded to ogle a man because of his dick.

But Jesus Christ ... that dick.

* * *

Accompanying Song: “Muddy Waters” by LP

Lock

She looked.

I'm not even guessing. It's a fact.

I saw her staring at my cock with hunger in her eyes. She's sneaking glances at every opportunity she has. It's not an accident or a coincidence. It's deliberate.

And she's still trying to hide it.

I grin, shaking my head. Women. They're such complicated creatures. I don't think I'll ever understand them.

One moment, she pushes me away, fighting me, and the next, she's clambering for attention, trying to get closer.

I wish I could ask her to make up her mind, but it's not going to be that easy. She probably doesn't even know what she wants yet, which is why I've decided ... I'm going to make it easier for her.

Going nude wasn't to tease her or scare her. This is just how I take baths. I'm not ashamed of my body and she shouldn't be either. I'm sure her body is as soft and perky as I imagine it to be. Her curves can't be hidden under clothes.

She's beautiful, so why hide?

Besides, she has to know I like her very much.

Why else would I go through the trouble of bringing her to this secret spot if not to make her happy? I knew she'd enjoy that shower even though it's not exactly like the real deal. But it works, so that's all that matters.

I slowly sink deeper into the lake and drift in the water on my back, basking in the sun. Occasionally, I open one eye only to find her peeking at me over the wood. I don't mind. I'll let her look.

She's going to lick it sooner or later.

And I'm going to fuck that sweet, juicy pussy into the next fucking day.

Just the thought makes my cock burst with excitement, growing rock solid and leaking at the tip.

And her eyes ... they glow with need.

It's a look I recognize all too well.

Fuck ... how long has it been? Too long.

I want her so badly, and every goddamn day it's getting worse. I don't care if she likes me or hates me. I just want to fuck her and hear her moan while she rides my cock.

Is that too much to ask for? After all, she's a guest on my island. I take care of her needs, and she takes care of mine, right?

I sigh. I wish it was that easy, but it never is.

* * *

Accompanying Song: “Muddy Waters” by LP

Juliet

As he swims around in the water, I peer out the tiny cabin. Our eyes meet again, and I can't look away.

“Wanna join me?” he muses, smiling.

“Uh ... I'm good,” I reply, my voice fluctuating quite a lot.

A devious grin spreads across his lips. “You sure?”

“Um ... yeah.”

Could that sound any more untrue?

He shrugs and continues swimming. “Suit yourself.”

Well, shit.

I guess that wasn’t the answer I was hoping for.

But what am I hoping for?

I don’t even know at this point.

All I know is that I’m fighting the urge to go to him.

Fighting the urge to jump his bones … and slide down that huge cock of his.

Because let’s face it, I’m a horny bitch. But I shouldn’t be. I’m stuck on an island with no way off, and now I’m wasting time in a makeshift shower.

Everything about this is so wrong, yet he’s becoming hard to resist.

“Fine, I’ll come down but give me a sec,” I finally say, which only makes his grin bigger.

Of course, I lose my morals within seconds.

How can I not when he’s floating there in the water completely naked?

However, I can’t go like this. I’m butt naked. I have to cover up.

Before I hop out of the shower, I check to see if he’s looking, and I quickly grasp the leaf right in front of me, tearing it off the branch. I wrap it around my lower body and snatch off another one to cover my breasts.

Something creaks and snaps behind me, and I squeal.

It’s Lock.

And he’s still very much naked.

My eyes snap shut. “Lock!” I scream. “What the hell?”

“What?” he replies, and I can feel his body whoosh air past mine.

Did he just go into the shower area? I take a quick peek.

Shit, his ass looks good.

Shouldn't have done that.

"You're ... naked!"

He washes under the water. "And?"

"So ... so ... put something on!"

"When I'm showering?" A rumbling laugh escapes his throat, and it sets all my senses on high alert. Goddammit, why does his laugh have to make me lust after him even more?

My whole face turns red. "Well, I wasn't ready yet. And you just barged in."

"I just want to shower. Relax."

"Right." I huff. "I'm going for a swim."

As I march off down the stone ledge, he yells, "You still have some leaves stuck to you!"

This only makes me walk faster.

Not because I want to get away from him ... but because I'm scared.

Scared of what's going to happen if I stay around him and his naked body any longer.

I quickly sink into the water with the leaves still on and let them drift away. My nipples peak from the cold, but it's a nice change from the humid jungle surrounding us.

I swim around for a while, enjoying the view. In the middle of the lake, I find a spot that's shallow enough to stand but deep enough to cover my body. There, I close my eyes and enjoy the chirping of the crickets and the whistling of the birds.

Until a hand circles my waist.

Two, in fact, snaking around my belly ...

My breath hitches in my throat as I feel his breath just below my ear.

“Is this what you want, Jules?”

His voice sets ablaze a fire inside me that not even the water around me can douse.

His lips press on my shoulder, leaving a gentle kiss filled with intentions ... and raw need. Just like his hard-on, twitching against my ass, promising sweet, dirty pleasure.

But it's not right. He's keeping me here on this island when I should be fleeing.

I shouldn't let this happen.

“Is this what you need?” His voice is a mixture of a growl and a moan, and it makes me completely helpless and at his mercy.

I don't want it to stop.

He plants kisses in a trail along my neck until I suck in a breath and hold it.

Two fingers reach for my chin, forcing me to turn and face him.

And then he smashes his lips onto mine.

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Accompanying Song: “Muddy Waters” by LP

Lock

I couldn’t stop myself from going to her.

From kissing her naked body.

From taking what I’ve wanted ever since I laid my eyes on her.

Her ...

She’s been on my mind since she came here, and I can’t stop myself from ravaging her. Not anymore.

Her mouth is like heaven and sweet sin wrapped together in one delicious package. My tongue is desperate to part her lips. I want to taste every inch of her.

She doesn’t fight back. Doesn’t stop me from kissing her.

In fact, she’s kissing me back with equal greed.

However, the longer our kiss lasts, the more she begins the struggle.

Finally, she pushes me away and glares at me for a second. Her lips are still red and swollen from my kiss, and I can't help but notice the way she breathes ... as if she's out of air.

She doesn't speak, doesn't move, so I use the opportunity to move closer again.

She pushes herself away from me again, farther into the water and out of my grasp.

At first, I stay and watch, hoping she might change her mind. I don't want to scare her, but that's not what I see in her eyes either. I see ... hunger.

And maybe that feeling terrifies her.

Hell, it fucked me up all right, so I can't imagine what it's doing to her.

She must be confused.

"That ... didn't happen," she mumbles, and she stumbles away toward the shore.

"Yeah, it did," I say, grabbing her arm.

"Don't," she says.

"Tell me you didn't like it," I reply, staring straight into her eyes. "Can you?"

She doesn't say a word. Doesn't even open her mouth.

She can't because she knows it's a lie.

The way she kissed me back spoke volumes. She was eager for more, yet she still cut me off. Why? Fuck, who knows. But she's definitely not going to admit it.

"You can't even say it," I say.

She jerks her arm loose and says, "I'm going back to the hut."

"But I brought you here. At least let me take you back."

“No thanks. I’ll figure out how to get back on my own,” she snaps.

“And then what?” I ask as she swims past me. “You’re just going to ignore what happened?”

She doesn’t respond. All I can do is stare at her beautiful ass as she walks out onto the sand and rushes to grab her clothes and put them on. I don’t stop watching her because I’m sure she feels it too. She’s ignoring her own needs. Ignoring the very part of her that wants to come out so desperately.

She’s telling herself she doesn’t like me just so she can continue hating me for what I did.

Before she runs off into the jungle, she glances over her shoulder.

The look is one of regret.

Longing.

And fury.

Then she disappears, leaving me in the water with a boner the size of my spear.

* * *

Accompanying Song: [“Touch” by Marz Léon](#)

Juliet

All the way back to the hut, my mind is still wandering to that damn man ... and that goddamn fiery, lip-scorching kiss we shared.

Why did he have to do that?

And why do I still feel all hot and bothered?

The memory keeps replaying in my head, and I can't make it stop.

I'm not even sure I want it to stop, which is crazy. Completely crazy. I've lost my shit. Lost my goddamn mind in this jungle.

Maybe I should find some herbs to deal with that.

The only thing that stops me from walking is the sound of monkeys, high up in the trees. I look up to try to spot them, but it's impossible. They're hidden behind thick leaves. I smile. It's the first big animal I've come across, and it makes me feel a little fuzzy on the inside.

But I can't keep staring as I won't be able to do my research here anyway. Best move on.

I need to get back to the hut and think about what I'm going to do next.

Tagging along to that waterfall was a mistake. Despite it being the most beautiful place I've ever seen, it made the tension between us even worse.

Now I can't even walk straight without thinking about those lips roaming my neck ... leaving sweet, delicious kisses everywhere while he pokes me with that huge hard-on.

Goddammit.

I have to stop thinking about this if I wanna make a stand.

God, I can still hear his voice just below my ears, telling me how sexy I am, how much he wants me, how we should just let go and do it because we both want it. I'm sure he would've said all the right things.

But fuck ... just because I want it doesn't make it right. None of it is.

And I'm so damn confused that I just wanna lash out and throw stuff around, but I know that's only the rage talking.

Why am I even mad? He didn't do anything I didn't want ... or like.

I liked it a lot, in fact.

But I won't admit that to him.

Hell no, it'll only give him more reasons to seduce me. And that's just it ... I can't allow a man like him seduce me. He ruined my only chance to get home. I can't ever forget that.

Right?

I can't. I have to remember that—no matter how hot his body is, and how sweet his words are, and how badly I want to give in to this life.

This life of ... pure wilderness, where anything and everything could happen.

Where life doesn't revolve around work and people demanding things from you.

Where the only thing that matters is your own needs ... and his.

I swallow down the lump in my throat and take a big gulp of water from the barrel outside his hut, determined not to let him sway me again.

But goddamn ... I was so close to giving in to him.

I swear, I would've done it, had it not been for that voice inside my head screaming at me, asking me what the hell I'm doing with a man like that. I don't even know who he is or where he came from. He won't tell me anything. Maybe that's why I'm so afraid of him.

Because I don't know if I can trust him or not.

Should I?

All this pondering has made me doubt myself even more, so I settle on not thinking about it for as long as I'm doing chores around the hut. There's more food to gather, a wooden plate for actual eating to be made, and I want to try to make a brush so I can get these tangles out of my hair.

When he gets back, we don't talk to each other for the remainder of the day, even though he keeps throwing glances my way. I force myself to look away whenever he passes, determined not to let those pristine eyes sway me.

He huffs and puffs as he toils away at a wooden block, shaping it into another box to use for god knows what reason. Meanwhile, I gather leaves to use as toilet paper. It's not much, but it's something. Anything to stay civilized.

When he's done with the box, Lock grabs a spear and the small box and walks off. I watch, wishing I could ask him where he's going, but that'd only give him more ammunition to start that seduction again. So I let it pass and continue my chores.

When night comes, I go inside and prep some edible leaves I found.

Suddenly, the door bursts open, and Lock marches in and slams a box on the wooden table. It's filled with fresh wiggling fish.

My eyes widen. "You ... caught that?"

He smiles, placing the spear in the corner. "Good?"

I smile. Did he do this for me? As some sort of peace offering?

"Actually ..." I scratch my head.

"What? Not good?" he says, frowning.

"No, no," I say, holding up my hand. "I was just about to say that I can use these with the leaves I found."

"So you eat fish?" he asks. "But not meat?"

"Basically," I say, shrugging.

He shakes his head and sighs. "Women."

He sits down on one of the seats and leans back indifferently, his arms resting on the back as he watches me with a particularly cool gaze.

I narrow my eyes at him, but he doesn't even seem fazed when I smack a plate down on the table and start prepping the food. I swear to god, this man pisses me off so much. I'm *this* close to smacking him with one of the fish he brought. But that would be a waste of the fish.

As I try to scrape off the scales and pick out the bones, it slips from my hand and falls on the ground. Lock's rumbling laughter has me frozen and boiling with rage.

"What?" I hiss.

He gets up from his seat and strolls toward me. Grasping the fish off the floor, he places it on the table. "Here."

Suddenly, he's standing behind me and grabbing the handmade knife, showing me how to do it from my point of view.

But all I can focus on is his rigid body right behind mine, those thick, bulging muscles pushing against me, and that delicious voice humming in my ears.

"Cut it like this."

I nod, but nothing's registering as I tremble in place from feeling his breath on the back of my neck. Memories of him kissing me right there flash in front of me, and my blood starts to rush, my pussy thumping with need.

Stop it, Jules!

"Th-thank you," I mumble in response. I had to say something. I just didn't expect it to come out that raspy. Jesus Christ.

When I turn around, there's a delectable smile on his face ... one that could make every girl's heart stop. Mine did.

"Want me to do it?" he asks.

I nod, practically drooling all over myself at the sight of his abs.

I have to stop being so easy. I'm not easy. I'm ice-cold-bitch Juliet. That girl every man warns his friends about because she's so difficult and never puts out. That snob who only cares about her job. Or at least, that's what I believed all these years.

But when I look at him, none of that seems to matter. Maybe I'm not so frigid after all.

I sit down on my seat and prepare the leaves while he preps the fish. We eat together in silence. Neither of us knows what to say, but I prefer it this way. I don't want to discuss what happened, and I guess neither does he.

When it's time to go asleep, he blows out all the candles and lies down on the second bed he made while I lie down in his. It feels strange with him not being here, and I keep sniffing the fur because it smells like him. I don't know why I like the scent ... or why I still can't fall asleep.

Snores erupt from the other side of the room, so it's obvious I'm the only having trouble. I stare at the ceiling and count some sheep, but none of it works. My head keeps going back to that moment we had in the lake ... and how much I didn't want him to stop.

Is it so bad to be curious?

To be hot for a man you don't even know?

Even now, when I look at him, all I want is to go to him.

To touch him ... or take a peek.

Only two banana leaves prevent my view of his naked body ... and I can't stop thinking about that huge dick I saw back when I was showering in that makeshift cabin.

My mouth waters just thinking about the things he could do with it.

But should I?

My brain must be totally out of it because I've already gotten up from my bed. I'm so tired, I don't even know what I'm doing as I walk over to him and lean over.

My mind goes blank, my self-control completely out the window, as I slowly grasp the banana leaf with two fingers and lift it.

What's underneath makes me clench my thighs together. I have so many dirty thoughts right now, none of them right ... but they're oh so delicious.

Just like his cock.

My finger can't help but reach for it. I'm completely mesmerized by him.

But the moment I touch it, it grows.

And oh boy ... does it grow.

It's thick and throbbing even though it's not even completely hard yet, just a semi.

I gently touch it again, too curious to stop myself as I do something I never thought I'd do.

That is ... until I spot two eyes watching me.

And my hand ... firmly wrapped around his cock.

Fuck.

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Accompanying Song: “Again” by Noah Cyrus

Juliet

I flinch and jolt back, dismayed that he caught me fondling him.

What did I do? Why did I do this?

Oh god ... I feel so bad.

My cheeks flush as I stumble backward. He sits up straight, staring back at me unapologetically. He doesn’t even seem fazed, despite the fact his dick is still hard ... and pointing upward underneath the banana leaf.

And it’s all my doing.

You actually fucking fondled him, Jules. What the hell is wrong with you?

Since when did you turn into a goddamn pervert?

I feel so wrong. So wrong.

I shake my head and mumble, “I’m sorry.”

He cocks his head and rises from the bed slowly, waltzing toward me.

I brace myself against the wall as he approaches, my head turned to the side. I close my eyes, waiting for punishment. Will he tie me up again? Lock me up in the pit? Or worse, hurt me?

But he doesn't do that.

Not any of that.

Because as I hold my breath, awaiting his move ... he kisses me.

Right on my neck.

My eyes spring open only to meet his, the same hunger from before flashing in his eyes.

His tongue darts out to lick his lips.

Another kiss follows ... right below the first one.

My breath hitches in my throat as he keeps adding more.

He places a hand right beside me on the wooden wall, trapping me. His other hand snakes up my torso. His kisses are equally soft as they are sinful, and I can't help but let go at the moment.

He grabs my breast and squeezes.

I can't breathe.

Can't fucking breathe.

His next kiss on my collarbone has my eyes rolling into the back of my head.

With a quick nudge, the top button of my shirt pops. His finger slips in ... more pop ... and down he goes until all of them have unfastened. He parts my shirt gently as his lips find mine, and he kisses me hard.

And his mouth ... tastes so damn good.

Feels so good.

The way he parts my lips and pushes his tongue in without holding back.

I'm helpless against his assault on my senses, making me delirious with need.

"Jules ..." he murmurs against my lips, softly nibbling them. "I dreamed of you. Naked."

His hand wraps around my throat as he presses a demanding kiss on my lips and licks the roof of my mouth. "Under my palm." I moan when he finds my nipple and twists it. "Begging for my cock."

A wide grin spreads across his lips. "It wasn't a dream ... was it?"

I don't reply. How can I? How can I ever admit it to him if I can't even admit it to myself?

He presses another kiss to my mouth and licks the seam of my lips. "You touched me ..."

"I'm sorry," I murmur, barely able to form the words as he tugs at my hardened nipples.

Everything is blurry, and I'm dizzy with lust. I don't even know what's happening right now. What *I* set in motion.

"Don't be ..." he whispers in my ear. "It's the best dream I've ever had."

His hand slides down my body and dives right between my legs.

I squeeze my thighs together and suck in a breath as he rubs me right through my shorts. He doesn't release his gaze on me. Not as I struggle to breathe. Not as I squirm to stay upright. In fact, he seems to revel in the fact he can make me melt into a puddle with his fingers.

His mouth is on my neck as his tongue drags a line down, all the way to my breasts, while his fingers curl my shorts and snake their way inside.

He's fondling me. Touching me in places I never thought I'd allow him.

His fingers dive into my slit as wetness pools between my legs, coating his fingers. I moan.

And I still can't. Fucking. Breathe.

I shouldn't allow this.

It's so dead wrong.

What I did was wrong.

I *feel* wrong.

As my brain regains control, I push him away.

He blinks a couple of times, confused. So I take the opportunity to make a run for it.

“Jules,” he says as I run out the door. “Wait.”

I don't reply. I feel too guilty. Too dark inside for this to happen.

I shouldn't let him in. Shouldn't let him do these things to me.

If I just could've kept my claws to myself, none of this would've happened.

If I hadn't come here, *he* wouldn't have happened.

We aren't right for each other.

I grab the nearest torch I can find, light it in the big fire, and run. I don't even know why I'm running. Why I want to get away so badly.

Into the dense jungle, in the middle of the night.

I don't even care that it's dangerous. I just want to get away.

With what I did ... the way I fondled him ... I'm ashamed. That's why I'm running. I can't bear to face him right now. Can't bear to face myself.

The real danger in this jungle ... is him.

He's the one thing that can sway my heart, and I don't want that to happen.

That's why I'm so scared.

Not because of what he could do to me, or how badly I want him to take me.

It's because I don't want him to persuade me to stay.

Tears well up in my eyes as I keep running. I don't know my destination, but anywhere is fine right now as long as it's away from him. It's not his fault; it's mine. I'm weak, and it's not something I've ever felt before.

I've never wanted a man so badly I'd touch him in the middle of the night while he was sleeping.

Who does that anyway? What kind of person do you have to be?

A nutcase, that's who.

"Jules! Come back!"

I brush away the tears as I pass some more trees and ignore him. I can't stop now. It's already too late. I have to keep going. Have to keep trying to resist.

However, the moment I come to a clearing, I stop.

It's that place ... the lake and the waterfall ... and the shower.

Did I go here on purpose or by mistake?

He guided me here with my eyes closed. Could I have found this on the memory of my steps alone?

I shiver and place the torch on a bunch of rocks.

I breathe out loud and let out all my frustration, all the pent-up sexual energy that was about to explode.

I don't hear him behind me anymore, so maybe he's given up trying to find me.

Good. I need some time alone to think.

And to decide.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Accompanying Song: “Muddy Waters” by LP

Lock

Fuck.

Why did I have to fuck that up?

I wake up and find her playing with my cock, which is a fucking dream come true. And then I chase her away by being too greedy.

But fuck ... I can't help myself when it comes to her.

I want her so badly. It's been on my mind since day one, and now she finally gave me a chance and I ruined it by going too fast.

But why did she have to run? Now I have to chase her through the jungle ... again.

Nothing pisses me off more than having a fucking boner while running. But I guess I'll have to make do.

I grasp one of my torches, light it in the fire, and immediately sprint after her.

There's no time to waste. She could get lost. It's hard to see where you're going in the pitch-black jungle with only the moon to guide your way, and she doesn't know this place as I do. She doesn't realize the danger she's in by being all alone in the dark.

Where could she have gone? She can't just run off nowhere; she must've had some kind of direction. Would she run back to the helicopter? No, that wouldn't make any sense. That thing was completely destroyed.

Maybe ... just maybe ... she went back to the lake.

The last place we were before things exploded.

That must be it.

I quickly make my way through the jungle, past the trees and through the thick bushes.

The chirping insects and other animals keep me alert, but my obsession with her keeps me going. I need to release all this pent-up energy somehow. She awoke something in me ... a beast that refuses to go back into its cage. And now it's going to claim her.

I'm tired of playing games. Tired of waiting.

The hunt is on.

However, when I get to the lake, I'm stunned to find her clothes on the ground ... and her bathing in the water not too far ahead.

She's completely naked.

But why would she do that? In the middle of the night?

To taunt me?

Make me come to her and take her?

I'll gladly take the invitation.

“Jules,” I say.

I tread closer and place the torch on the rocks close to the lake. Then I pull the rope around my body and let the leaves fall to the ground.

She doesn’t turn around even though I know my voice was loud enough for her to hear. Maybe she’s ignoring it … scared … or maybe she’s in denial. Whatever it is, it won’t stop me from claiming her right now.

I approach the water and slowly go in. It’s cold and tickles my toes, but soon, I’ve submerged my whole body. I don’t mind a cold swim in the dark. Besides, the warmth radiating from my body more than makes up for it, along with a major hard-on that just won’t go away.

In fact, it’s only grown bigger the closer I get to her.

She stays in the water at a place where she can stand just below the waterfall. So I wade through the water until I’m right behind her.

I softly brush her hair off her shoulder and lean in for a gentle kiss. I don’t want to scare her away again, so I take it slow this time. Another kiss right below her ear, and her head leans back against my shoulder in defeat.

I know it’s hard, so why resist?

“You want this,” I whisper into her ear.

My palm slides down her shoulders and arms, and goose bumps scatter on her skin. I press another kiss on the left side of her neck as her head tilts to the side and her eyes close. I capture her mouth with mine and taste her sweetness, wanting every last drop.

We drift forward in the water until her body hits the rocks and I press up against her. I want her to feel how hard I am for her, how badly I want her … and that there’s no escaping this.

What we have … it’s something inescapable. Too powerful to ignore.

I don’t just want her.

I need to have her.

Right fucking now.

So I plant my hands against the wall behind her, trapping her.

She spins in my arms and looks up at me with those doe eyes, making me wish I could read her mind. But I don't have to as long as she kisses me back just as hard.

And when our mouths latch, it's as if we combust into flames.

"Wait," she murmurs between kisses. But she doesn't stop.

So I whisper back, "I'm done waiting."

Her tongue wraps around mine, just like her arms around my neck, both in a desperate attempt to get closer.

When we take a breath, she says it again. "We shouldn't."

Her words don't sound like what she really means.

She can't let herself go.

Can't give in to me without a fight. And that's okay.

I don't need her to say yes.

I just need her to do exactly what I want.

So I push her up against the rock and lift her until those beautiful tits of hers are right in my face. Then I smother them with licks and kisses, tugging at her nipples until she moans.

The sound is all I need to know she wants it just as much as I do.

I grin against her skin as I latch onto one nipple with my mouth and twist the other with my fingers. Her arms are still firmly entwined behind my neck, despite her mouthing the words, "It's wrong."

But it's not wrong. It the only thing we can do.

We're humans who desire each other. What's so wrong about that?

I live here on this island, and she's from a world I don't understand.

She ruined my jungle. I ruined her chance to get back.

But right now, none of that matters.

Enemies or not, we can learn to coexist ... if we start with finally giving in to our hunger.

And fuck me ... am I hungry for more.

* * *

Accompanying Song: “Muddy Waters” by LP

Juliet

I tried to stop him.

Tried to say no.

But every time I opened my mouth, the words refused to come out.

I don't want to say no, and I don't want him to stop.

I can't take it anymore. Can't fight anymore. I only want to give in.

My body has already lost control. Every time he touches me, I get more and more aroused. And when he kisses me, my brain shuts down.

My thighs clench when he pushes me up the wall farther and sets me down on a ledge not too high up. With the palm of his hand, he pushes me down, forcing me to lie down as he plants kisses all over my belly.

I gasp, but I still feel out of breath.

When his lips reach my thighs, I panic and clench my legs together. With a gentle nudge, he parts them again and immediately buries his face between my legs.

“Fuck ...”

His rumbling voice makes my pussy thump.

And when his tongue presses down, I lose it.

A moan escapes my mouth as he starts to lick me. Right there ... between my legs.

And Jesus Christ, it's never felt this good.

He laps me up and alternates kisses with licks, applying pressure on the spot that makes me choke up. My fingers struggle not to reach for his hair, and my mouth struggles not to beg him for more.

He's that good.

God, that tongue of his ... it could make me come.

Right here and now.

Within the snap of a finger.

The pressure is already building, making me hot and bothered and definitely fantasizing about having his dick inside me.

But it's wrong, despite what he says ... yet I still choose to ignore it.

I was lost the moment I ogled his dick.

I couldn't stop thinking about it ever since I saw him, and now it's too late. Too late to stop my body from craving him.

He sucks on my clit and murmurs, "You taste so fucking good."

His gruff voice alone could make me come.

He keeps licking me to the point when I'm practically moaning every second. I can't hold it back.

Suddenly, his fingers dive inside.

My eyes burst open, and my breath hitches in my throat.

Two fingers driving into my soaking pussy, coating them with wetness.

My nails scratch the rock, and I take in a big gulp.

“Yes,” he murmurs, his lips firmly pressed against my pussy. “Let me taste you while you come.”

And I do.

So goddamn hard.

All over his fingers.

And his mouth.

And I scream out his name.

“Lock!”

His tongue only licks me harder, and wave after wave of ecstasy hits me so hard my eyes roll into the back of my head.

I writhe underneath his grasp, the palm of his hand keeping me in place so I don’t slide down the rock.

He presses a kiss to my thighs before slowly pulling his fingers out of me and bringing them to his face. He smells them. Then his tongue darts out to take a lick, then sucks them. A low groaning hum follows. My body erupts into goose bumps, and my eyes widen.

Suddenly, he grasps my waist and yanks me down, making me squeal.

“More,” he growls, pinning me against the rock after he spins my body around.

With my face against the rocks, I have nowhere to go, and fear washes over me again.

But a gentle kiss on my shoulders instantly replaces that with a wantonness I didn’t know I had.

Roughly, he grabs my wrists in a vise grip and pulls them against the rocks above my head. His fingers entwine through mine as his tongue slides down my neck. Soon, his hand follows, all the way down my spine until it reaches my ass.

There, he pokes me with his hard-on.

Nudging my legs apart with his hand, he pushes himself against me.

A gasp escapes my mouth as the tip is right near my entrance.

“Shhh ...” he whispers into my ear. “Let me give it to you.”

He penetrates me without holding back, thrusting into me completely to the base.

I let out a loud squeal, but only half is audible because his hand has already covered my mouth. “What did I say?” he growls near my ear. “Shhh ...”

He plunges into me with furious strokes, grasping my waist to go even deeper. My eyes sting with tears from his size, and how fast he’s going. I’ve never been fucked this roughly, this carnally. He’s a fucking animal ... claiming what’s his. Staking his territory by planting me against the rock and taking me hard.

A real savage.

And I don’t even fucking resist.

My brain is numb with need. Delirious with desire.

It’s like he’s fucking all my reservations out of me. Stripping me of my humanity. Leaving only the raw need.

“Fuck, you’re so tight,” he groans, thrusting even faster.

He takes a fistful of my hair and pulls my head back until he can kiss me on the lips, all while fucking me. I feel humiliated. Offended. And so goddamn thirsty for more.

His animalistic fucking is like an aphrodisiac to me, only sparking my lust even more.

“You wanted this too, didn’t you? All along, you wanted me to fuck your pussy raw,” he growls, pulling my head back even farther. “Say it, Jules.”

“Yes,” I moan as he plunges in to the base.

Immediately, he covers my mouth with his, his tongue dipping in with fervor.

“Let me give you what you need,” he groans. His cock pulses inside me, veins bulging, thick and throbbing. And I’m practically drooling as he bangs me against the hard rock.

“Fuck yes, Jules!”

There’s nothing sexier than hearing him say my name.

A loud howl bursts out of his lungs and then he explodes. Right inside me.

Warmth fills me, and I mewl as he pours out his seed, again and again, forcing me onto his dick until every last drop is emptied.

As he slowly pulls out, the hormones that clouded my brain start to dissipate. And the reality of what we’ve done sinks in.

We had sex ...

Unprotected sex.

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CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Accompanying Song: “Close” by Nick Jonas ft. Tove Lo

Lock

She hasn't spoken a single word to me in days.

Not since we fucked in the lake.

I don't know why, but every time I attempt to start a conversation, it's as if I'm talking to a wall. She refuses to even acknowledge I'm here, which pisses me off. Have I done something wrong? Have I insulted her?

Who knows, but she won't tell me.

I want her to be happy, but it's proving to be difficult when she won't even tell me what she wants from me.

It's because of what I did. What we did. Even though she won't admit it, she had just as much a part in what happened as I did.

She peeked at my cock. Couldn't stop herself from letting me fondle her.

And then she ran, and I followed her and claimed her anyway.

She didn't stop me either.

She wanted me to fuck her, and now she regrets it.

That's what this is. It has to be. Why else would she continuously stomp around the hut while throwing angry glances my way without acknowledging I even exist?

She's not mad at me. She's mad at herself for letting me in.

But I don't regret staking my claim. Not even for one second.

That pussy was the most delicious thing I've tasted in a long while, and I fully intend to lick it again. It's only a matter of time before she gives in to temptation. And I'll be right there to kiss her and make all the doubts disappear.

Meanwhile, I'll just watch with amusement as she toils with my equipment, trying to construct god knows what. Some kind of oval-shaped bench or something. I don't fucking care. I enjoy seeing her get all worked up.

I don't know what it is about us, but the more we hate each other, the more we seem attracted to each other. And I don't even fucking mind. It's been such a long time since I last felt this ... let alone any kind of emotion. I welcome it with open arms—including her—no matter how fussy she is, or how cold she can get, or how badly she wants to get rid of me.

She'll never fully erase me from her memories anyway.

As a matter of fact, I think she's started taking on some of my quirks.

Most notably, she hasn't worn her clothes since she took them off.

They're lying on the ground, completely soaked in water mixed with herbs.

She's not nude, though. Unfortunately, she's wearing a makeshift banana leaf skirt now. Just like me, only hers looks like it took an awful lot of work to make. It's completely pasted on her skin, sewed together with a piece of rope she stole from my hut. I don't mind. If it makes her feel more comfortable, have at it.

As I sit outside on one of the wooden stumps and slice some of the fish, she keeps throwing wicked glances at me.

“What?” I bark, wanting to know what she’s thinking.

Her nose twitches, and she spits, “Nothing.”

Wow, a word. That’s more than she’s given me the past few hours.

“Are you mad at me?”

She doesn’t respond. As always. Instead, I get a mean look.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” I say. “I did nothing you didn’t want me to do.”

When she glares at me and raises a brow, I glare right back and grin. “It’s the truth.”

She sighs and returns to cutting that oddly shaped wood. However, her banana leaves get stuck on a sharp edge, and she loses half of them, exposing the left side of her ass.

“Ooh,” I mumble, enjoying the view.

Her face turns red, and she screams, “Stop looking at me!”

“Why? Nothing I haven’t seen before,” I muse. “And it’s everything I like.”

She picks up a fallen twig and chuckles it at my face. “Not funny!”

I lean sideways and easily avoid it. “Wasn’t meant to be,” I reply. “Why are you so afraid of me? I won’t do anything you don’t want me to. And you *definitely* wanted me back there.”

“Stop talking about that,” she says, holding up her hand. “Please.”

“Why? Nothing to be scared of. I won’t bite. Unless you want me to.” I wink at her, but that only makes her face contort in rage.

“I don’t care!” she says.

“Yeah, you do. That’s why you’re getting yourself all worked up. Because you care too much,” I say, trying not to laugh. “I don’t mind, Jules. You can

be angry all you want. No one's here to judge. It's just us. You and me."

"Maybe I don't want that," she says. "Ever crossed your mind?"

"Never," I say, shrugging in denial.

"Whatever," she spits, and she throws the tools onto the ground and marches off.

"Where are you going?" I ask.

"Nowhere. And don't follow me!" she screams as she disappears into the jungle.

But since when have I ever listened?

Never.

* * *

Accompanying Song: "Devil In Me" by Halsey

Juliet

I march off toward the beach without as much as a bottle of water with me. I just needed to get out of there ... away from him. I don't fucking care what he thinks right now. All I want is to be alone, but he won't let me.

Am I mad? Fuck, yes.

I just don't know who's at fault. Him or me?

We had sex, and I blame both of us for that.

I could've resisted, could've pushed him away, but no, my sleepy head had to give in so easily. He could've let me be, could've let me go to the lake on my own and went back to sleep, but he didn't.

It's both our faults, which is why I'm so pissed. Not at the fact that he got what he was after. Not at the fact I actually wanted it so much.

No, I'm pissed because we didn't use protection.

There isn't any. Not here on this godforsaken island. Goddammit.

I kick a rock on the way to the beach, but my toes immediately regret it, and I hop on one leg as I bite my tongue and scream some more.

Annoyed, I continue walking until I get to the rocky part of the beach. There, I pick up some of the less heavier rocks and drag them all the way to the sandy part of the beach.

Yeah, that's right. I'm going to make an SOS signal using rocks. Old school way. One rock at a time.

I'm pouring out all my frustrations into lifting these rocks. And right now, I don't give a shit how long it takes me to put them all together to form a word. I'll go on until it's night if I have to. I won't stop until it's done.

Several hours pass before I have the first two huge letters complete. However, the moment I haul myself back to the place I found the rocks, Lock appears from the jungle.

“Jules.”

Oh shit.

I look up and then continue walking, ignoring the knot in my stomach as it grows tighter with every passing second.

“Jules!” His voice rings in my ears, but I ignore it.

He might want to talk, but I don't.

He'll only sway my heart to stay when I shouldn't. I should go back home. Where I belong.

I pick up another rock. Within seconds, he's right in front of me and snatches it away from me. With a loud grunt, he hurls it into the ocean.

“What the hell!” I scream, and I slap his chest. “Get out of my face!”

“No,” he growls back. “Stop this.”

“No, fuck you,” I hiss, and I grab another one ... which he immediately steals from me and chuckles into the ocean. Again.

“What is wrong with you?” I sneer.

“What’s wrong with *you*?” he interjects. “You’re acting all strange.”

“Of course, I am,” I scoff, walking past him.

“Are you mad at me?” he asks, following my footsteps through the sand.

“Is it that obvious?” I glance at him over my shoulder, and I immediately regret it.

“What did I do to you?” he asks.

I don’t respond because I don’t know what to say. He won’t understand.

“Jules. Stop.” Out of nowhere, he grabs my arm and spins me around.

“What’s your problem?” I spit. “Just let me do my thing and you do yours.”

“No, that’s a fucking signal,” he growls back, pointing at the stones in the sand. “You think I’m going to let you finish? Fuck no.”

“Let go,” I hiss, and I jerk my arm free and stumble on.

He tails right behind me, so I start to run.

But it’s no use ... I can’t escape him.

I can’t escape this island.

Not any of it.

And the moment he catches me, we tumble down onto the warm sand, rolling over until he’s on top of me.

“Get off me,” I hiss.

“No,” he says.

So I slap him.

He doesn't budge. It's as if the pain doesn't even faze him.

"Let me go," I say.

"No. Not until you calm down."

"I wanna go home," I say, trying to look anywhere else but at him.

But it's no use. He's right up in my face, forcing me to face with what I've done.

"Why? Do you hate this place so much?"

Part of me wants to scream yes. But that would be a lie.

The truth is, this place has been liberating, to say the least.

No more judgment. No more rules. No more stress.

But what did I have to sacrifice in return? My home. Comfort. My family and colleagues.

Families out there waiting to hear the bad news about Pete and Ollie. They died for the research we were supposed to do here.

And what did I do? Nothing.

I fucked a man from the jungle.

"Why can't you let me go?" I ask, tears welling up in my eyes.

"This isn't about me, and you know it," he says.

"Just shut up," I plead, closing my eyes. "Please."

"No. You said you wouldn't try anymore. That was a lie."

"I'm sorry, okay? I can't stay here. Don't you understand? I have a life off this island," I say, trying to push him off me, but it's no use. He's far stronger than I am. "I have to contact them."

"No," he says.

"Why?" I scream, punching him again.

“Stop,” he says, pinning my hands above my head. “You’re only hurting yourself.”

“Fuck you,” I spit.

“Well, fuck you too,” he says, a familiar grin spreading on his lips. “In fact, we already did that.”

Grinding my teeth, I growl, “You seduced me.”

“And you practically begged me to,” he muses.

“Liar,” I hiss.

“Oh, yeah? And what was that touching my dick in the middle of the night all about then?”

“It was a mistake,” I reply.

“Really?” He raises one eyebrow. “Or are you just saying that because it’s easier to lie to yourself?”

I part my lips, but there is no witty response. No comeback. Nothing.

Just ... *goddammit*.

“Why do you still resist?” he asks. His thumb caresses my cheeks, lingering on my lips as he leans over. “You can feel it too, can’t you?” He presses a soft kiss to my lips, numbing the pain.

But I don’t *want* him to numb the pain.

I gather the last bit of my strength and push myself away from him, crawling across the sand.

“Why won’t you let me love you?” he asks.

“Love? Love?” I make a face. Does he even know what that is?

“Yes. I like you ... and I want you,” he says, his eyes as desperate as his words.

“How do you even know what love is?” I ask.

“I learned it … before I came here.” He clears his throat.

“But love needs more than sex,” I reply.

“I can give that to you,” he says. “Whatever you need.”

It’s all so simple to him.

But the thing is, he *can’t* give me what I need.

“Won’t you stay?” The pain in his voice feels like a sharp knife to the back.

“I can’t,” I say, shaking my head. “What if I get pregnant?”

“You mean …?” He gazes at my belly, and I immediately rub it.

“I don’t know,” I reply. “But we had sex, Lock. Unprotected.”

A smile appears on his face. One of genuine joy. “A baby. Hmm …” He crawls closer and places a hand on my belly too. “Yes, I want *you* to carry my baby.”

“What?” My jaw drops. “No, no, no. Not happening.”

I can’t believe he’s actually thinking of having babies. On this island.

“Why not?”

“Because … we’re on a fucking island?!” I say, my eyes practically bulging out of my head. “Have you lost your mind?”

“No.”

I glare at him for a second before it sinks in that he’s totally serious right now.

He’s not kidding. He really wants to have a baby.

Holy shit.

I never imagined that.

I’ve never even thought about it.

Me? A baby?

I can't.

I'm not the right person. I'm not a good mother.

"I ..." I sigh.

How do I even respond to such a thing? This isn't something I want to be thinking about right now.

"What?" Lock grabs my chin and forces me to look at him. "Please, Jules. How can I make you happy?"

Oh god. When he says it like that, it's almost impossible to say no.

"Why do you want me to stay so badly, Lock?" I ask. "You said you wanted to be left alone."

"Because I like you," he mumbles.

His words turn my heart into a mushy mess.

"But we don't even know each other," I say, frowning.

"Yeah, we do. You prefer greens over meat. You like soft beds. You like how the jungle smells in the morning and prefer to go to bed after sundown. You like to take showers with herbs, and you're a good cook and a good cleaner. And you enjoy working on the hut too."

"But ..." I laugh and shake my head even though it isn't funny. It's sweet that he considers all that 'knowing me.'

He lowers his head so he can look me in the eye. "That's all that matters to me."

"But I need more ..." I reply.

And I don't mean babies.

God, I'm so glad he didn't bring that up again.

"What? Tell me," he asks.

"Well, I don't know anything about you," I say, trying to fill the void. I really don't know much about him.

A difficult frown marks his face. “Like what?”

“You won’t tell me anything about you. The you from before this island. Where you came from. Why you left. Who you were.”

It would help me understand why he is the way he is.

Maybe make things easier.

His face darkens, and his shoulders slump. “Oh … no.” He shakes his head. “I told you, I don’t like talking about that.”

There it is again. The avoidance.

“But why? Why are you so desperate to keep people away? What did they do to you?”

He looks away, visibly strained. “I can’t …”

But I still want to know. “Why?”

He sneers, “Because you’d definitely leave if you knew.”

Now my curiosity is definitely piqued. “Knew what?”

“*Everything.*”

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CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Accompanying Song: “Through Falling” by Johann Johannsson

Lock

Fifteen years ago

A girl knocks on the glass behind me.

I ignore it.

I have no interest in her whatsoever.

She isn’t the first, and she won’t be the last.

That’s what my father does … take girls and locks them in here with me. A thick layer of glass separates our cells. The only doors inside our cells connect to a room in which he allows us to meet.

Whenever he wants, of course.

Which is when he assumes I'm going to fuck her because that's what he wants.

My father wants a lot of things from me, but I've already lost interest.

It's not her fault; it's his.

He keeps throwing girls at me, but they're not what I want.

What I want is to be outside this glass prison.

To see what the world has to offer.

I lie on the metal bed and stare at the ceiling. It's so dark and gray in here that it hurts my eyes, so I close them. I imagine being back there, outside, exploring the vastness of the world. It's so colorful, with green and blue everywhere, and a yellow bright light in the sky. The sun.

Father told me about the beauty of this world.

He told me all the things I asked for and more.

But it still isn't enough.

Each time I win a fight against an opponent, my father earns money, and he rewards me with girls ... and time outside the cage.

I'm only interested in the latter.

Being out there is like a drug to me.

The pull is stronger than any girl.

So I keep ignoring the girl knocking on the glass, hoping she'll go back to sleep. Hoping I'll get to have my real reward soon.

Because when I do ...

It's the very last time I'll ever see this prison again.

* * *

Accompanying Song: "Through Falling" by Johann Johannsson

Present

“So how did you come here? To this island? Did you pick it beforehand, or did you just happen to end up here?” Jules asks, pulling me from my memories.

I stare at the sand between my feet. It still amazes me that it exists.

“It just happened. I traveled. Stole. Lived like a thief. Then I stole a boat and sailed the oceans until I found a place for my own. This island,” I say.

Her eyes perk up. “A boat? Is it still here on the island?”

I shake my head. “There was a storm. It capsized and smashed into the cliffs on the other side of the island. Not much left.”

She sucks her bottom lip and nods in defeat.

Still so focused on leaving this paradise.

I don’t ever think about going back.

Before I came here, I never knew beaches as beautiful as this one existed.

Or that there would be jungles as vast as this one.

Or that the ocean would be so huge. Or the animals so amazing.

I didn’t know a lot of things before I came to this island.

Back then, way before, my life wasn’t mine to live.

I sigh and take a good look at her face so I can memorize it ... before the change. “I lived in a cage, most of my life.”

Her eyes widen, and her look changes ... from curiosity to discomfort. It’s what I feared the most. And now it’s going to happen.

If I don't tell her, she won't accept me, and she won't stay. But if I do, she might run anyway.

At first, she stares at me ... but then a hand reaches for me. "Tell me more."

It's the first time in ages I felt something other than judgment. Something less than hatred. And it unwinds my heart. Makes me believe in hope. Maybe *she* could understand.

"My father used me as a fighting machine. Something he could earn money with."

"He put you in there?" she asks.

I nod. "I didn't know anything else. I was born in captivity."

"Wow."

I swallow away the lump in my throat. "He kept me there so he could use me."

"What about your mother?"

"I've never met her. I don't even know if she's still alive."

She lowers her eyes and bites her lip. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be. You can't miss what you've never had."

"Why ..." she mutters. "Why would anyone do that to a person?"

"My father was awful. If I didn't do what he wanted, he'd beat me."

She cringes.

"As I said, I don't have many good memories of my life before."

"How ... how did you end up here?" She places a hand on my arm.

I clear my throat and let out a sigh. "Sometimes, he'd let me out as a reward for winning a fight. Said I could look around. Explore. Each time, it would be a little longer."

I grab a handful of sand and watch it fall through my fingers. “But he didn’t realize how much I loved seeing this world. This world is so beautiful. So green, and yellow, and blue. Everything tasted better, smelled better, felt better. The food I ate, the sky above me, the earth under my feet. The bustling sounds of the people in the towns. And my cage was just one gray stone mass. A concrete prison hidden from the world.”

She listens to me attentively, hanging on my words.

“Once I had a taste, I wanted more. So much more. I’d fight as hard as I could just to get out. I didn’t even care about all the women he threw at me. I just wanted to *see*.”

“Women?”

I take a quick glance at her. “My father wanted me to … make babies.”

“Oh.” Her entire face goes red. “But why?”

“So he could sell them.”

Her whole face turns white, and for a second there, I think she’s going to run or puke.

But she stays put and holds it down, clutching her stomach.

“So did you do it?” she asks after a while.

“Sometimes, but it never resulted in a baby. They were also very reluctant. I didn’t like it, and I quickly lost interest in them. My real prize was right outside the door, waiting for me. This lively planet and everything it has to offer. I felt like a kid every time I went outside.”

“I can imagine,” she says, smiling gently. “Your father … he sounds evil. Pure evil.”

I nod. “It’s because of him I don’t trust people. That, and when people see me, they literally run away. Maybe it’s my size, or my physique.”

“Or both,” she says, giggling, but then stops immediately when she sees my concerned face. “Sorry, go on.”

“Right. They didn’t see me the way you see me. All they saw was a monster ...” I frown, gazing at the ocean ahead. “All I wanted was to be like them. To be free. To be seen. So when my father let me out for such a long time, I decided it was time for me to escape. To find a good place to live.”

“And then you settled here ...”

I touch the sand underneath me. “This place is my home.”

“Is that why you don’t want people to come to this island?” she asks tentatively. “Because you’re afraid they’ll ruin it?”

If only that was the sole reason.

Knots form in my stomach as I’m forced to come to terms with my past. My future. My present. Everything that happened up to this moment led me to this place. Led me to her.

In all the beauty and the chaos, I found her.

And now she’ll be taken away from me by fear.

“No,” I reply. “It’s more than that. They ... fear me. And they should,” I say, my hands forming fists.

She bites her lip even harder as I speak, but I continue, knowing that when I finish, she’ll want nothing to do with me.

“I tried so hard,” I say, shaking my head. “To fit in. To be liked. To find someone, anyone, to talk to. I just wanted a friend. I didn’t mean to do it. It was an accident. But the people wanted to catch me and put me behind bars again. Anything but another prison. I couldn’t take it, so I ran and then I came here.”

Her face darkens as she backs away slowly. The slight movement is like a spear to the heart.

“What did you do?” she asks, putting emphasis on every word.

“I killed a girl.”

Her lips part, and her pupils dilate. She immediately flinches and pulls back when I reach for her hand. “Please, don’t be mad.”

“You ... killed someone?”

“No, it wasn’t like that.”

I place a hand on her leg, but she immediately gets up, hissing, “Don’t touch me.”

The sharp pang of her judgment fills me with rage. “It was an accident,” I growl.

“But you killed someone? You just said you did.”

“I did,” I reply, getting up too. “And I don’t ever pretend it’s not true because it is. I’m guilty.”

“Why? I don’t understand.” She shakes her head, stepping back one foot at a time.

“Please, listen to me. I didn’t do it on purpose.”

“Tell me what happened!” she yells.

I nod slowly, trying to reach for her, but she keeps inching backward. “I only wanted someone to talk to. A friend. And that little girl wasn’t afraid of me. The only one ... so I wanted to keep her. I wanted to take her somewhere else.”

“A *little girl*?” she says in shock.

“I took her into the woods ... beyond her home ...”

“And then you murdered her,” she says through gritted teeth.

Her voice speaking my sin out loud is like a death sentence.

“I’m sorry,” I say, licking my lips. “She fought me, kicked me. I dropped her ... and then when she tried to run ... she fell into a deep pit.”

Disbelief—and something else—mar her face.

Something I haven’t seen in a long time.

Hatred.

“Please, you have to believe me. I didn’t mean for her to die,” I say as Jules stumbles backward.

I take a step toward her, but her voice stops me in my tracks. “No.”

“Jules,” I murmur, wishing I could turn back time.

I shouldn’t have told her.

Shouldn’t have even said a word.

At least then I’d still have a chance.

At least then … I wouldn’t have to see that face.

That face of pure disgust.

The one I’ve seen so many times.

“Jules … please.”

“Don’t,” she snaps, and then she turns around and runs back into the jungle.

A sigh leaves my mouth as I drop to the sand on both hands and knees.

It’s done. It’s finally done.

I’ve come clean, and with it, I’ve lost her.

People everywhere don’t understand what it’s like to have lived in a cage and want nothing but human contact. Real … contact. What it means to be human.

But my reasons are never enough to explain why I did the things I did.

Why I killed every fighter who dared to cross me, just so I could have my reward.

Why I let my father use me the way he did.

Why that little girl died because of me.

There is no excuse.

I did something unforgivable.

And I will keep paying the price because I deserve it.

Because she is right.

I am a monster.

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CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Accompanying Song: [“Coachella” by Lana Del Rey](#)

Juliet

I've been stomping through the jungle the entire day, collecting leaves that I can sew together to create a sail. The only thing that made me stop in my tracks was a colorful frog with red eyes perched on a leaf. But since I didn't have any equipment on me, it was impossible to study it, and when it jumped away, I lost the chance anyway.

So I direct my attention to the leaves I gathered and continue my effort. I put them all on a stack and focus on my boat first. It's a large piece of wood that I carved out over time.

It took me a few days, but it's shaping up to be something I can use to get off this island. I toil away as hard as I can, trying to focus all my anger and rage into this wood. I'm not good at this, but I don't care. I want to have something to do to waste time. To give meaning to it because I'm stuck here with Lock, whether I like it or not.

Not that he's been much of a hassle. I haven't seen him in days. Not since *that* conversation.

The mere memory of it still makes me shiver.

I can't believe he killed a girl.

Why would he do that?

How could he?

I can understand he was lonely, but he had no right to take her. No right.

And then to kill her just like that?

Granted, he did say it was an accident. But is it really, when it's his fault she was there in the first place?

That girl was someone's child. Parents are missing a piece of their soul right now, and nothing he says or does will fill that hole she left. Nothing can undo what he did. Nothing can bring her back.

Which is why I'm so upset. He did something unforgivable. How can I go on talking with him as if everything is normal after knowing he did something like that?

No wonder he refused to tell me why he hates people. No one would react well to hearing that.

A young girl killed at the hands of a beast ...

I shake my head and cut harder into the wood. I can't believe I'm still so pissed off, but I am. Some part of me wishes he wouldn't have told me. But that wouldn't have been right either. That girl deserved better.

He *should* feel guilty.

He should've done everything in his power to make it right even though that's impossible.

But anything is better than nothing ... better than fleeing. Like a coward.

Enraged, I slam the wood so hard it snaps off.

“Goddammit!” I scream, throwing the tool away.

Blowing out a sigh, I rub my forehead and wipe off all the sweat.

I should’ve finished a long time ago, and now it’ll take even longer to fix this. I wanted it done before he came back. If he ever does because I still haven’t seen him.

Is he hiding somewhere? Waiting to catch me by surprise?

Or is he alone somewhere on the island, thinking about his crime?

I wonder how long he’s walked with this secret ... how long he’s kept it to himself.

If I’m the only one he’s ever told.

I swallow away the lump in my throat.

He did say he was sorry. Maybe he does regret it deeply. Maybe it was a mistake he never wanted to happen.

Should we forever be punished for something we did in the past? Even if it’s as horrible as can be? Even if it’s unforgivable, is it my place to judge?

I clench my fists. At this point, I don’t even know what to do anymore. I’ve wanted off this island since I came here, and he’s put every inch of his effort into making me stay.

It’s as if he was desperate for a companion. Desperate for someone to understand him. Someone to talk to.

I’m like that little girl to him, but he didn’t kill me.

In fact, by not coming to the hut for days, it’s almost as if he *wants* me to go.

As though he’s giving me everything I need to escape.

As if he knows he deserves nothing less.

But could I?

Could I leave him here, knowing he came here after being chased away with pitchforks and fire? Could I crucify him the same way those people did when they wanted to find the killer and probably plastered his face all over the news?

I always knew there was something about him, something dark and unspoken. Something he didn't want me to know ...

But I *needed* to know.

And he knew that. He knew how I'd react. Anyone would be mad.

Yet he told me anyway.

Was that his way of showing me his heart? Showing me he'd do anything to make me trust him? To keep me, even if it meant possibly losing me?

I lick my lips and contemplate what to do.

I can't leave like this. Not after what he told me. Not without resolving this.

I may be mad at what he did, but we're both still human.

And when I leave, he'll have no one left.

I have to know where he is and what he's doing.

I need to know if he'll be all right.

So I drop everything and take a deep breath before walking into the jungle again. With my pouch filled with water attached to my waist on a rope, I can search the jungle for a few hours without getting dehydrated.

First thing I do is go to the beach where I last saw him. The place I left him behind.

It doesn't take me long to get there, and when I do, my throat immediately clamps up.

There he is ... in the sand ... with his face buried in his arms.

After all these days ...

Did he stay there all this time?

Or has he come back, hoping I would too?

I lick my lips and stare at him as he raises his head and gazes at the sea. There's a small patch of fur right beside him and a pouch made of leaves, probably filled with water.

I sigh. He looks so sad, sitting there on his own, waiting for ... God knows what.

I approach, and my feet stumble over a piece of wood. I barely manage to catch myself before I fall.

Suddenly, he turns his face and looks straight at me.

When our eyes lock, my heart stops beating.

Seconds seem like minutes as we stare at each other. Everything around me fades into the background. The look in his eyes is one of pure misery ... and it breaks my heart in two.

My lips part, but I have no idea what to say.

I'm too far for him to hear anyway.

Instead, my inner coward takes over again, and I turn around and bolt away.

God, why? Why do I have to be such a wimp?

I couldn't take the stare down. Couldn't take seeing the defeat in his eyes.

It wasn't just guilt that was eating away at him. It was the despair ... the loneliness ... and pure terror that he would lose me and be alone again.

That's why he stayed there.

Not to give me time.

But to get used to the idea of being on his own again.

And it kills me.

It hurts me to the point of tears filling my eyes as I run.

I feel so much right now, and I don't know how to give it a place. How to come to terms with the fact that I ... *feel* for him.

That I feel things I shouldn't be feeling for a savage on an island.

But I do.

I want to hug him.

Hold him.

Keep him close.

Shit.

When I come face to face with the hut again, I immediately go inside and clean the mess I made. I throw the pots and bowls into the water and clean them, then I wipe off all the dust and make the bed.

I grab the box and take out some of the smoked fish, prepping them, placing them on a plate. I open the other box filled with jerky and take a few out, placing them on the plate too. I fold over a few banana leaves and place it in back in the box to preserve it.

Then I sit down at the table and wait.

* * *

Accompanying Song: “Come Say Hello” by SuperHumanoids

Lock

With my head lowered, I open the door to the hut. I'm not sure what I'm going to find. Or why I even came. A part of me wants to turn around and leave. Hell, I forced myself to ignore her watching me from afar for a few

good minutes. But eventually, I couldn't take it anymore. I can't be alone. I can't let her be here while I'm there. I simply can't let her go.

She came to me.

I never told her to, yet she came anyway.

Despite her running away again, I know it was a sign. She came to me for a reason. Instead of staying away, instead of fleeing the island, she actually came to me. That means something.

As I glance around the hut and our eyes meet, my whole body quakes with need.

I want to hug her. Hold her tight. Never let go.

I was afraid to lose her, but when I look into those eyes right now, I see none of the fear and rage from before. Something's changed.

She's changed ... and the hut has as well.

Did she clean it?

She swallows and slips off the chair, her eyes never leaving mine. I stay put, watching her every move. I don't know if I can trust her. If she'll betray me and try to stab me with something. I wouldn't blame her if she did, but I'd prefer it if it didn't happen, so I have to stay wary.

She has every right to be pissed off at me; I expect nothing less.

But what I didn't expect was this.

Her ... slowly sliding toward me, grabbing my hands, pulling me inside.

What is she doing?

She's supposed to hate me. Loathe me.

I'm poison. Everything I touch turns to ashes.

I'm someone who brings pain and suffering ... and what does she do? She welcomes me inside as if she's missed me.

But why?

I came here because I knew in my heart I needed to do everything I could to mend the situation. To apologize and give her anything she'd want in order to make her stay.

But she's pulling me along, and I'm letting her.

She sets me down on my own chair and grabs something out of the box, placing it in front of me. A plate ... filled with smoked fish and jerky.

Did she make this for me?

But why? I didn't do anything to deserve this.

I stare at the plate in front of me as she conjures up another one filled with leaves and other greens, along with bits of fish.

She points at my plate, and the left side of her lips quirks up into a slight smile.

She wants me to eat?

But why? After everything that happened, after everything I did, everything I said ... she wants me to eat with her?

She should want nothing to do with me.

That was the right choice.

“Why?” I growl, planting my fists on the table.

Her whole face turns red. “I don’t know.”

“You don’t know?” I raise a brow.

She shrugs. “I just ... don’t want you to punish yourself.”

I cock my head and stare at her. I’m not even fucking hungry anymore. Not after this.

“Punish myself? After I sat there for fuck knows how long, *now* you suddenly care?”

She grimaces. “It’s not as black and white as you make it sound.”

“Yes, it is,” I growl, shoving the plate toward her. “I don’t want this.”

She scoots it right back. “Yes, you do. Now eat.”

I ignore it and look the other way. Even if I’m hungry, I refuse to eat. I don’t deserve any of this.

“Can’t we return to the way it was?”

“And then what?” I bark, maybe a little too aggressive, but I’m pissed, and I don’t even know why. “You’re still going to want to leave.”

“That’s not important right now. I don’t like it when—”

“When what?” I say, biting my bottom lip. “Say it.”

She plays with her food, not even looking at me as she speaks. “When you’re unhappy.”

I sit back in my seat and fold my arms, gazing straight at her until she looks up, and our eyes finally connect. Electricity sparks through the air like lightning. I don’t look away and neither does she. Her whole body freezes as I lick the top of my lips, her eyes clearly following my tongue.

Exactly what I thought.

She can’t stay mad at me because she’s already beyond the point of no return.

That point where you can’t stop wanting someone. No matter how much you hate them. No matter how badly your brain tells you to run the other way.

She can’t stop craving me.

And I can’t stop desiring her either, but I’m not going to forget about this.

“I came here to say sorry,” I say. “Not to eat.”

She nods, swallowing away the lump in her throat. “You don’t have to. I understand now.”

“How?” I say, my voice going deeper each time I speak.

“You didn’t do it on purpose, right?” she asks.

I nod. There’s nothing more to it. Nothing to explain. I did what I did, and I pay the price every day.

“Do you hate me now?” I ask.

My fists clench as I picture those vivid eyes of hers filled with disgust as she gazed at me on the beach after hearing the truth. Maybe she isn’t mad anymore, but I am.

She asked for it, and then she still denied me a shred of dignity.

Maybe she was right when she said I was dangerous.

But she likes danger.

She hungers for it.

Why else would she come to this island?

Research? Fuck no. She wanted adventure.

I’m as big as an adventure can get.

She just wasn’t prepared for what it meant when you fall into the hands of a beast like me.

She bites her bottom lip and says, “I’m not mad anymore. But I know you are.”

I nod slowly. I guess anyone would have. What I did was unforgivable. Still, that look in her eyes ... it hurt me. Makes my heart fill with rage. Makes me want to do ... bad things to her.

She should’ve escaped while she had the chance.

Now, I’m ready to pounce.

However, she gets up from her seat ... not to run.

But to kneel right in front of me.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Accompanying Song: “[Only Human](#)” by Cold Showers

Juliet

I kneel right in front of him and wait.

I don’t know what I’m doing, but I’m doing it anyway.

My brain has turned to mush again.

His eyes make me do it. Make me do a lot of things. Dirty things.

I want to see what his reaction is. What he’ll do to me. If this is what he wants.

For me to submit to his needs.

It’s always been about his needs … and mine. And the struggle we both endure to keep it in check.

It’s the only reason he told me about his past and about what he did. Because he wanted to keep me so desperately, and I was still slipping away.

By coming clean, he's only made that voice in my head stronger. The one that tells me to flee, to get off this island in any way possible.

But I can't.

Not without hurting him.

And right now, that hurts me more than anything.

Seeing the pain in his eyes as he sat there on the beach changed something in me. Something irreversible. A part of me is inside him, and I can't take it back. It's too late for that. He stole my heart and bound it with need, desire ... and love.

The only man who hasn't tried to ditch me after finding out how difficult I can be. The only man who accepts me for who I am. And I didn't accept him.

Didn't accept his apology. And it hurt him in ways I didn't think was possible.

I didn't know my opinion of him mattered so much to him. That my words could cut like a knife.

And I hate that it had to be like this.

I want to put it behind me.

Behind us.

What he did in the past doesn't matter in the now.

Because we're here, on an island, where no one can judge us.

How many times has he had to apologize? To say he was sorry and not be taken seriously?

How long does a person need to suffer until he's forgiven?

Until people will accept him again?

I can't do it. I can't keep shunning him like they did.

He doesn't have to hide. Not from me.

I'm done with feeling sorry for him, feeling sorry for myself.

This is my choice.

I want him to take control. To do what he needs to get it out of him.

To expel the demons, you have to give in to them.

I blow out a breath and lean forward, pulling the rope around his waist. Right before it's undone, Lock grasps my wrist.

"What are you doing?" he asks with a gruff voice.

I gaze up into his eyes as I say, "What I want."

His eyes narrow. After a few seconds pass, he releases my wrist.

I take it as a sign to continue, so I do ... and the banana leaves fall to the ground, unveiling his semi-hard-on.

The left side of my lips tip up into a smile.

So he was already into it from the start.

He was only trying to stop me from doing something I didn't want to. But I do ... I do want to do this. For his sake and mine.

He needs this. He can't hide his frustrations from me. He needs to let them out on me.

So I grab his shaft and start rubbing it, up and down, until it grows harder and harder in my hand, and my mouth begins to water at the thought of having him.

I don't stop, despite how thick it becomes. Pre-cum drips from the tip, and I spread it all across.

He moans softly, the sound arousing me. Making me wet.

I lean in to take a lick.

I don't know what comes over me, but it's all I want right now.

To taste him as he tasted me.

My tongue instinctively rolls out and slides all the way up and down his shaft, taking the tip into my mouth. He groans, and his head tilts back as he braces on the chair. His muscles tense up, his body tightening. I grin and focus on sucking the tip, licking it, giving him everything he wants and more.

I want him to feel wanted.

To feel needed.

Maybe it's the empathy that did me in. Or maybe it's because I was already lost to him ... and we both needed the release.

As I lick him, I begin to play with myself, hiding it underneath the banana leaves.

Still, he notices, as his head tilts back and his eyes wander off between my legs. His tongue darts out to lick his lips, and he groans again.

I like it when he looks.

“You’re ruining me, Jules ...” he murmurs.

“You ruined me first,” I reply, winking.

Screw dinner. I want him to screw me.

I continue kissing and licking him, tasting the pre-cum on my tongue. However, he lets out an exasperated sigh and leans forward, grabbing my face with both hands to kiss me on the forehead. “Jules ... don’t.”

I shake my head. “Take me.”

He whispers into my ear, “I can’t stop myself if I start.”

“Then don’t,” I say.

“You don’t know what you’re giving in to ...” He breathes on my skin, on my neck, my lips, and my body sends out delicious tingles.

I look up into his eyes and whisper, “Please.”

A soft moan escapes his mouth, but I heard it. I definitely heard it, and it made goose bumps scatter across my skin.

“Don’t beg,” he groans.

“Why?”

“Because I can’t say no to you,” he says, pressing a kiss to my lips. I greedily kiss him back, practically hanging on his lips as he pulls them away.

He leans back in the seat, legs spread, hard-on on full display.

He licks his bottom lip again and cocks his head. “Suck.”

My throat clamps as my pussy thumps, but I approach him anyway and slide my mouth over his length. His hand pushes down on my head, forcing me to take it all the way to the base.

I cough, wheezing.

“Give up yet?” he growls as I struggle to breathe.

But I shake my head.

What the hell is wrong with me?

At this point, I don’t know anymore. All I feel is the wetness pooling between my legs and how turned on I am by his dominance.

He releases me from his grip, and I pull up to gasp. But I don’t stop licking, don’t stop spreading my saliva all over him. I love that look on his face ... the hunger ... the deep, dark lust of a dangerous man.

Right now, I want it all.

I don’t care if it’s wrong or right.

So I wrap my tongue around the tip again and sink down to the base, letting him take over.

He groans, and the salty taste on my tongue increases. It only makes me wetter.

I circle my clit and finger myself right in front of him, not giving a shit about how dirty I am.

“I’m bad, Jules. You don’t want this.”

“I do,” I reply, sucking on his cock.

“Show me then,” he growls, his eyes darting toward my legs. “Show me how much you want it.”

With one hand, I slide away the banana leaf while the other is still working my pussy. I don’t even feel shame as his eyes take in all that I’m doing. They flicker with need, making me want to come.

“Make yourself come,” he says, and I nod.

He points at his dick and then beckons me to come closer, so I do, and I put him in my mouth again. He pushes and makes me choke on his dick, but I love the way it feels. Love that I have no control over this.

I’m flicking furiously, my nub swollen and aroused.

“Fuck,” he hisses, pulling me back. “Keep going.”

I do what he says, losing myself in the moment, licking him as fast as I can.

Right as his cock pushes against the back of my throat, he growls, “Come.”

His deep voice makes my legs quiver, and ecstasy follows. With his shaft all the way down my throat, I fall apart, right in front of him.

He pulls out of me as I sink to the floor. But I can’t stop looking at him with hungry eyes, desperate for more. I want him to take away the pain, the fear, the regrets. Everything that ruins us both until nothing’s left.

“Take me,” I say, holding up my hands.

He squints. “You sure?”

I nod. “Take away the fear. I don’t want it anymore.”

He lowers his head. No nod, no words. I don’t need any. He knows what I need.

What I've needed from day one.

He gets up from the chair and grabs me. I squeal as he lifts me and throws me over his shoulder. But it's not one of terror or worry ... it's one of excitement.

* * *

Accompanying Song: “Only Human” by Cold Showers

Lock

She's lost her mind.

But I'm glad she did.

Her giving in to me is the best thing to happen since she landed on this island. Finally, I get to do whatever the fuck I want to her body, and she won't protest.

It's like a wish come true even though I don't deserve it.

I guess she is just too perfect.

And too fucking sexy to resist.

I throw her down on the bed and grasp the rope from the small wooden handmade cabinet. The look on her face changes from playful to dread, so I sit down beside her and press a kiss to her lips.

“This is what you want, isn't it?” I murmur.

She nods softly, sucking in a breath when I grab her wrists and pin them to the head of the bed.

One by one, I tie her wrists to the bed. Then I slowly lower myself on top of her. I sniff and smell the fear. I slide down her body and linger near her pussy, my tongue dipping out to take a quick lick. It immediately takes the tension off.

I smile as I continue my path up her body and steal a greedy kiss.

Then I grasp the rope she used to tie the leaves around her breasts and rip it in two. She squeals from my ferocity, the feral way with which I destroy the last shred of who she was before she came here. For one moment, our eyes connect. Then I bury my face between her tits and ravage her, kissing them, licking everywhere, sucking hard on her nipples until they're peaked. Until they are what I remember them being.

Mine.

“Are you afraid of me?” I ask, arching my back to tower high above her.

She has nowhere to go. Nowhere to hide.

Strapped to my bed ... completely submitted to my will.

To my mercy.

And still, she shakes her head.

It's a lie, I can tell, but I don't mind. This is what she truly wanted. And to get rid of her fear, she has to face it. She has to give in.

So I'll give her what she wants. Me ... in my most carnal form.

I perch myself right on top of her. “Open your mouth,” I say, using my thumb to help her.

Then I shove my cock inside. Slowly, steadily ... completely inside until the base.

She chokes and heaves but manages to keep it inside.

I pull out and slowly go back in again, adding a thrust.

Her eyes widen as she realizes what I'm going to do, but she accepts it anyway, without protesting, her mouth remaining open for me.

Just as I want her to.

Each thrust is a little faster until I can't stop myself anymore and go all out. She gulps in air as I take it out and go back inside again. I don't stop the assault on her mouth because this is what she begged me to do.

To give her all the fear ... and leave her with none.

Her saliva coats my cock, making it easy to slip and slide into her throat. Her gargles are a turn-on. Her eyes fill with tears from the poking in the back of her throat, and I lean over to lick them off her cheeks.

"Give up yet?" I ask.

She shakes her head.

"Good," I groan, pushing her to her limits.

I fuck deeper, harder, faster, until my veins bulge and my balls are ready to explode.

"Here it comes," I groan. "Take it deep and suck."

Howling, I bury myself inside her. My seed jets out in spurts, covering her tongue and the back of her throat. She coughs and struggles, so I growl, "Swallow it."

Her tongue moves and wraps itself around me, and she gulps it down as I come, filling her up.

When the stream stops, I pull out and let her breathe.

I'm not done yet. Far from it.

I move backward and slide down her body far enough to lift her legs and settle between them. With the tip of my dick at her entrance, her head rises, and she mutters, "Still hard?"

I smirk. "I'm only getting started."

I push inside when she least expects it, wanting to see that o-shape on her lips. It's as pretty as last time when I fucked her in the lake. Only this time her wetness replaces the water... and fuck me, is she wet.

Groaning and puffing, I fuck her deep and hard, slamming into her with everything I have. Sweat drips down my back as I take my woman with every inch of my body. I take her back and everything she took from me. My pride. My dignity. My needs and wants. I take everything she's willing to give me and more.

Is it selfish? Fuck yes. But I don't care anymore.

She willingly gave herself to me.

She knew what she was getting herself into and did it anyway.

"Tell me you want it," I groan, burying myself deep inside her.

"I want it," she murmurs, her cheeks rosy and her lips still glossy with my cum.

Her hot and heavy voice turns me on even more, and I give her all I've got, fucking her until her eyes roll into the back of her head. Until she moans and her pussy contracts, muscles squeezing my dick. I come again, harder, filling her to the brim with my seed.

When I pull out, it drips from her pussy, so I push it back inside with two fingers and spread it all over her lips and in her mouth.

She might think I'm sated ... but this is far from over.

I don't plan on stopping anytime soon.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Accompanying Song: [“Coachella” by Lana Del Rey](#)

Juliet

We’re both eating breakfast in silence, but I’m not even hungry. I can’t stop thinking about what happened last night. And that I did all those dirty things.

My stomach twists, and I push away my plate and look around.

“Not hungry?” Lock asks.

I shake my head. “I’m a bit nauseous.”

“Oh …” He frowns. “Sorry.”

“It’s not your fault,” I say, smiling gently. “Maybe if I wait a few minutes, I’ll get my appetite back.”

“Do that,” he says, chomping on some fish. “I’m gonna go hunt some more today.”

“Hunt?” I look up at him.

“Yeah. We need more fur and jerky.”

I cringe. “Maybe … we could do with more fish?”

“Yeah … tomorrow.” He smiles as he swallows down his food. “We still have enough.”

“Right.” I was actually hoping he might start eating more fish instead of meat, but I guess some things will never change.

Not that I should be thinking about food right now. I feel sick to my stomach. So badly, that I get up off my seat and say, “I … have to go.”

“Where?” he asks as I run out the door and throw it all up somewhere in the bushes. “Jules?”

“Just … go eat,” I say, trying not to be worried even though I am.

Being sick isn’t the problem; it’s the fact I’m sick in the jungle.

I immediately touch my forehead to make sure I’m not feverish, but I’m not. And now that it’s all out, I feel much better. What if it’s some bad kind of virus, though? There’s no medicine here apart from some of the herbs I’ve found. If it gets really bad, there’s no doctor I can go to. No hospital to visit.

We’re all on our own … and somehow that thought freaks me out.

The door slams open, and Lock storms outside. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah.” I cough, but it only makes more bile rise.

“You aren’t,” he says.

I spit it out and wipe my mouth on a leaf, then I walk to the water barrel and dunk in a cup, taking a sip. “I’m fine.”

“Don’t lie.”

“Why? Does it matter?”

His brows furrow. “Something bothering you? You sound angry.”

I sigh. “Look, forget it, okay?” It doesn’t matter. He wouldn’t understand. He likes it here.

“Why? You’re sick.” He grabs my hand. “Come inside.”

He drags me along, and I struggle to stop him. “Let go.”

“No, you should be in bed,” he says.

“I feel fine,” I reply, trying to jerk free, but he won’t release me from his grip. “It was the food.”

“Bullshit. I ate that too, and I feel fine. You’re sick. That’s dangerous here.”

“I know,” I say as he pushes me inside and closes the door behind us. “Why do you think I want to go home?” I blurt out.

His eyes narrow, and he sighs too now.

Shit. I didn’t mean for that to come out so badly.

“I’m sorry, I—”

“Stop,” he interrupts. “You don’t have to say it. I know what you want.”

I swallow and sit down on the bed, gazing down at my feet. I wish I could’ve met him under different circumstances. In a different place. Maybe then things would’ve been a lot easier.

But would we have been the same people?

Would he have been so caring?

I doubt it.

All the men I’ve met up until now were assholes who only wanted me for my body. None of them were in it for the long game. But Lock? He doesn’t even seem to care about my looks or what I’m wearing or how sexy I am. He looks at me in a way only a lover would.

He pays attention to the words I speak and doesn’t laugh at me.

He takes me seriously ... and I appreciate that.

But can this ever be more than just a *thing*?

I don't even know what to call it.

I just know I'm in deep trouble, and I don't know how to get out of it.

He sits down on the bed beside me and says, "Please ..." He places a hand on my leg. "Rest a little. Let me do the work today. I want you to be okay."

"But ..." I have so many things to do.

Wash my clothes and the banana leaves. Gather more food. Continue my work on my boat.

He gently tips my chin up and says, "What do you want me to do? Ask, and I'll do it."

The smile he gives me makes butterflies scatter in my stomach.

Shit. Why do I feel this way around him?

I smile and look away, trying to ignore this warmth growing inside me. "I need a boat."

He frowns. "A boat? Why?"

I nod.

"Oh ..." Finally, it sinks in with him. "Right. You still want off this island."

I bite my lip as it's quiet for a few seconds.

"Lock, what if I'm sick?"

"Then I'll take care of you." I appreciate the sentiment, but what if it's worse?

"What if that's not enough?" I say. "What if it gets bad? Really bad?"

His face contorts as if he's having a difficult time processing it. "You mean ...?"

"What if it's a virus? What if I have an infection?"

"Virus?" He frowns. "What's that?"

“Something bad. Tiny animals in the air that do damage to your body on the inside.”

“Animals?” He grabs his spear. “I’ll hunt them.”

I chuckle but hide my laughter behind my arm when he glares at me.

“It’s not funny. I’ll do it.”

“You can’t. They’re practically invisible.”

“Invisible? How? What kind of monster can’t be seen?”

“Not technically,” I say, taking in a breath. “They’re just super small, so small you can’t see them. But they exist. And there’s nothing you can do about it.”

“But … how are you supposed to get better then?” he asks.

“Medicine, Lock. If I’m really sick, I’ll need medicine.”

“Where can I find it?” he says, making a fist with his hand. “I’ll search.”

“Not everything can be found on this island. I already looked. There are only a handful of herbs. Some of them to kill pain and inflammation, others for headaches, and some for stomach aches. Not much else. The only way to get them is to go …”

“Home,” he mumbles, looking away into the distance.

I nod, but the sad look in his eyes breaks my heart. I don’t want him to be sad. Not even when it’s better for me to be there than it is to be here. Right now, I don’t even know what I want anymore.

I place a hand on his cheek and say, “But I’m not *that* sick yet. Maybe it’ll be all right.”

He immediately brightens. “Could it be something else?” he asks.

“Well …” I blush. “Maybe … I could be …” I place a hand on my stomach and rub it gently.

“Pregnant?” he asks.

Sucking on my bottom lip, I mumble, “I don’t know. I hope not.”

Fuck, why did I have to have sex without protection *again*?

“Why not? That would be amazing,” he says, placing a hand on my stomach too. “My baby … Our baby.”

“No,” I say, pushing him away. “I can’t be pregnant here.”

“But you’re my woman,” he says, grabbing my chin, forcing me to look at him. “You belong to me.” He presses a kiss to my lips, and I’m helplessly melting into a puddle right in front of him.

How can I resist this man?

This savage who takes what he wants and claims it as his?

It’s the ultimate compliment, yet it doesn’t feel right.

How can I say yes to this when the world goes on beyond this island?

I can’t.

Even though I want to, so badly, more than anything.

I want to give in to my heart, but my moral compass won’t let me.

If I truly am pregnant, then I should get off this island.

Right now.

Not for myself, but for that baby.

If it is real, and I am pregnant, there’s no way I can have it on this island.

That wouldn’t be right for the baby. Or for me.

I have to make the right decision.

So I push Lock away and say, “No.”

He frowns as I get up and walk to the door. “No, what? You’re not my woman?”

“I can’t, Lock,” I say, glancing over my shoulder, tears filling my eyes.
“Don’t ask this of me, please.”

Before I burst into tears, I run outside and slam the door shut.

I do what I always do. What I’m used to.

When I’m suffocating in my own emotions … I shut people out.

* * *

Accompanying Song: “Come Say Hello” by SuperHumanoids

Lock

For the entire day, she works on some kind of long wooden thing next to the campfire. She toils away with my tools, not even asking if she can borrow them, but sure. Every time I ask her what she’s doing, she ignores me and throws me a look. Like I’m the bad guy for asking her why she’s so upset.

Maybe I am. At this point, I honestly don’t know anymore.

We’ve all done bad shit, but does that make me the only one around who’s selfish? No.

She doesn’t think about me or anyone else while she’s attempting to do fuck knows what. I don’t know why she’s still so pissed off at me. She got what she wanted; I told her about me, and then we made up with sweet, rough sex. And it’s still not enough.

What else can I give her to make her happy?

She won’t accept the drinks I offer or the food. Kisses or hugs are out of the question, and talking won’t work either.

The moment she became sick, everything went downhill again. Is it because she's afraid of being down on the ground with no way to recover? Or is it because she thinks she might be pregnant?

If that's the case, I can't be happier.

My woman ... pregnant with my baby. That's like a dream come true.

But it doesn't seem like that to her. Is having my baby so bad? On this island?

I sit down in front of her with a cup of water in my hand and try to offer it to her again, but she doesn't even look at it.

"Jules ... c'mon," I say, holding it under her nose.

She pushes me away and part of the water splashes all over the ground.
"Don't."

"What's your problem?" I ask.

"This," she says. "Everything."

I sigh. "You still want off the island?"

"Yes." She says it within a heartbeat. As if it doesn't mean the world to me if she stayed.

I bite my lip and say, "No."

Her face contorts as she lowers the tools for a second and stares at me. "You have no right to decide that for me."

"You want to get away from me?"

"I never said that," she says.

"No, but it's the same."

"It's not. I just ... never mind." She shakes her head. "If you're not going to help me, just let me work."

"What are you making?" I ask.

“You’ll see,” she mumbles as she toils on.

I shrug and chug the last bit of water before placing the cup on the ground.
“Suit yourself. I’m going to hunt.”

* * *

Accompanying Song: “[Believer](#)” by [Imagine Dragons](#)

Lock

When I come back from my hunt at sundown, I drop off all the meat and fish in my hut, which I’ll smoke later. When I look around, Jules is nowhere to be found. I thought she’d be inside, but there’s no one here but me. Where the fuck did she go?

“Jules?” I call out her name several times outside, but there’s no response.

Fuck.

Did she disappear on me again?

Where did she go this time? Back to the helicopter? Up the hills into the deep jungle? Fuck, I hope not.

Did she not leave any tracks? Nothing’s missing ... except for that thing she was making.

That long wooden thing. What could it be used for? It was carved out enough for it to fit her body. She kept on sitting down inside and then getting back up again.

And then it hits me.

It must be ... a boat.

Fuck.

Of course, she would build one.

I immediately grab my spear and a lit torch and march through the jungle. I know where she is. We always come back to that same place ... where our love gets torn apart between our different worlds.

The beach.

The moment I get there, I stare out into the distance. There's a tiny speck in the water. I can barely tell because it's already getting dark, but it has to be her.

It has to be.

I throw the torch and spear down on the ground and rush through the sand toward the water, but the closer I get, the farther the boat seems to go. It's definitely her. The short hair and curvy body give it away.

She's struggling to stay afloat, using a thick tree branch as an oar.

And then the boat suddenly flips over.

"Jules!" I scream.

She doesn't come up.

I jump into the water and swim as fast as I can. I don't give a damn that I'm bad at swimming or that it could kill me if I go too deep because the waves are so strong. I have to save her.

As I run in, my foot scratches along some of the sharp rocks. Sharp pain makes me grunt, but I still push on.

Fuck. I can't stop.

I plow ahead through the water, using every bit of strength I have. The salty water enters my nose, and I cough and wheeze but keep on going.

I don't fucking give up.

Ever.

Not when it comes to her.

Not even when the salty water stings my foot.

Not even when my muscles start to hurt from the sloshing waves.

I won't stop ... because she is *my* woman. And I have to save her from herself.

When I finally get to the flipped boat, I scream her name. "Jules!"

I dive down and try to look around, but there's nothing except fish and shells and coral. Where the hell is she?

I come up to get air.

That's when I spot her to my left, not far from the boat. "Jules!"

I swim to her and quickly grab her, pulling her up to my body so her head stays above the water. She's not awake yet, so I softly pat her face and say, "C'mon, Jules. Stay with me."

A moment later, she chokes and coughs up water. She gargles and sputters as I pull her back to the boat.

"Hold on," I say as I grab it.

"Fuck ..." she mumbles as she grabs the wood and throws herself onto the top.

She's breathing in and out as loudly as I am, but I'm not done yet.

I push the wood all the way back to the beach with her on top while she groans and comes back to the land of the living.

When we reach the shore, I pull her off and hold her in my arms as I walk onto the sand. I don't stop until we're safe from the waves, then place her on the ground and collapse beside her.

We're alive.

For now.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Accompanying Song: “Again” by Noah Cyrus

Juliet

I stare up at the darkened sky and continue to cough up water. It all happened so fast. One moment, I was still in the boat, floating toward freedom, and the next, I was in the water, struggling to breathe. The waves were so damn high ... I didn't expect them to be that rough.

That boat did not provide enough stability. I should know better.

Luckily, I don't think I swallowed that much water. Lock came to my aid so quickly ... it amazes me. I didn't expect him to know where I went, but maybe I gave it away when I told him about the boat.

“What the hell were you doing out there?” Lock barks, still breathing heavily.

I can barely think when he's shouting at me like that.

I know I fucked up, but he doesn't have to be that harsh on me.

I cough some more and then lean up.

“Going home, what else should I be doing?” My voice is still croaky, but I manage.

“You can’t go home in that *thing*!” he shouts, leaning up on his elbows. “If I knew you were trying to escape with a fucking boat, I would’ve put a stop to that right away.”

“It’s not your call to make!” I yell back, sitting up too now even though I still feel queasy from swallowing the salty water.

“So what? You’re just gonna keep trying to piss me off?” he growls.

“Yes. If that’s what it takes to get home ...”

“You could’ve *died*!”

His sharp tone immediately makes me shut up. I tug a strand of my wet hair behind my ears and grab my legs, pulling them up toward me.

He’s right. I could’ve died.

If he hadn’t been there to save me, I would have.

No way could I have swum back to shore the way he did.

He’s still out of it, still breathing loudly as though he’s run out of air. And he did it to save me.

Tears well up in my eyes. “I ... I’m sorry.” I choke on my own words.

I’m not even sure if I mean them. A part of me is sorry for doing this to him. For making him go through all that. For making him suffer. But another part desperately wants to go home.

“Why? Why do you keep doing this? Is it so bad to live here? With me?” he asks.

His words cut into my soul.

“No,” I say, gazing at him from the corner of my eyes. I can barely say the words. “But I...”

“Tell me … please, Jules.” He grabs my hand and squeezes. “I want you to be mine. But you won’t let me.”

It’s hard, so hard to fight him.

To fight the desire to be with him.

But this island will be the death of me.

Of this baby.

If it’s true.

I won’t even know for sure until I get back home.

And what if it’s true? I can’t raise it here … or at home by myself.

I shake my head and bury my head in my arms, wanting to escape.

“Jules …” His voice is so sweet, it breaks me.

“I can’t *be* pregnant. Not here.”

“I can take care of you and the baby,” he says.

If there even is a baby. We won’t know for sure until I’m home. Until a doctor can check me.

“It doesn’t matter,” I say, looking up to stare right into his eyes, even though mine are bright red and stained with tears. “There’s no medicine on this island. Nothing to support a child, let alone us. It’s not safe. Or healthy.”

“But …” He grabs my chin and wipes away the tears with his thumb.
“We’ll have each other.”

He leans in and presses a kiss to my lips, sealing his feelings for me. It’s emotional blackmail, and I don’t even mind. All I want right now is for him to take away the pain.

“Let me love you,” he murmurs against my lips.

“I want to,” I reply, and he pulls back and looks me in the eye.

A pause follows.

“Come with me,” I blurt out.

I don’t know why, but it came to me out of nowhere.

“What do you mean?” He frowns.

“Come home with me,” I say, grabbing both his hands. “Together.”

“Home? Your home?” he mutters, his eyes glazing over me and across to the ocean. “I—”

“Why not?” I say.

“How?” he asks, shaking his head. “Those boats of yours will never make it past the waves. You’ll die out at sea.”

He pulls away and leans back, staring up at the sky.

“We can try to make a new boat. Together,” I say, clearing my throat.

It’s quiet for a while. Then he mumbles, “It won’t work, Jules. I’ve already been there. To your world. People don’t want me.”

“No, that’s not true,” I say. “They don’t know you ...”

“They know a girl died because of me,” he growls. “That’s enough.”

I frown. “They’d understand if you’d explain it.”

“Jules ...” He sighs. “This is my home.” He places his hand on mine. “I’m happy here. I just wish I could make you happy too.”

I blow out a sigh too and lie down on the sand. He joins me, and we both stare up at the sky filled with stars.

“It’s beautiful, isn’t it?” he says.

I nod and paint a picture in the sky where the zodiacs are.

“What’s that?” he asks.

“Lion.”

“A what?”

“It’s the zodiac of the lion.” He makes a confused face when I look at him.
“You don’t know what a zodiac is or what a lion is?”

“Both,” he replies.

I chuckle. Is he messing with me or what?

“It’s not funny,” he says.

“You mean you’re serious?” I say, narrowing my eyes as I lean up briefly.

He nods.

“Well ...” I lick my lips. “A lion is an animal with sharp teeth and claws, and a nice, yellow fur. And a zodiac is a combination of stars that form a line. People assign names to them. Every month has its own zodiac, so when you’re born you also have a zodiac assigned to you.”

“So I have one too?” he asks.

“Yep. When were you born?”

He pauses, and his face scrunches up again. “I ... don’t know.” He swallows. “Father only taught me the basic things.”

I can’t believe it. How badly was he neglected? How little does he know about this world before he came here? Or even about himself?

I lie back down on the sand. “Tell me about your father.”

His face darkens. “What’s there to tell? He’s my father. He put me in a cage to fight for him. I don’t know anything else but that cage ... and sometimes being let out.”

“So you don’t know anything about your time before you were put in that cage?”

He shakes his head.

So he’s been in a prison for most of his life.

Only let out occasionally. Like some caged animal.

Who would do this to their own son?

A monster.

My whole body begins to shake, and tears well up in my eyes.

“But I have this place now,” he mumbles. “And I swore I’d never go back there.”

“Good,” I say, smiling at him, whisking away the tears with my thumb.

No wonder Lock put me in a pit. It wasn’t just for his safety or mine … it was all he’s ever known. That which is dangerous should be kept in check. It’s how his father must’ve treated him, so he did the same to me.

I understand now. I understand why he did what he had to do. What motivates him.

He wants to survive. To live and be left in peace.

And when Pete, Ollie, and I came to this place, we ruined it for him. We destroyed a part of his only sanctuary. And for what? Was the research really worth it?

Three people lost their lives over it.

And now, fate is wrecking two more lives.

It’s poetic, to be honest. A true beautiful disaster.

“Tell me about your world,” Lock says suddenly.

“Huh?” I mumble, pulled from my thoughts.

“Your home,” he adds. “I want to know what it’s like.”

“Oh … well, it’s a house. Made of bricks.” I laugh awkwardly because I honestly don’t know how to describe something so normal to someone who … doesn’t think it’s normal.

“Do you live alone there?” he asks.

“Yeah. But I have family and … co-workers.” I don’t really have friends, actually. I don’t have the time. I’m a workaholic.

“Co-workers?”

Holy shit. He really doesn’t know a thing, does he?

I take a deep breath. “We work together, but I like them too. Like a big family but not related in any way except for the work we do.”

“Okay ...” He seems to struggle with it. “Do you have a father too?”

“Yeah.”

“But he didn’t lock you up?”

“No.”

He looks away and bites his lip.

“I have a mother too,” I add, trying to connect again.

He smiles. “Is she nice?”

I nod vehemently. “Yeah ... but I definitely got my stubbornness from her.” I laugh even though he doesn’t.

“You’re definitely stubborn. But you’re also nice, Jules,” he says.

Now, I’m blushing like crazy. “Not really. But thanks.”

“I mean it.”

“I haven’t been very ... nice to you,” I say, clearing my throat.

“I don’t care. I like you the way you are.” The smile that follows fills my body with butterflies.

I normally don’t care about compliments, but when they come from him ... they feel so much more important. Like it matters to me what he thinks of me.

Maybe I’ve started to care more than I’ve let on.

Too much, in fact.

“Please ... stay,” he says, grabbing my hand to kiss the top. “For me.”

I sigh and rub my lips together.

“Just stay for a couple of more days. Maybe you’ll like it,” he says.

“All right. Fine,” I reply, smiling and shaking my head. “But … if I still want to go after that, will you help me?”

“Okay.”

I hold out my hand. “Deal?”

The grin on his face is infectious. “Deal.”

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CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Accompanying Song: “Hungry Faces” by Mogwai

Lock

A week later

“All right, all right. Enough,” I say, pushing the small knife away.

“But I’m not done yet. Your beard is half-shaved now,” she says.

“I don’t care.”

“But I do,” she says, putting her hands on her hips. “It stings my face.”

I raise a brow. “Tell me you don’t like the tickling between your legs.”

She blushes and chuckles the small knife into the warm water. “Lock. Stop it.”

I laugh. “Sorry, I can’t help it. I just don’t like sharp objects that close to my face.”

She washes her hands and grabs a piece of fur, using it to swipe the leftover hair off my face. “There.”

“Does it look good?” I ask.

She smiles. “Yeah ...”

“So nothing’s changed.”

She rolls her eyes, which makes me grin. “So ... you ready?” I ask.

“For what?” she asks.

“The fish, remember? I would let you shave me, and you’d cut up the fish.”

“But I haven’t even shaven you completely.”

I shrug. “So? Half is enough.” I run my hand along my chin to feel it. It’s quite stubbly now, but there’s still hair, so that’s good.

“Besides, you’ll have to learn how to prepare food other than just stuff you plucked off the plants,” I say.

“Fine.” She sighs, cleaning up. “You go grab the fish; I’ll go grab the tools.”

I do what she asks and set everything up for her. Then I get to work on my arrowheads.

“I’m sorry, little fishy,” Jules mumbles as she cuts off its head.

I can’t help but let out a laugh.

I taught her how to catch a fish with my spear, and now she has to clean it and prepare it for eating. It’s difficult, but she’ll get the hang of it. Once she throws aside her guilt, of course.

“It’s not funny,” she says.

“Yeah, it is,” I say.

She’s struggling with it, and I get it, but she’ll get used to it in no time if she keeps practicing.

“I’m just saying sorry because I’m killing it,” she says.

“I know,” I say. “But it’s already dead. It can’t feel anything.”

“Well, it could … a minute ago.”

I shrug and chug down my water before I continue grinding away at the stones to form perfect arrow shapes.

“It’s … cruel,” she mumbles, cutting off the scales.

“No, it’s not,” I reply.

“We’re killing animals,” she scoffs, gazing up at me.

“So?” I shrug again. I don’t understand why she hates doing it so much.

I mean, I love animals too … but a man’s gotta eat.

“It just feels wrong, okay?” she adds.

“So you don’t eat anything but leaves at home?” I ask.

She frowns. “No.”

“Fish too?”

She nods.

“How do you get it then?” I ask.

“From the store.”

“Right. But there’s no store here. If you want to eat, you have to hunt.”

She sighs as she slices the fish and takes out the insides like I showed her. “I know …” She still cringes and makes weird faces as she does it, as if she’s about to pass out. “I feel guilty.”

“Don’t be,” I say. “Animals exist for food. Animals eat animals. It’s nature,” I reply.

She nods a few times. “I’ve studied that plenty of times. But I still feel like there should be a better way.”

“Like what? How does your store get the meat? Do they kill the animal?”

“I guess.”

“And it feeds how many people?” I ask, raising a brow.

“Millions across the world, I suppose.”

“So you made a farm out of animals,” I say. “We don’t do that here. I kill what I need to survive. Is that cruel?”

She shrugs and looks down at the fish. “I suppose not, when you put it that way.”

I smile and gaze down at the arrowheads, which are finally sharp enough to use.

“Done,” I say as I get up from my tree stump. “You?” I ask.

She cuts the fish a few more times and then says, “Yeah.”

“Throw it in the box with the rest. We’ll eat it tonight,” I say.

She goes inside to store the fish and clean up, washing her hands in a separate water bowl. She even made some kind of frothing mixture made of herbs that supposedly keeps the tiny animals at bay, the ones that were almost invisible.

It still amazes me what all she can do with leaves. I wish I’d known all that. It would’ve made life much easier. But I guess it is, now that she’s here. She’s even been trying to teach me how to do it, but I’m not a fast learner.

As she rubs the sweat from her forehead, she mumbles, “What now?”

I’m glad she’s so eager. She’s finally settled on working hard here on the island, and she hasn’t said a word about wanting to go home in a few days, so that’s good. I just hope it stays that way.

I grab my arrowheads and attach them to the sticks, then I find my bow in the hut and bring it out. She looks at me with questioning eyes, which makes me grin. “Now, we hunt.”

I grab her hand and pull her into the jungle. We both have a flask filled with water tied around our waist, so we can easily hunt for a couple of hours without going thirsty. Perfect.

I already taught her how to shoot an arrow by using trees as targets. But it's time she participated in the real deal.

I pull her through until we get to the spot where the monkeys are. The moment they make a noise, I stop in my tracks and so does she.

"What?" she whispers.

I place my finger on my lips. "Shh."

Jules looks around while I grab my bow and place an arrow on the string. I eye the area above me. I spot one and point at it. Then I pull back the string ... and let go.

The arrow blasts through the air. The monkeys screech. A loud thud sounds through the jungle. The monkey's been hit.

I smirk to myself and wink when she gazes into the distance, searching for the animal. "Whoa ..."

"Now you try," I say, shoving the bow into her hands.

"What? Shoot an animal? Me?"

"Yeah," I say, shrugging. "You want food or not?"

"I can eat leaves."

I lift a brow. "For the rest of your life?"

She makes a face.

"So you don't mind getting cold in the winter?" I ask.

She frowns. "What does that have to do with it?"

"Fur, remember?"

She takes a deep breath and sighs. "Really?"

“Yes. Fur. We need it, just like food. Now c’mon.” I nod my head in the right direction.

“What? Now? I haven’t even practiced this—”

“Just try it. I’ll help you.” I throw her an arrow and search for more monkeys, walking around until they make more sounds. However, Jules is still in the same spot she was before. She seems frozen to the ground, staring at the arrow.

I pause and turn, beckoning her. “C’mon. This way.”

But she won’t come.

She won’t even glance my way.

Her hand begins to tremble … and so does her entire body.

“What’s wrong?” I ask, frowning as she drops the arrow on the ground.

She immediately turns her head my way and gasps as she sees me. Her eyes are bewildered. Her body language like that of a bird about to fly away to safety.

“I … I …” she mutters. No full words leave her mouth.

What did she see that startled her?

What happened when I wasn’t looking?

Her eyes widen.

Then she turns around and runs.

“Wait!” I scream, holding up my hand, but it’s no use. She doesn’t look back.

Won’t even say where she’s going.

Or why.

* * *

Accompanying Song: “Through Falling” by Johann Johannsson

Juliet

I run.

I run as fast as my legs can take me.

As far as the horizon goes.

I don’t look back.

Don’t hesitate.

I have one destination, and I’m heading there right now.

The moment I held that arrow, I knew.

I remembered.

It marks the beginning of the end.

Tears form in my eyes as I wade through the jungle back to the place I once came back to life. That place that held my memories ... the place I left my home behind.

The moment I spot the metal wreckage, or what’s left of it, tears run down my cheeks. I run across the field, multiple times, scanning the ground. Everywhere and anywhere, nothing’s left unchecked.

I scream the moment I see it. I’m unable to stop the pain from gushing out of me. I’m delirious on my own thoughts and the images flashing through my head.

One moment, I’m on the ground between the lush greens, and the next, I’m in the sky, whipped from side to side. The hellish noise of the helicopter hitting the ground replays over and over in my mind.

But one clear sound stands out the most.

Something ticking against the window.

Another tick.

Then a bang against the metal.

It all came crashing down.

Because of *this*.

I stare at the small pebble between my feet, not too far away from the helicopter.

Except when I take a closer look, it's not a pebble at all.

It's an arrowhead.

And the stick to which it was applied to is lying right beside it.

My throat clamps up, my lungs refusing to suck in oxygen.

I hold the pebble in my hand, which shakes the longer I stare at it.

It's not a dream.

I always thought it was, but it wasn't.

Like pieces of the puzzle falling together, everything begins to fit.

It's not a coincidence. It never was.

The sudden crash.

The hatred Lock exudes for humans.

The guilt that dripped off him whenever he looked at me.

Him thinking I was dangerous.

It was all because of *this*.

An arrow.

Holding it tightly in my hand, I gaze across the field and continue my search ... until my theory is proven right.

Another one.

I stare at it with blatant disgust, the anger marring my face.

Marking my soul and tainting this isolated island.

“Jules?”

His voice brings my blood to a boil.

How dare he.

How dare he come here and defile this graveyard.

I didn't ruin this jungle ... *he* did.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Accompanying Song: “Through Falling” by Johann Johannsson

Lock

“Jules ...” I repeat, but she doesn’t respond.

In the middle of the open field filled with ashes of burned down trees, she stands.

Towering above the remains of the metal bird. The helicopter.

Her hands firmly clutched, close to her unmoving body.

I approach.

A short but bitter glance makes me stop.

She’s never looked at me that way.

Not even when I put her down in that pit.

Or when I tied her to my bed.

Not even when I told her about the girl who died because of me.

It's a look of pure hatred.

And it destroys me.

My eyes widen the moment she opens her hand to show me something.

An arrowhead.

My handcrafted arrowhead.

But she dropped the arrow back there ... I saw it myself.

A sharp pang in my stomach makes me clutch my jaw. I can't fucking breathe.

She found it *here* ... on the very ground she's standing on right now.

My head hurts. Pain rushes through my veins.

Everything is unraveling before me.

I can't let it happen.

"Jules ..." I mumble, taking a step toward her.

"You ... monster!" she yells.

The tears rolling down her cheeks scar me in ways I didn't think were possible. Wound me in a place I never thought I'd feel. My heart ... bleeds.

"Jules, please ..." I say, shaking my head.

"No," she says, placing her feet firmly on the ground. "Stay back."

I bite my lip but stop. Even though my entire body screams to go to her, wanting to hug her tight, I can't because I don't want her to hate me even more.

"You ... did this?" she yells, holding up the arrow as though it's a piece of her soul.

My lips part, but I don't know how to respond.

How would anyone when faced with an impossible choice?

“Those arrows … I knew I saw them somewhere, and then I remembered what happened in the helicopter,” she says through gritted teeth, swallowing down more tears. “You shot at us!”

I suck in a breath, but it burns like the fire from the day I met her.

The fire that scorched the very earth I love so deeply.

The fire … I caused.

I lower my head, unable to keep looking at her as I hear my own truth through her voice.

I’ve lived with this guilt for so long, I almost learned to cope.

“Did you?” she screams. “Answer me, Lock!”

“Yes.” It comes out as one word, but it repeats itself over and over in my head.

Yes. Yes. Yes.

I killed that little kid because it’s my fault she fell.

I killed countless other people in the cage with my own bare hands.

I killed the metal bird that carried her and more people.

And now I killed her love for me too.

“How … how could you?” The tears stream across her face again.

I don’t know what to do, so I stand here frozen to the ground.

There’s no place I can go where she won’t be.

No place she can flee where I won’t stalk.

We’re bound to each other by this island.

Bound by tragedy and despair.

“I’m sorry …” I say, pulling the words from the deepest pit of my soul.

“No! You don’t get to say you’re sorry and pretend like everything’s okay!” she yells, her face completely red. “Sorry won’t bring Pete and Ollie back! It won’t bring the pilot back! It won’t bring back the plants destroyed by your hand, and it will never bring back my life as I know it!”

Suddenly, she stomps toward me. I don’t know how to react, so I stay put and allow her to come into my space. She points her finger at me and says, “You destroyed everything I had and turned it into dust. Why? Tell me why!”

She pushes me in the chest.

I let her.

I don’t know what else to do but let her. If it’s the only comfort I can give her, then I’ll gladly let her throw herself at me for as long as she needs to. I’ll endure all the hatred she can give. All the suffering she’ll bring.

I deserve every inch of it.

“Why did they have to die?” she yells in my face, punching my chest.

“I … was hunting birds. That metal thing … it looked very dangerous.”

“So you just decided to attack us?” she scoffs. “How dare you!”

“It wasn’t like that. I did shoot two arrows at it. But it didn’t cause the crash.” I can’t even look at her. Can’t face the pain I’ve caused her. “Nothing I say will change what happened.”

“Why? Why would you do that?” she yells.

“Because the birds flew in the direction of that *thing*. And when I hit one, the rest of them flew straight into the windows. I don’t know what happened inside … but I saw the crash happen right in front of me.”

For a moment, her hands freeze, and even her breathing stops.

“What …?”

I bite my lip. “The bird I shot scared the other birds, and they all flew into the helicopter, smashing the windows,” I say, looking away.

“The pilot … that thing on the controls …” she mumbles, her eyes drifting off. I have no idea what she’s talking about.

I only know that I wish it never happened. “If I had known you were inside, I would’ve never—”

“Shut up!” she says, punching me again. “Don’t you dare make this about me! I’m not the one you should be apologizing to.” She points at the metal wreckage. “Apologize to *them*. They *died* because of you,” she exclaims.

I turn to look at the molten metal and say, “I’m sorry for what I’ve done. I really am.” I shake my head as our eyes lock again. “But I don’t regret saving you. Ever.”

“You didn’t fucking save me!” she yells. “You broke me!”

“But you’re still here. Alive,” I reply, making a fist.

“Those people lost their lives while I’m still here. They died while I live. How is that fair?”

“Life isn’t fair. It’s not supposed to be fair,” I growl.

How can she not appreciate her own life?

I get that she’s upset with me, but she’s still alive and well. That’s more important to me than anything else, and it should be to her too.

“Easy for you to say. You did this.” Tears still stream from her eyes. “You caused all of this. All this pain. This misery.”

Her fists come at me, but her strength is gone. It’s just a gentle tap, but one with immeasurable emotions. When she tries again, I grab her wrist and stop her, midair.

I gaze deep into her eyes. “I’m sorry.”

She bites her lip, shaking her head, her eyes red and big.

She has every right to be angry.

Every right to want to scream and fight.

But I can't let her destroy herself like this.

"I couldn't save them," she mutters.

She must mean the people who were in the helicopter with her.

"It's not your fault," I say, lowering my head.

"No ... it's yours," she hisses.

She tries to slap me again, but I grab both her wrists now.

"I'm sorry," I say again.

I don't care how many times I have to say it. I'll keep saying it until she realizes I mean it. Until she knows how much guilt I feel ... and that I will do anything in my power to make it up to her.

"Get out of my face," she spits.

For a second, I'm tempted to do what she asks. But I don't want to avoid her hatred. I want to face it. Conquer it. Devour it until it no longer exists.

I still want her, and I know she still wants me. She just can't see past her hatred, and it will suffocate her.

I can't let it happen.

So I lean in and kiss her, right on the lips, pouring every ounce of my love into her.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Accompanying Song: “Come Say Hello” by SuperHumanoids

Juliet

He's kissing me.

He's actually fucking kissing me.

And I'm letting him.

Wait. No.

Shocked, I pull back and glare at him. I can't believe he did that.

Without thinking, I jerk my wrist free and slap him across the face.

He rubs his chin and cheek but keeps his eyes on me like a hawk.

We're both panting.

Did I just hit him? Yes, I did. Multiple times during our conversation.

I couldn't stop myself. I hate him so much, hate him with all my guts.

Yet I can't stop myself from kissing him back. Right away.

My lips clash with his, unable to resist the pull. But fuck, I should hate him for what he did.

"No," I mumble, pulling back again.

I rub my own lips, wanting to get his taste off me, but I can still taste him on my tongue. I hate how badly I want more.

He frowns and cocks his head. His hand reaches for my face again, and he brushes my cheek with his thumb. He leans in ... pressing his lips to mine again.

And I'm lost.

Lost in the small space that consumes us.

He numbs the pain.

He fills the void in my heart.

And I hate him for it.

I push back as hard as I can, but I only manage to let out a meager growl. "I fucking hate you."

His tongue darts out to lick his bottom lip. "That's okay. Hate me as long as you need to."

He goes in for the kill again, but I shove him away. "What? No. That's not how it goes."

"Then how should it go?" he says, lifting a brow as he keeps approaching me.

I walk backward, stumbling across the ground, not knowing where to go. I just know I need to back away from him before I lose it again. Before I lose myself to him.

Is it already too late? Have I already given my heart away?

I shiver when he speaks in that rough voice of his again. “Jules, you can’t keep running away from this.”

“Like hell, I can’t!” I reply. “You … you’re everything I shouldn’t want!”

A flush spreads on my cheeks as my own words echo in my head. What the hell did I just say? Did he hear it too?

That smirk on his face says it all.

“Hate me then,” he says, still coming closer. “As hard as you can.”

I try to move back, but I’ve reached a dead end. Or more specifically … a tree.

With my back against it, he traps me in his arms, placing a hand on the trunk right beside my face.

“What I did in the past doesn’t change a thing about what I feel for you now,” he says, catching one of my hair locks, curling it around his finger. “I love you, Jules.”

I shake my head, but he takes my face with his hand and covers my mouth with his. The sweet taste of his lips floods my brain with hormones, forcing me to forget.

But I can’t forget. I’m here because of him.

“No …” I mutter between his kisses.

“Yes. I love you, Jules. Nothing about that will ever change.”

“Don’t say those words,” I say, hissing when he kisses me again.

“I love you.”

I bite his lip, and he jerks back, touching his lip. It’s bleeding. A sliver of regret washes over me, immediately replaced by the pang of guilt. Pete, Ollie, and the pilot are dead because of what he did.

“You killed them …”

“The bird did,” he says. “And that wasn’t nice of you.”

“You shot that bird!”

“And what do you want me to do about it *now?*” he says, right up in my face.

My lips part, but I don’t know what to say. I don’t know the answer. And neither does he.

That’s why he keeps staring at me. Keeps pushing back.

There is no way their deaths can ever be undone.

No way to change the past ...

“Let me love you, Jules,” he says, grabbing my face.

“I hate you,” I say, staying strong even though I’m faltering.

I should hate him. I should, with all my heart.

He shakes his head, smiling. “You don’t mean that,” he says.

I frown. “Yes, I do.”

“Stop lying,” he says. “I can see it in your eyes.”

My pupils dilate, and I immediately look away, but he won’t allow me to turn my head. Instead, he smashes his lips back onto mine, kissing me with all the love he has to give.

They’re hard and soft at the same time, greedy but gentle. As if he wants to show me he cares but is afraid to lose me all at once.

I don’t even know what to feel at this point.

I’m torn between two kinds of needs.

The one where I want to rip him to shreds.

And the one where I want to jump his bones.

Neither is good.

My heart swelling with pain and desire all at once completely overtakes my brain.

“I need you, Jules,” he growls between ragged breaths. “Hate me. Love me. I don’t care. But don’t you dare run.”

He plants his hands firmly against the tree, caging me in as he keeps on kissing me. I’m helpless to stop him. My heart can’t say no. Not to him.

I should hate him. Loathe him. But I can’t keep it up.

It’s wrong, but my body refuses to move, refuses to stop kissing him back.

His tongue swirls around mine, and I desperately try to get closer to him. I’m torn between my wish to do the right thing and wanting him so badly.

He grabs my wrists and pins them above my head against the tree, making it impossible for me to break free.

“Fuck ...” I mumble when he dives between my legs.

I don’t even protest.

Maybe I like how he holds me, preventing me from even thinking about leaving.

It’s freeing, in a way ... not to have to even think.

When he kisses me, I kiss him back, despite wanting to hate him all the same.

“I love you, Jules. More than anything in the entire fucking world. I’ll never hurt you again,” he murmurs. “I fucking need you like the air I breathe.”

I clench my thighs together when his fingers slide back and forth my slit, but I’m no match for his strength. He nudges my legs apart and starts to toy with me, circling my clit, making me gasp for air.

“Lock,” I mumble, barely able to form coherent words.

“Shh ...” he whispers, his lips still lingering near mine. “Stop resisting what you feel for me. Let it go. It’s okay.”

His tongue draws a line down my jaw as he leaves rough kisses wherever he goes, attacking my senses with everything he’s got.

My back arches as he cups my breasts and rips everything out of the way, throwing it to the ground. I'm naked now, and he pauses to take a good look at me, his tongue darting out to wet his lips. Hungry for what comes next.

"Mine," he growls, and my body fills with goose bumps at the sound of his voice.

Fuck, I hate it so much, but I can't help myself anymore.

Not when he touches me like that, kisses me like that ... fucks me like that.

Raw and passionately, no holds barred.

He doesn't hold back. Isn't afraid of anything but losing me.

Maybe that's why I'm so enraged. Because I'm afraid of losing him too.

Losing what we had because of what he did.

Because my mind can't let go.

"Stop thinking," he says, taking my nipple into his mouth. "Just feel."

My eyes close as I let him do his thing, knowing full well what he's capable of.

I can no longer say no to this man.

This man. God ... what a man.

He releases my pussy, and I already miss him there. He shows me the wetness on his fingers with a grin on his face. "This tells me the truth."

I grimace, annoyed at my own inability to withstand his invasion. "Well, fuck you for making me feel the way you do. Just fuck you."

"Oh ... I intend to," he says with a lopsided grin, and he rips away the small rope around his waist, showing me his raging hard-on.

He lifts me up in his arms, making me squeal as he shoves me against the tree. Without warning, he lowers me onto his cock. I let out a moan as he buries himself deep inside me. He grunts when he pulls me back up and

thrusts back in again, repeating it over and over again until I'm delirious with need.

Fuck, why do I have to be this easy? This complacent?

Why does he have this power over me as no other man ever has?

"Look at me," he growls. "Look me in the eyes when I'm fucking you."

His voice alone makes me do what he asks. Am I that pathetic? Yes. Definitely yes.

Because I want him so badly, with every fiber of my being, and I hate that about myself... and him.

"Tell me you want me," he groans, fucking me hard and without mercy.

"Tell me you won't leave me."

"I can't," I say.

"Yes, you can!" he groans. "Tell me you want nothing else but this cock right here."

"I want you ..." I mumble as he places a kiss just beside my lips.

"Louder," he whispers.

"I want you, I do. But I hate you too," I say.

He grins. "I'll take it." And he smashes his lips onto mine.

He never stops slamming into me, doesn't give up on his quest to make me feel just how much he craves me ... and how much I crave him too.

"You're mine, Jules," he groans between dirty, wet kisses. "All mine and mine alone."

I nod even though it's only the hormones talking right now.

My brain has turned to mush.

He rams into me with full fervor, not holding back a single inch, and I can feel it all the way inside me, making me want to come.

“Fuck!” I scream as he fills me to the base of his shaft.

“There you go,” he growls.

Suddenly, he pulls out and lowers me to the ground.

“Wha—” I mutter, but I have no time to finish my sentence because he immediately spins me around and pushes me against the tree, positioning himself right behind me.

“It’s time we settled this,” he growls, spitting on his dick before pushing the tip ... into my ass.

What the hell?

I squeal when he thrusts inside.

“Fuck, Lock! Jesus!” I don’t think I’ve sworn this much since I came on this island.

“Relax. It’ll feel better if you do,” he says, pushing until he’s inside me completely.

“That hurts,” I growl back, bracing myself against the tree.

“No,” he says. “The way you looked at me when I told you the truth ... that hurt. The way you hate me right now, that hurts. Me fucking your ass? That’s pleasure. And I’m giving it to you.”

He fucks me hard and fast, spitting on my ass every so often just to rub it in. I’m helpless to fight him because I’m weak ... I’m weak whenever he touches me because my body just wants to give in.

“Take it deep,” he groans, pushing farther until his balls slap against my pussy. He brings his fingers down between my legs and plays with me again. “I know you want it.”

He fucks me hard against the tree, and I feel humiliated but in a good way. I almost want to beg him to fuck me harder, but that would go against every fiber of my being.

I’ve already committed the greatest sin.

What's another one added?

It doesn't matter anymore. All that matters right now is him fucking me, anywhere, everywhere, until every inch of my soul has turned into a puddle and I can barely breathe. Until I've lost my mind and completely forgotten what I was mad about.

That's what he wants ... and maybe I want it too.

"That's it, let go," he says, grinding on me, pushing me to my limits.

My face is smashed against the trunk, and I'm smelling all the good scents. I'm gasping for air as he circles my clit, applying pressure in all the right spots. When his fingers dive into my pussy, I'm at a loss for words and completely done for.

"I can't," I murmur, but my legs are quivering.

"Do it," he growls. "Come."

His deep, dark voice alone pulls me to the edge and makes me fall ... so damn hard.

I come harder than ever, and I almost tumble over, kept upright only by his arms wrapped firmly around me.

He thrusts in once more, burying himself deep inside me, releasing all the pent-up rage ... and cum. It jets out of him, filling me to the brim, and I'm actually moaning with delight.

When he pulls out, we're both panting and completely out of air.

I turn around and stare at him as the realization of what we just did sinks in.

Again. I failed again.

Out of nowhere, he plants a kiss on my lips.

I'm flabbergasted. Confused.

I pull away, jerking myself free from his grip, immediately grabbing my banana leaves to strap them around my body again.

“Jules!”

Without looking back, I march away through the jungle, determined not to let him sway me again.

Even though that was probably the best sex I’ve had in years.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Accompanying Song: “Deep End” by Ruelle

Lock

Her rejection of my kiss creates knots in my stomach, but I ignore the pain and immediately follow her after putting my banana leaves back on properly.

“Hey! Don’t walk away from me,” I growl, marching behind her after I’ve quickly grasped my stuff.

She refuses to turn around, let alone even grant me a glance. She’s completely ignoring me, and it’s pissing me off.

Does what we have mean nothing to her?

Can she not forget the whole thing and love me as I love her?

I don’t want to lose her.

“I mean it,” I growl.

“Good for you,” she snaps back, still walking fuck knows where.

“Stop,” I say.

“No,” she replies. “You used me. Used my weakness against me.”

“So?” I shrug. I don’t see a problem with two people fucking each other if they like it.

“So? Is that all you have to say?”

“Yeah. I don’t regret it. Not even for a second,” I reply, smirking. In fact, I’m still reeling from the fact that I finally took her ass. And fuck … did it feel good. So tight.

Everything about the way we fucked was right.

“Well, I do!” she huffs, completely pulling me from my dirty thoughts.

I guess she doesn’t feel about it the way I do then.

“What is it with you?” I growl, losing my temper. “We just fucked, and now you’re running away from me *again*.”

“I already told you …”

“What?” I snap, standing still for a moment when she finally looks at me. But the gaze in her eyes is anything but loving.

“I need to go home.”

I grimace. “Am I not good enough? Why can’t this be your home?”

“Because you … you … you know damn well why!” she yells, stomping.

“No, you’re lying because you don’t want to face your feelings,” I say, walking right beside her now. “Admit it.”

I grab her arm to make her stop, but she jerks herself free and hisses, “Let go of me.”

“Please, Jules,” I mutter, shaking my head. “Can’t we start over?”

“After this?” She makes a face, tears filling her eyes again. “After everything that happened?”

“Why not?” I grab her hand. “I love you.”

“Don’t.” She pulls her hand back and starts walking again.

“I mean it. I love you. More than anything,” I say, refusing to give up.

She rubs her lips together, looking away as if she’s trying everything she can to block me out. But it won’t work. I won’t let it. I can’t lose her.

Not her.

She’s the only girl who ever came close to understanding me.

To loving me for who I am.

And now I fucked it all up.

“Jules,” I say. “What do you want from me?”

“*Nothing*,” she spits.

“Not true,” I reply. She’s only saying that to hurt me the way I hurt her, and I get it. But that won’t make me love her any less.

“Please, can’t you just leave me be?” she begs, her voice changing in pitch multiple times.

She’s struggling, and I want to reach out, but she refuses me every time I try. It’s as though she’s shut herself down completely. Built up a barrier so high no one would ever be able to climb.

But I’m willing to try.

I won’t give up.

Not on her. Not on what we have.

Not ever.

Not even if I have to let her go ...

If that’s what it takes to make her like me again, then so be it.

I bite my lip and say, “I’ll do anything for you. Anything you want. Tell me, and I’ll do it.”

“I can’t ...” She shakes her head.

“Do you want me to make a boat for you?” I say, which makes her look up with big eyes. “I’ll do it. If it means I can make things up to you.”

It’s quiet for a while, and the silence is killing me.

I want her to be happy ... with me. Whatever the cost.

Even if it kills me, I don’t care.

“You ... you’d do that for me?” she mumbles, gazing up at me with those beautiful eyes I want to drown in.

I let out a long-drawn-out sigh.

My heart already caved in long ago.

“Yes. If that’s what makes you happy,” I say, regretting it instantly.

“It will,” she answers. “So ... what now?”

I nod, shivering from the sudden cold. “It’s getting dark, so we’d better go back to the hut first.”

“I’m not going back there with you,” she says, looking me up and down.

“Why not?”

She shrugs.

I raise a brow. “Afraid you’re going to get fucked in the ass again?” Her whole body starts to glow, and it makes me laugh. “Don’t worry, I’ll let you rest ...” I add.

“Good,” she says, folding her arms. “Because that won’t happen again.”

“Right. Because you’re supposed to hate me,” I say.

“Exactly.”

Her fake cold shoulder is cute.

Still, as we walk back through the jungle, the realization kicks in that I’ll have to give her what she wants ... if I ever want to make her happy again.

And as the sun goes down, my body starts to feel colder and colder.
Maybe it wasn't meant to be.

* * *

Accompanying Song: “Bad Dream” by Ruelle

Juliet

When we get back to the hut, I immediately go inside and gather my thoughts. I hope he doesn't follow me. I have to think.

When the door slams open, I know my little wish didn't work, and I sigh and sit down on the bed.

As he approaches, I hold up a hand and say, “Don’t.”

He mulls it over for a second and then turns around, walking outside with slumped shoulders.

I hate the look on his face because it makes me feel guilty ... makes me want to throw shit around. But channeling my anger at this hut isn't going to do us any good.

I have to think about it. Better yet, sleep on it.

So I lie down on the bed and let out a long-drawn-out sigh, shutting my eyes.

I don't know how much time passes before I fall asleep or if I even do. I'm floating between half asleep and wide awake, and it's the first night in a long while that I don't dream.

When the sun rises, I know I've wasted another night.

I gaze around. The bed across the room hasn't been slept in. I get up and sigh.

There's no point in trying to sleep more if I can't shut off my mind. I have to do something. I have to act.

I should go look for wood we can use for a boat instead.

Now that he's agreed to help me, I have to make use of the time I have before he changes his mind again.

That's it.

I grab a cup and fill it with water, gulping it down in one go before I walk outside and face him. He's throwing wood on the fire and poking it when I pass him.

"Hey," he says.

I was hoping he wouldn't talk because it only makes things more difficult.

I wouldn't know what to say anyway. I don't want to like him. I don't want to love him. I don't want to crave him. But I do. All of it. And I hate myself for it more than I hate him.

"Where are you going?" he asks as I grasp his tools and knives and a lit torch. You never know when you need fire. Then I hurry off into the jungle again without answering him.

"To find some wood," I reply sternly, letting him know I'm not going to let him stop me.

"Don't," he says, immediately grabbing a torch and running after me.

"You wanna help? Then help, or get out of my way," I bark, not even looking at him.

It's not because I don't want to. I can't because his eyes alone would be enough to make me stop and stay.

But that isn't the right thing to do.

Not when it comes to this island.

It's toxic.

"Help you with what?" he says.

"The boat, remember?" I say, searching through the jungle, looking for a tree I can cut down.

"No, no, no." He catches up with me and grabs my wrist, stopping me in my tracks. "It's dangerous out there. There's something stalking around the bushes."

"I don't care." I think he's lying because he wants to keep me with him, so I jerk myself free. "Go back to the hut then. I'm going to get wood."

"Jules ..." he growls.

"No," I snap, turning to face him. "I'm doing this, whether you like it or not. You want me to be happy? Then let me do this."

He shakes his head. "You're making a mistake."

"So be it." I wave the torch the other way. "See ya."

"Jules," he mutters, but I keep walking with my head held high.

I'm glad he's not following me. That means I won't have to deal with these conflicting emotions.

I can't keep giving in. Can't keep ignoring this little voice in my head that says I need to get out of here now.

I keep going until I finally find a few thin but strong trees I can cut down. If I can get these back to the hut, we can tie them together with Lock's rope and create a raft, which is much better than a tiny boat. Especially when combined with a sail ... which we could make from the skins of the animals he hunted.

The thought alone makes me throw up in my mouth a little, but there's no other way to do it. There's no leaf large enough to withstand that amount of wear and tear from waves and all the wind.

I sigh and grab the tools. "Better get to work."

* * *

Accompanying Song: “Arrival Trailer Music” by Johann Johannsson

Within two hours, I’ve cut down most of the wood I need. I take a break to quench my thirst with some water, and I wipe the sweat off my forehead. Even if this isn’t enough, it’ll do for now. I need to spend the rest of my energy hauling it back to the hut anyway.

I hope Lock is still awake to help me rope them together. It looks like at least a couple of hours have passed since the sun has already moved across the sky.

I grab the thin trees and tie them together with the small piece of rope I brought, so I can drag it behind me over my shoulder. It’s not easy, but it’ll have to do.

If only Lock hadn’t gone back to the hut, maybe he could’ve helped out. But I guess he’s really afraid of some kind of animal living out here.

I haven’t seen any of the dangerous ones yet, though, despite being here for a long while. Nothing bigger than a monkey, and I doubt they could hurt us, so is it all a figment of his imagination? Or is there more to this island than I’ve seen so far? A quiet paradise … with a dangerous killer stalking the woods.

I shiver at the thought.

Better not think about it if I wanna make it out alive. Making a noise will only draw more unwanted attention. I’ll just have to pull my big girl panties up and do it.

I throw it over my shoulder and take a deep breath before I start pulling. It’s much heavier than I thought, but I should be able to carry it back to the hut. I didn’t stray that far.

With the torch in one hand and the rope attached to the load of wood in the other, I make my way through the jungle. Sweat drips down my back, but I ignore the strain in my muscles and push on.

A sudden rustle in the bushes up ahead makes me stop in my tracks.

What was that?

I hold my breath and inspect my surroundings like a hawk.

I don't hear anything anymore except the buzzing of the insects.

Did I imagine it all?

Maybe my mind is playing tricks on me.

I blow out a sigh and force myself to continue. I can't be paranoid, not here, not now.

Out of nowhere, something touches my shoulder.

I drop the wood and torch.

Something covers my mouth.

I scream, but my voice goes silent as I'm pulled into the bushes.

* * *

Accompanying Song: “Xenoanthropology” by Johann Johannsson

Lock

“Don't move,” I whisper into her ear. “Don't make a sound.”

She's sweating from top to bottom, and her body is shaking.

The moment she sees me, the look in her eyes changes from panic to rage.

"I'm going to lower my hand if you agree," I whisper. "Do you understand?"

She nods slowly.

Good.

When I pull my hand away, she immediately glances at me over her shoulder and whispers, "What are you doing here?"

I narrow my eyes and scan the environment. I hold up a finger to my mouth and signal for her to stay here. With my spear firmly clenched in both hands, I take a step toward the open area where she dropped her wood.

As silently as I can, I creep toward the center where her torch is burning the ground.

My foot steps on a branch, and it cracks under my weight.

I stop ... gaze up ... and meet two eyes. Slits. Blinking in the shadows.

A set of pearly white, sharp teeth.

And a low, humming growl.

As my eyes widen, so does his.

I hold my spear steady and wait for him to charge.

One wrong move and I'm done for.

Suddenly, it leaps out into the open. It's headed straight for me.

"A tiger!" Jules screams.

One minute, I'm waiting for it to strike, and the next, it's already pounced on me.

I'm fighting it off with every inch of strength I have, pushing the spear between its teeth.

"Lock!" Jules approaches. "Fight!"

“Stay back!” I growl, trying to push the animal away.

It claws at me, scratching my skin.

The wound is deep and painful.

I howl and shove it off, pointing the spear straight at its face.

It avoids my poke, comes in from the side, and swipes at my legs.

I go down.

“No!” Jules screams.

“Run!” I hiss, trying not to feel the pain even though blood is pouring out of me.

Right then, his fangs push into my shoulders.

I scream out in pain, but I clench my spear and shove it into his side.

The animal grunts and howls in pain, just like me.

Jules rushes into the open area and picks up the torch from the ground. Screaming, she swipes it through the air like a blade, pointing it at the tiger until it burns him enough to make him get off me.

When she pokes him with the fire, it bolts and runs, the spear still stuck in its side.

I stay still, blood spilling everywhere.

It hurts so much I can barely breathe.

Fuck.

I don’t think I can get up.

And worse … the more seconds pass, the heavier my body feels … and I can no longer keep my eyes open.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Accompanying Song: “Sapir Whorf” by Johann Johannson

Juliet

Shit. Shit. Shit!

“Lock!” I scream, sliding down beside him.

I plant the torch firmly into the ground. Adrenaline shoots through my veins as I grab his body and pull it closer. There’s blood everywhere ... on his body ... his face ... the ground.

And most of it is *his*.

“Lock! Stay with me!” I yell, but he’s barely keeping his eyes open.

Tears well up in my eyes as the guilt pours in.

Why? Why was I so stupid? Why didn’t I listen to him when he said it was dangerous?

I didn’t believe him before, but I do now.

"I'm sorry, Lock," I mutter, holding him, hugging him. "I'm sorry. It's my fault you got hurt."

I cradle him, hoping he'll regain consciousness, but the longer I wait, the more he seems to drift away.

I don't know what to do, but I have to do something.

So I get up and pull on his shoulders, with little effect, and then I remember how they did it in an online video. I circle around him, step on his toes, and pull him up by his hands. It's tough, but I manage to pull him toward me. Bending my knees, I pull him over my shoulder, wrap my arm around his knee, and lock his hand in the same place. The fireman's carry.

As I look up and into the jungle, I determine my bearings. The hut is not too far up ahead. I can do this.

His body is heavy, and I can barely walk with his added weight, but I refuse to stop.

I can't let him die.

Not here, not in this jungle ... not because of me.

God, why did I have to do this? And why did he have to come and help me?

Because he loves me, of course.

He's said it so many times before, and I've refused to let it sink in.

Refused to accept the inevitable.

And now we're here, struggling to survive.

With every other step, I take a huge breath. Sweat trickles down my body and forehead. I feel dizzy, but I don't give up. Every tiny push helps.

I go as fast as I can until I'm finally back at the hut, and I sink to the ground, laying his body beside me. I grab my flask and gulp down the water, breathing out loud afterward.

When I look at his body ... pain seeps into my bones.

I can't leave him here like this.

I have to fix this.

I push him off me slightly, so I can get up, but it makes him groan. "I know, I'm sorry," I murmur. "I'm going to fix you. I promise."

"Jules," he mutters, coughing up blood.

I silence him by placing a finger on his lips. "Don't talk. Save your energy."

I immediately get up and go inside the hut, frantically searching for something to bind his wounds and sanitize them. I make do with a few pieces of clean fur and a few herbs I gathered. I crush the herbs in a pot and mix them together with water, then I rush back outside.

When I rub it into his wounds, he grunts in pain, but I keep doing it as quickly as possible. "I'm sorry, I have to do this," I say, wrapping the wounds in the fur tightly, hoping it will stop the bleeding. "There's not much else I can do."

"Jules ..." He looks up at me and his hand reaches for my face.

He struggles ... badly ... but persists anyway just so he can caress my cheeks. "You're safe."

His words undo me.

Strip me bare and destroy every inch of the barrier I had put up around my heart.

Only now do I realize how much he's come to mean to me.

Even if I wished for it, I could never go back to the way it was.

I'm bound to him.

Not just through this island but through our hearts.

And if I don't do something now, he might die.

The man I love might die.

I can't let it happen.

I have to do something ... but what? A hospital is out of reach. The only way to get there is by helicopter or boat. A few of them sometimes pass close by this island every so often, but they never reach the shore.

Without thinking, I walk to the tree I've been scratching every passing day on, and I count them in my head. Today. Today is exactly the day one of them is supposed to come near. Near enough for me to draw attention, I hope.

But how?

Lock extinguished the previous fire I had made and probably already brought the wood back to the hut for firewood when I was doing something else. Knowing him, he'd do anything to prevent them from coming here.

So I'd have to start a whole new fire if I wanted to make them see me, but I don't have the time to gather the wood. They could be close at any moment, maybe even now.

Suddenly, it hits me.

I quickly bolt back into the jungle, back to the place I left the wood that I wanted to use for a boat.

I'll use it to make a fire instead.

I don't care about the boat anymore. Or about going home. None of it matters if Lock isn't safe. If Lock doesn't survive.

I shiver and shove the thought away as I find the wood and carry it back to the beach. It's not a long walk, just a heavy one, but I manage. My body is set to survival mode, with only the thought of rescuing him the way he rescued me circling through my mind.

He came back to me, despite warning me.

He came to save me from that tiger ...

Now it's my turn to save him.

I haul the wood all the way to the beach. The moment I drop it, I notice a speck on the horizon ... and it's coming closer.

I run back to the hut where I find Lock ebbing away. I shake him, but he's unresponsive, so I quickly grasp the torch and run back to the beach.

I light the wood in multiple spots and throw some dry grass onto it too, hoping it'll stoke the flame. "C'mon, c'mon, c'mon!" I yell, trying to get it to burn faster, so it'll create a big bonfire large enough for the fire and smoke to show in the sky.

"This has to work," I mumble to myself, toiling away.

The boat is still coming closer, so I run back into the woods and back to the hut, back to Lock.

I sit down in front of him and grab his hand, bringing it to my face so I can touch him again. His lifeless body makes me tear up again. "They're coming, Lock. They'll be here soon. Hold on."

"J-Jules?" His voice is there but barely. It's as though he's becoming delirious.

"Don't die on me, not now," I say. "I'm sorry, about everything. Don't leave me, please."

"I'm ... here." His words as he struggles to even breathe make the tears roll down my cheeks.

"I love you. I do." Hope and pain fill my words.

It's not a lie. It's one of the few things I've said recently that was actually true.

I can't hate this man ... this man who stole my heart.

I just hope I can save him in time before he goes down with it.

By the time the boat is approaching the island, I've already gone to the beach and held guard next to Lock's body, which I dragged all the way out here. I've even placed a few big leaves over his body so he won't burn and given him plenty of water. It still won't make him better.

He needs a doctor ASAP.

I wave and wave the torch as hard as I can, not giving up until they finally see the fire and smoke. And us.

They have to.

They must.

Either that, or they're headed straight for a collision course toward this island.

* * *

Accompanying Song: “The Void” by IAMX

A smaller boat approaches the beach while the bigger boat remains out at sea. My heart is skipping beats as it comes closer, and I scream out loud to let go of all the pent-up frustration and happiness. “Over here! Please!”

Tears stream down my face when they come ashore, and I quickly run toward them. “Please, you have to help us.”

“What happened?” a man says as he jumps out of the small boat and walks to the shore.

“I got stranded here after our helicopter crashed. People died,” I say, frantically naming only the most important things because every second counts. “This man got attacked by a tiger.” I point at Lock. “Please, you have to help us get off the island. Take us to a hospital,” I beg.

The man glances behind him and whistles at the rest of the guys to step off the boat too.

“We’ll help you, ma’am. Don’t worry,” he says.

At that moment, all the built-up stress and anxiety pours out of me, and I fall to the ground, crying happy tears that mark the sand.

Finally ... help has come.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Accompanying Song: “[She Remembers](#)” by Max Richter

Juliet

On the boat, they took care of us, gave Lock medicine, bound his wounds, and gave him painkillers. They gave us proper clothes and food and water, and they gave me a cabin to sleep in.

I was so tired, I slept through a storm. I can’t even remember the waves crashing against the ship. All I know is that the pillow underneath my head felt so good.

I guess I had to process everything that happened in my own way ... with a good night’s sleep.

When I wake up, I take my first real shower. The water pouring down on my face feels so nice, but it doesn’t make me happy. Doesn’t make me smile as I thought it would.

I step out, dry off, and put on a pair of actual pants and a shirt I found in the closet. Not my size, but it’ll work. I look at myself in the mirror and give myself a fake smile, which dissipates immediately.

I can't be happy when Lock isn't.

Can't be sitting here, pretending everything is okay when he might be dying.

I even feel guilty for sleeping so long and for taking a shower when I don't even know how he's doing.

I immediately march out of my room, not even giving a shit about the two men guarding my door. "Hey, where you going?"

"Lock," I bark back, not looking back as I go to the back of the ship. To the place I last saw him.

When I enter the room, a bunch of people surround him. One of them is monitoring his health, and the other is taking measurements and whatnot. I don't know what they're doing, but it's not making him better.

The moment they spot me, they stop and stand.

"Juliet, you're awake," the captain says.

"Yes. How is he?" I ask.

"Better than yesterday, but he's not out of the woods yet."

I swallow and nod. "Can I ...?"

"Of course," he says, and he beckons the rest of his crew to depart the room.

Before they all leave, he says, "We'll dock in an hour or so, so prepare yourself. I've already called for an ambulance, which should take you both to a hospital. The medics will take over from there."

"Thank you," I say, smiling even though it's forced.

He closes the door and leaves me alone with Lock.

I go to my knees and grab his hand. I squeeze. There's no response.

I touch his face and caress him gently, but the more I do, the harder he begins to breathe, so I stop.

Bandages cover his whole waist—some just redone, some soaked in blood. The bite wound on his shoulder looks painful ... horribly painful. And he's so damn cold. I wonder if he'll make it out alive.

Tears well up in my eyes.

"Keep fighting, Lock," I say. "Don't you dare give up now. I forgive you for being an asshole; now stay here and fight. Fight for me. Fight for us."

I lay my head down on his chest, tears cascading down onto his chest.

They say you don't know how much you need someone until they're gone.

Right now, I need him more than ever. He has to come back.

And I whisper the words I wish I had said before. Before my whole world came crashing down.

"I love you."

* * *

Accompanying Song: "[*She Remembers*](#)" by Max Richter

Juliet

When we arrive, we're immediately picked up by an ambulance that takes us both to the hospital. At the entrance, a bunch of reporters have gathered, and they shower me with questions about what happened to the research team, the crash, the island ... and the secret inhabitant. I don't answer any of their questions. I don't even know how they found out, but I guess when something is shocking, the news travels like wildfire.

I just want them to be gone. I have no intentions of ever appearing on the news. Ever. I just want to be left alone ... All I care about is Lock.

We're separated when we're inside the hospital, but Lock's in good hands.

In my own room, I'm checked by various doctors and put on medication. They do a test, and I ask them if I'm pregnant ... the answer is no.

I'm not sure if I should be elated.

All this time, the thought of being pregnant loomed in the back of my head.

But now that worry has evaporated ... replaced by a different kind of fear.

The bed is warm and cozy, but I can't stop thinking about Lock and how he's doing. I hope they can help him.

They're probably already disinfecting and suturing his wounds, maybe even putting him under for surgery. Who knows.

They won't tell me anything. They're keeping things under tight wraps, and I don't like it one bit.

What if they're trying to keep us separated so they can report us to the authorities? Or more importantly ... him? He's done some questionable things in his life. Someone out there is probably looking for him. The mother of that little girl, for example.

If only people knew the real story. The real man behind the rough exterior. That man has suffered enough.

What he did was wrong, but a man like that can't be put in jail. It would break him. He's a free spirit who doesn't understand our world. I just hope they'll understand. And I hope I can talk to him, the staff, and everyone else who wants to know about him before they report him to the police.

Or maybe they're keeping me away from him, so I can recover without worrying. What if he's already past saving? Already dying as we speak?

And I'm not even there to hold his hand.

My whole body begins to shake, and I quickly grasp the glass of water on my bed stand and gulp it down. I continue staring out the window, wishing I knew more.

I already told the police and the doctors everything they wanted to know. I told them about the island, how I crashed there, how we survived ... and about the tiger that attacked Lock.

They even said they would send a search party to the island to find the bodies at the helicopter and bring them back home. I still shudder to think that I left them there.

But at least I survived ... that has to count for something, right?

At least now I'll be able to go home.

Finally.

But then why am I still not happy?

Someone knocks on my door, and I'm pulled from my thoughts. It's Mom, and moments later, my dad also appears.

I smile as they come in, and my mom hugs me tight.

"Oh, Jules ... we were so worried about you." She starts to cry and so do I.

Even my dad when he comes closer for a hug lets out a few tears. "Jules," he mumbles, practically unable to utter more words.

"It's okay ... Mom, Dad." I look at them and swipe away a tear on my cheek. "I'm okay now. I'm okay."

They nod and sit down beside my bed. My mom holds my hand, refusing to let go.

"When your company back at home called us to tell us they'd lost contact with your team, we were so scared," Mom says, hiccupping.

"I was too," I say, sitting up straight in the bed. "I saw them ... I saw ... They're all dead." I sniff, barely able to keep it inside.

"That's horrible," Dad says.

"Oh, I'm so sorry, sweetie," Mom says, hugging me again. "It must've been tough to live there all on your own."

I shake my head. “But I wasn’t on my own.”

They both frown. “What do you mean?”

“Well …” A blush spreads on my cheeks. “There was a man. He found me and took care of me.”

“A man?” Now, Mom looks even more confused.

“He lived there,” I say. “Like … on the island.”

“I thought that place was untouched by humans? That’s why you went there for research, right?” Dad asks.

“Yeah, that’s what we thought too, and there he was,” I mumble. “Lock.”

“Lock? What a strange name,” Dad says, licking his lips. “And he was just there?”

“Well, the story is complicated,” I answer, swallowing.

I’m not sure I should tell them what happened. The reason we crashed … what if they take it the wrong way? I don’t want them to hate Lock.

I already gave him enough of that, made him feel more guilt than ever, and I don’t want that anymore. I want us to have a clean slate … if he even survives this.

“It doesn’t matter. We crashed. He helped me.”

“But why did it take him so long to get you help from outside then? You know, get off the island?” Mom asks.

“Because I … didn’t want to leave,” I lie, looking away because I can’t look them in the eyes while doing so. It’s hard, but I don’t want to give them any bad ideas.

Lock is a good guy.

He really is.

Mom releases my hand and places it on her chest, like she always does when she’s offended. It’s okay. I can take her pain.

“I’m sorry, Mom,” I say, cocking my head. “I just ... We ...” My whole face turns red. “We fell in love.”

My dad’s eyes widen. “Love?” He begins to laugh. “With a stranger you met on an island?”

“Well, yeah,” I say, running my fingers through my hair. “I actually did.”

“But you never ... I mean, you always told me you weren’t interested in men,” Mom says, clearing her throat.

“I am, Mom. Just not the ones from back home,” I say, shrugging. “Lock stole my heart. Nothing else to it.”

Dad’s still laughing. “Well, I can’t wait to meet this guy then. Where is he? Or did you leave him on the island?”

“He’s here in the hospital. They’re treating him for his wounds.”

Mom frowns. “Wounds?”

“He was attacked by a tiger.”

“Tiger?!” Now her voice is definitely raised.

“It’s okay, Mom. We’re alive. I think ...” I mumble.

“It’s not okay! You could’ve *died!*” she says. “And you wanted to stay? *There?*” She shakes her head again.

“The tiger’s probably dead by now,” I say, remembering how brave Lock was when he shoved that spear into its torso.

“That doesn’t make me feel any better,” Mom says.

“Well, I’m glad you’re safe now.” Dad places a hand on my leg and squeezes a little. “And you can tell us everything once you’re ready. No rush. Let’s focus on getting you home first.”

“Thanks, Dad,” I say, smiling. “I do want you to meet him, of course. If you want to.”

“When?” Mom asks, which makes me chuckle.

“I don’t know. I just hope they save him. So soon, I guess,” I say.

Mom smiles, and she gets up to kiss me on the cheeks. “I’m sorry, sweetie. But I’m glad you’re back, and that you’re well. Now let’s all pray for a quick recovery together.”

She’s right.

All we can do at this point is pray and hope ...

Hope he’ll fight for his survival.

And maybe then, I’ll get to see him on the other side.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Accompanying Song: “She Remembers” by Max Richter

Juliet

My parents have already been contacted and they’re on their way, but all I care about right now is Lock. I want to know if he’s okay. When I’m finally allowed out of bed, I immediately ask to visit him. There are a few reservations, but after a few harsh words about having been through enough, they finally let me go to him.

I take a deep breath as I open the door and close it behind me.

There he is, in the bed right in front of me.

A few wires connected to his body run to beeping machines next to the bed.

One goes directly into the vein in his hand.

He looks so peaceful, the way he lies there, completely still and with his eyes closed.

Every step I take makes my heart beat faster, and I suck in a breath before I sit down on his bed.

I grab his hand and squeeze.

He doesn't respond. Doesn't wake up. Doesn't open his eyes.

Nothing.

So I place a gentle kiss on his lips and whisper, "I'm still here, waiting for you."

As tears fill my eyes, I push them back down and lay my head on his chest. I close my eyes and listen to the sound of his breaths. It's the only thing I have that reminds me of who he was. What he's supposed to be.

Strong. Serious. Caring. And mine.

But when I open my eyes again ... a set of eyes stares right back at me.

* * *

Accompanying Song: ["When She Came Back"](#) by Max Richter

Lock

Jules.

The moment I wake up, I open my eyes. Am I dreaming?

I blink, but the image still doesn't get clearer. Doesn't change.

It's her. Right in front of me.

But am I really here?

And where is here, exactly?

“Lock?” Her voice gives me energy, forcing me to come back into my body and stay conscious. Despite the pain in my body, I focus on her voice. Her scent. Her touch.

I can feel her ... everywhere ... on my chest, hugging me.

She’s here. She has to be.

But when I open my mouth, nothing comes out but a vague cough.

It’s as though I haven’t breathed on my own in days.

Like I’ve been struck by a falling tree.

But then I remember ... the fangs. The sharp claws. And the orange striped coat of the animal that attacked me. Attacked *us*.

It came for her, so I stepped in to defend what was mine.

I didn’t care whether she told me to stay away or not; I had to follow her, had to know she was safe.

And when that beast came to take her, I knew I had to step in.

No animal can take the one thing I love from this world. The only person who can make me smile.

Jules.

My Jules.

My hand instinctively reaches for her face, but the moment I touch her, she jolts up.

It’s not a dream. She’s really here.

“Jules,” I mumble, my voice hoarse and painful.

Tears run down her cheeks as she leans into my hand. “Lock ... I was so scared.”

“You’re here,” I say, still feeling like I’m not awake.

“Yes, I’m here,” she says, smiling gleefully.

I look around, but the lights immediately blind me. Fuck, what kind of place is this? “Where am I?”

“The hospital,” she replies. “You were hurt really bad.”

A hospital? That means I’m off the island.

“Don’t worry, the doctors here are taking good care of you,” Jules adds, swallowing. “You just rest.”

I don’t like it here, but if it means I’ll get better, I’ll stay … for her.

It’s quiet for a while before she opens her mouth again. “I’m sorry; if it wasn’t for me, you would’ve never gotten—”

I place a finger to her lips to silence her. “Doesn’t matter.”

Her smile is the only thing I need. The only thing I crave. Always.

And I heard every single word she said to me while I was out.

For some reason, I knew what was going on, but I couldn’t respond.

I could never let her know … how much I love her too.

So I pull her closer and make her kiss me, her sweet taste lingering on my lips. “I love you too,” I reply.

“What?” She inches back, her eyes widened. “But I never … Wait, you were …?”

A smirk spreads across my lips, and it’s enough to give it away.

“You could hear everything I said?” Her skin turns red everywhere, and goose bumps scatter on her skin the moment I nod.

“No denying it, Jules,” I murmur. “I know how you feel now.”

The look in her eyes makes me want to laugh, but it hurts too much, so I settle for a hug instead.

“Are you angry with me?” she asks.

I shake my head and smile back. “Angry? I’m alive, and my woman is in my arms. I have nothing to be angry about.”

She rubs her lips together, but that won’t hide the grin on her face. “I’m glad you’re back.”

I grab a lock of her hair and tuck it behind her ears, admiring her beauty. “I never left.”

* * *

Accompanying Song: “When She Came Back” by Max Richter

Lock

The doctors patched me up well. I don’t know what they did, and they used all kinds of weird equipment I’ve never seen before in my life, but it worked, so I’m happy. I never liked needles much as Father sometimes used them on me, and they hurt, but Jules told me it would be okay, and I trust her.

She’s a good woman, and I’m happy I found her.

It’s not often a woman falls from the sky, but I guess it was what Jules would call ‘fate.’

But even after everything that happened between us, I wouldn’t exchange it for the world. In fact, I would make the same mistakes over and over again if it meant meeting her again.

I’m certain of my desire to be with her, but I also know one thing stands between me and her being together.

This world.

Now that we're off the island, she's finally able to go home.

She gets her wish, but I'm not sure I can adjust.

I don't understand their tools and technology. I know what a bed is, and a shower, but other than that, I never had actual technology in my cell when I still lived in Father's compound. And I kept it that way when I got out.

I prefer to use my own handmade items, but that's probably going to be difficult here. I never liked being around people, and they probably won't understand me. Let alone accept me. Especially after what I've done.

And the first people I have to face, apart from all the doctors, are her father and mother.

Talk about unlucky.

I already have sweaty palms by the time I get out of bed, and they're not even in the room yet.

"Take it easy," Jules says as she supports me while I get up.

But I have no intention of taking it easy. I want to be ready when they come. I can't appear weak in front of them. They're important to Jules, and I need to leave a good impression.

So I arch my back and gulp down some water before I start doing some exercises.

"What are you doing?"

"Stretching," I say.

"The doctors said you should rest," she says as she rummages in the closet.

"So? I don't like lying still. I need to do something."

"Want me to bring you something to read?" she asks.

"Read?" I raise a brow. I've never read a book in my life. Not because I don't want to ... but because I was never taught how.

“Oh, right.” She clears her throat. “Sorry, I don’t want to make you feel uncomfortable.”

“I know you wanna help, and that’s okay, but I’m fine. I just need to feel better.”

“But why now?”

I shrug, and she hands me a pile of clothes. I stare at them.

She nudges me with her elbow. “Put them on. I bought them for you.”

I do what she asks, throwing off the paper-thin gown they put on me here. She keeps ogling my dick, but I don’t mind. I like it when she stares. I understand her body language more than I do her actual words.

“Want me to help?” she asks.

“No, I can do it,” I say even though it still hurts to use my arm.

She folds her arms and cocks her head as she watches me dress. It hurts a little around the shoulder and on the bandages, but I manage. It fits but barely. My muscles feel constrained in this fabric.

“What is this?” I ask.

“Cotton. Don’t like it? I can get you something else.” She plucks at it to make it fall better over my abs.

“It’s great,” I say. I just want her to be happy.

Besides, if I’m going to convince her parents that I’m good for her, I’d better look the part. They’re probably going to judge the fuck out of me, and I need to be prepared. That, or they’re just as stone cold as my father was. I hope not.

“Your parents could be here any minute, right?” I ask, my nerves getting jittery.

“Yeah. Are you sure you want to see them?” Jules asks. “I can ask them to come back on a different day.”

“I’m fine. Let’s just get this over with,” I reply, a little blunter than I wanted it to sound.

“Right … Sorry.” She looks away.

I grab her hand and smile. “Sorry, that came out wrong.”

“It’s fine. I know you’re tense.” She snorts. “Anyone would be when they meet my parents.”

“Why?” I frown. “Is something wrong?”

She chuckles. “No, they’re just … difficult sometimes.”

“Oh.” The left side of my lips quirks up into a smile. “Like you.”

She narrows her eyes at me, which are practically shooting thunderbolts right about now.

I like it. I like it a lot.

But as I take one last glance at myself in the mirror, two heads pop up in the doorway. A knock follows.

“Mom … Dad!” Jules rushes over to them and hugs them tight. “So glad you came.”

“Of course, we did,” her mom says.

I turn around and clear my throat, nodding as her dad gives me a stern look. “And you must be Lock.”

Her dad approaches me first and holds out his hand. “Howard.”

I think I’m supposed to grab it and shake it … that’s what Jules told me, but when I do it, it feels so unnatural. Judging from the way he looks at me, he’s thinking the same thing.

“C’mon,” Jules says, grabbing her mom by the arm so she can drag her along to me.

Her mother is far more reluctant to greet me but still does it with a forced smile. As if she thinks I might bite her if she doesn’t play nice.

I smile in return and grab her hand, but not too harshly. After shaking it softly, I kiss her cheek, precisely how Jules told me to. Apparently, she likes it because her posture immediately relaxes.

“Happy to meet you, name’s Lock.”

Her cheeks turn red. “Oh, my … um, Lynn Baker.” She immediately eyes Jules and whispers, “You didn’t tell me he was this *hot*.”

She probably doesn’t realize I can hear, and it makes Jules chuckle. I try to smile too, but a sudden pang in the gashes in my stomach makes me groan. Jules immediately grabs me by the arms.

“Whoa. Careful there,” she mutters. “Let’s sit down.”

She helps me into the chair near the small table in the corner and gathers more chairs from the hallway for her parents to sit on, both of whom have gone to grab a cup of coffee.

“You don’t have to fake it, Lock,” Jules says, holding my hand.

“I’m not. I just have to stop smiling.”

She snorts and shakes her head. “Typical.”

“What?”

“You, always pretending to stay strong.”

“Who says it’s pretending?” I reply, cocking my head.

“Right,” she says, grinning like crazy.

Her mother and father come back and sit down too, giving Jules and me a cup, but just the smell of it makes me want to puke. I can’t believe people actually drink that shit.

“Here.” Jules quickly grabs my cup of water from the nightstand and puts it down in front of me, winking.

It’s as if she can read my mind, and I love her for it.

She always knows what I want … what I need.

Her.

She's enough.

As her father and mother bombard me with questions I don't have the answers to, I take a sip of my drink. The cup empties quickly.

It's not that I don't want to talk. It's just that I don't know what to tell them. The truth will only make them unhappy. I'm a savage. A violent man who lives on his own and prefers it that way.

Instead, I tell them about the beauty of my island, and how lucky I am to have met Jules.

She doesn't mention that I made her helicopter crash. Doesn't say a word about how I treated her ... put her in a pit ... tied her up.

She leaves out all the pain and focuses only on the nice.

As if it's all she can see.

Or maybe she's blinded by love ... blinded by having almost lost me.

I'm not sure it's right, and after sitting through it for so long, everything bursts out. "I'm not right for your girl!"

Everyone looks at me as if they've seen a ghost.

"What?" her mom mutters.

"Lock!" Jules says, making a face at me. "Don't."

"I can't sit here and lie," I say. "That's not me, and you know it."

She shakes her head, but I place a hand on her knee and squeeze. "Please ... let me do this."

"Do what?" her father asks, frowning.

"I ..." I take a deep breath and lay my hands down on the table. "I kept your daughter from leaving the island. I made her stay."

Jules squeezes my hand so hard it feels like it's about to fall off.

“What?!” Her mom’s voice is louder than before. “You would keep our little Jules as some sort of … prisoner?”

“He didn’t,” Jules interjects before I can even open my mouth. “He just didn’t know what to do with me. He isn’t used to people, Mom. He doesn’t know how to behave.” She briefly glances at me. “I’m trying to teach him.”

“How?” her dad asks.

“Just … you know. By setting the right example. And by not judging him for being this way. There’s a reason for it all.” She gazes at me first, and I nod. She wants to tell them what happened to me before … before the island.

I hate to discuss it, but if it makes them trust me more, then it’s for the best. I don’t want her to lose that bond with her family, not because of me. I may not have a family of my own, but I understand their importance. Especially to her.

They need to know she’s okay, and that I won’t get in the way.

If that means I’ll have to stop being close to her, then I’ll do it. If it means being honest… if it means they won’t be mad at her. I just want her to be happy.

By the time we’ve answered all the questions her parents had to ask, many hours have passed, and I’m glad to see them leave. I’m tired and need to take it slower if I want to recover quickly. No time to waste on trying to get people to like me. It won’t work anyway.

“I think they like you,” Jules mutters as she closes the door behind her.

“Yeah? Good.” I sit down on the bed, groaning from pain. I still don’t believe they do, but as long as she believes it, I’m happy.

“Sorry,” she mumbles, helping me with the bedding.

“It’s fine. I had to meet them someday and ask permission.”

“Permission for what?”

I grab her hand. “To make you mine.”

A blush spreads on her cheeks, and she grins. “Stop it. You don’t have to ask them anything. They don’t decide for me. I do.”

“And? Do you?” I ask, raising a brow.

She leans over and kisses me on the forehead. “The answer is yes.”

I smile and take her face with both hands, kissing her deeply, greedily, with all the pent-up desire in me. I have to take what I can right now because the moment is fleeting, just as our time together is.

Because soon, she’ll want to go back to her home.

And I’m not prepared.

I don’t want to lose her.

When our lips unlock, I let out a breath and focus on memorizing her beauty and strength.

I wouldn’t even be alive if it wasn’t for her.

“Thank you,” I say, and I mean it.

When she crashed on my island, I thought it would ruin me and my home.

But the opposite is true.

She brought me something no one ever has. Acceptance. Unconditional love.

It’s all I needed to feel alive after living in such solitude. Even if only for a while.

I’m still grateful.

“For what?” She frowns.

I caress her cheeks and whisper, “For saving me.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Accompanying Song: “Hungry Faces” by Mogwai

Juliet

The doctors said Lock would finally be released tomorrow, so I can finally take him home. They've even arranged for him to get a temporary ID so he can travel with me.

We spend our last day in the hospital playing games that I got from one of the nurses—an old board game called Game of the Goose as well as a card game. At first, he didn't understand why he was supposed to find it fun, but after a while, he got the hang of it and started trumping me with rolls of the die and with his cards, which made him grin like crazy.

When we're done, I turn on the television and show him all the different channels, except the one that's talking about us, showing my picture as ‘the girl that survived.’ I quickly switch to stop Lock from reading too much into it. I don't want to bother him with that. He already has enough on his plate as it is.

His eyes light up every time I change the channel, and the moment he saw a tiger on some animal documentary, he immediately jumped out of bed to grab a weapon ... in this case, a coat hanger.

I laugh out loud as he approaches with that thing held out in front of him as if he can chase the animal away. "No, silly, it's not real. Stop."

"If it's not real, then what is it?"

"An image. You know, like a drawing," I say. There's a puzzled look on his face, so I go to the cabinet and grab a piece of paper and a pen. I draw a tiger, or at least what looks like one, and hold it up. "Like this."

"Doesn't even look the same," he replies.

"That's because the television shows images that are real."

"Is it real or not? I don't understand you," he says, and I shake my head.

How do you even begin to explain how the world works to a man who hasn't lived in it? He's like an alien on his own planet. Only now do I begin to see how much of a recluse he is. Kept in a cage for most of his life ... it only shows how badly his father treated him.

"It's just not *here*, right now, okay?" I add, and I quickly grab the remote control. "Let's watch something else."

My head's already hurting at the thought of all the things I'm going to have to teach him once he comes home with me. It'll be a daunting task, and I don't think I can combine it with work. If I leave him alone, he might burn down the entire house. Nope, not happening. Guess I'll have to stay with him until I've taught him everything there is to know.

However, when I switch the channel, Lock places the coat hanger on the floor and stares at the television as if he saw a ghost. There's a drawing of a face being shown, probably a man wanted by the police.

Only ... this man bears a striking resemblance to Lock.

And seconds later, his name appears in the corner.

My lungs refuse to suck in oxygen as I stare in disbelief.

Is that really ... Lock?

Someone's out there looking for him?

Lock approaches the screen and gently touches it with his fingers, running them along the drawn lines ... And with his other hand, he touches his own face, precisely on the same spots. He marches toward a mirror and looks at himself, then back at the television, repeating this over and over again until the reporter starts to talk.

“If you have any information on the whereabouts of this man, please call ...” There’s a number at the bottom of the screen.

A shiver runs up and down my spine. I press the pause button.

“Me ...” Lock mumbles, and he turns around to face me, his lips parted as though he’s waiting for my response.

“Yes,” I reply. I don’t know what to do, don’t know what to think about this.

Is this real?

Is someone out there really looking for him?

And if so ... who?

And why?

Suddenly, I’m cold to the bone.

What if it’s those people ... the family of the girl who Lock killed?

I can’t let them take him away.

“Who’d be looking for you? Do you know?” I ask, grabbing him by the shoulders.

“No,” he says. “No one.”

“What about *the girl*?” I whisper, making sure no one else can hear us.

He sighs, and his eyes dart back and forth between the wall and the image on the screen. “Maybe.”

“Did anyone see you do it?”

He nods.

“Who?”

“I think … it may have been her sister. But it was a long time ago.”

I close my eyes and let out a big sigh. God. This is so bad. What should we do?

Rubbing my forehead, I pace around the room to try to think, but nothing’s working. I’m agitated, our lives completely tilting off the axis because of this.

“I want to call,” Lock blurts out.

I stop in my tracks. “What? No!”

“Why not?”

“Because …” I hiss. “It could alert the police, and then they’d put you back into a cell again.”

“But what if this isn’t about that girl?” he says.

I scowl, but when I open my mouth to speak up, nothing comes out. I don’t know what to say. We don’t actually know for sure if this is about *that girl*.

“Right.” I bite my lip and gaze at the picture on the screen.

Lock’s hand snakes around my waist, and he pulls me close, pressing a kiss to my shoulder. “Trust me.”

I spin around in his arms. “But I don’t want you to be in danger.”

“I won’t. Just let me try,” he whispers, pressing another kiss to my cheek. “Whoever it is… they have a reason, and I need to make things right.”

I nod, sighing. Maybe he’s right. He needs to fight his own demons in order to feel good about himself again. I can’t do that for him, so maybe this is the only thing we can do.

“Want me to do it?” I ask.

He nods, so I grab my cell phone from my bag and dial the number.

The beeping on the other end of the line makes the sweat drip down my back.

When a voice rings in my ears, I suck in a breath.

“Hello?” It’s a man with a very, very deep voice.

“Hi …” I mumble. “This is Juliet Baker. I saw the picture on the news.”

“Have you seen him?” He sounds thrilled, to say the least.

“Can I ask … why you’re looking for him?” I swallow down the lump in my throat. It’s a gamble because I don’t know if he’ll answer. He might even put down the phone. But it’s worth the risk.

“Because he’s my brother.”

My eyes widen, and I lower the phone even though the man is still talking.

I can’t believe what I just heard.

Lock grabs my shoulders and lowers his head to look me in the eye. “What did he say? Is he looking for me because of the girl or not?”

I stammer, “He’s … your brother.”

* * *

Accompanying Song: “Hungry Faces” by Mogwai

Lock

“A brother? Me?” I point at myself because I honestly can’t believe she’s talking about me.

But she keeps nodding, keeps saying yes, even though it goes against every fiber of my being.

Why? Because it would mean all these years, my father lied to me.

He always told me I had no one else but him.

And all these years, I had a brother looking for me.

How is this possible?

It can't be true because if it is, I wasted my life alone on an island when I could've spent them with *him*. Someone who shares my blood. Someone who knows what it's like to live in pain.

Did Father lock him up the way he locked me up?

Did he fight for glory, and did he get a reward?

And how did he manage to escape?

So many questions run through my mind right now, but none of them can be answered because the conversation has already ended. Jules told him where we'd meet, and that was that. She didn't tell him anything about me, and he didn't tell her anything about himself.

"Why didn't you let me talk to him?" I growl.

I don't know what that thing was that she used, but it sure as hell gave her a direct connection to my brother. I want it back.

"Because if this is true, we need to do this in person. For real," she replies.

"But he's my brother. I want to ask him ... *things*." I swallow back the rage. I don't want to be angry with her, but she makes things so difficult sometimes. And I don't understand any of this.

She places a hand on my chest. "I know you have a lot of questions. He probably does too. It's better if you ask them after meeting him." She looks at the floor. "Besides, we don't know if it's safe. What if the phone was tapped?"

I have no clue what she means.

“Like what if people are listening to the conversations? Police? Who would take you to jail if you told them everything that happened to you. We can’t risk it,” she adds. “We have to stay safe. That’s why I chose a neutral place to meet at a park near my home. We’ll have to fly there first, of course.”

“Fly?”

She giggles. “Airplanes.”

“Is that like ...” I hold up my hands. “Fuck no, I am not getting into those metal birds.”

Just the thought makes me want to swim from here all the way back to the island, just to avoid having to go inside one of those ... *things*.

She laughs and shakes her head. “Lock, trust me, please. It’s safe.”

I grumble and blow out a breath, but her sweet face still manages to persuade me. “Fine.”

She immediately wraps her arms around me and hugs me tight. “You won’t regret coming home with me. I promise.”

But that’s a lie.

I already regretted it the moment I said yes.

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CHAPTER THIRTY

Accompanying Song: “Close” by Nick Jonas ft. Tove Lo

Juliet

When we’re finally out of the hospital, I’m glad to see no reporters waiting for us. Apparently, they lost interest after I refused to answer their questions, and Lock wasn’t available either.

And luckily, none of them followed me to my house.

Nothing can wipe the grin off my face as soon as I’m back home. I immediately cuddle everything in sight; my couch, my table, my walls. Even my dead plants.

I honestly don’t care; I’m that happy to be back home.

Except, the moment Lock walks in, all of that seems to vanish into thin air.

He’s broody, and he throws himself down in a chair and glares. He had a rough time. I literally had to drag him onto the airplane; he wouldn’t have come along if I didn’t. I even had to strap him to his chair and promise the

flight would be over soon. He didn't let go of my hand the entire time, and his pulse was racing.

It made my heart ache for him.

"Want me to make some tea?" I ask, trying to cheer him up. He loved it when we were still in the hospital, but now it doesn't even make him look up. He just nods.

I rub my lips together and go into the kitchen, smelling all the herbs and food that's in there like tea, honey, and a half-eaten bag of chips. I don't even care if half of it has gone stale. I'm savoring the scents. I can't wait to buy more and dig in again. God, how long has it been since I cooked a proper meal? Too long. I should make us something tonight, but what?

"Hey, have you ever had spaghetti before?"

"What?" He frowns when he looks at me.

"It's long and you can slurp it, and it tastes like tomatoes and herbs."

He shakes his head, shrugging, his brows raised. Guess not.

I smile. "It's delicious. I'll make it tonight."

"Great." He gets up from the chair and starts touching the television with his hands, feeling the whole thing.

"The remote is in the drawer," I say, pointing at it.

He immediately goes for it and uses it to switch through all the channels until he finds the one we watched when we were at the hospital ... animal documentaries only.

I sigh, watching him stare wistfully at it. I don't know what to do at this point. It seems as though the farther we get away from the island, the unhappier he becomes.

There must be something I can do.

Biting my lip, I approach him from behind and wrap my arms around him. "Hey there, handsome."

He smiles gently as I kiss him from above, my boobs firmly pressed against his head. He moans into my mouth and kisses me harder, taking my mouth. Suddenly, he drags me over the couch, making me squeal. I end up in his lap, held down in his arms, while he showers me with kisses.

I've never felt better in my life.

Is it abnormal to love a man who kept you a prisoner on an island?

Maybe ... but I don't like normal anyway.

He caresses my cheeks and murmurs, "You know that only tempts me to do dirty things to you."

Grinning, I raise a brow and ask, "Like what?"

His tongue darts out to wet his lips as his hand moves down his body to the pants I bought him. He unzips himself and takes out his cock. It's already hard. As he pushes me closer, I acquiesce and take it into my mouth.

His head falls back onto the couch as I start to lick him, eager to get him off. I want him to stop thinking. Stop everything and focus on me. I'm here ... isn't that enough?

His pre-cum makes my pussy thump, and I suck even harder to taste him. He groans and grabs a fistful of my hair, pushing me farther down until I gag. God, I love it when he does that.

He quickly pulls me back up again and rubs my ass with his free hand. A sudden soft spank has me jolting up.

"Fuck, I love your tongue wrapped around my dick," he groans.

He shoves down my pants until they're below my ass, and then he slides his hand inside. His fingers brush my clit and circle around it, making me wet and even hornier than I already was. And I continue sucking his dick until his veins pop and he's about to burst.

But he quickly removes his fingers and pushes me away. Then he grabs me by the waist and slings me over his shoulder as he gets up from the couch. I squeal.

“Bed?” he growls.

“Upstairs.”

He marches into the hallway and up the stairs, opening every door until he finds the one he is looking for, the one with the king-size bed ... and the huge panda in the corner.

I have a secret thing for pandas, and I never tell a soul about it.

I would've tucked it away before he came here, but it's too late now. *Oops.*

He briefly glances at it and shrugs when I grin like a crazy woman. Then he throws me onto the bed and crawls on top of me, ripping my clothes off as if they're paper to him.

“All these clothes are in the way,” he growls, visibly annoyed even though it only takes him seconds to throw it all into a corner of the room.

He quickly dives back down and parts my legs, burying his face between them. I gasp and bite my lip when he goes down on me, his tongue expertly licking all my nooks and crannies in a way that makes me moan with delight.

I love the way he can work his mouth to give me all the pleasure in the world. It's like he craves it, enjoys it, loves to hear me purr.

He laps me so good, my whole body begins to shake and hum, and I grasp the sheets tight. When I come, I clamp my legs together and call out. “Fuck!”

He grins and presses soft kisses and licks my clit until the orgasm is over. Then he rises, and I struggle to breathe when he comes down on top of me and pulls my leg up beside him.

“Fuck, Jules ... You’re my undoing ... But I fucking love it.”

He plunges into me without holding back, making me gasp.

“Yes!” I moan as he fucks me hard and fast.

I feel dirty. Bad. But I love everything about it.

I love everything about him.

And I love how he's filling me up right now with every inch of his being.

We're both high on lust and need, our bodies dripping with sweat and desire. He looks me in the eye as he makes sweet, filthy love to me, and I take it all. I don't want him to hold back. This is what we both need, what we crave.

We fuck until we're both out of air and come undone together, wetness and cum spilling everywhere, moans echoing through the space. Spent, he rolls onto the mattress and lies down next to me, breathing out loud.

I stare at the ceiling as the heat rushes through my body.

I can't ever get enough of him.

"What are you thinking about?" he suddenly asks.

I turn my head and smile at him. "You."

He smiles back and leans in to press a kiss to my forehead, and we curl up together.

But even as I lay here with him by my side, I can't help but feel melancholic. I know his love for me is practically infinite, but at what cost?

"Do you miss the island?" The question blurts out of me.

He nods but remains silent. It's enough for me. I don't need words. I've seen it in his behavior, in his emotions, everything. He's not really here.

And I'm beginning to understand that no matter what I do, nothing will change the way he feels about the world beyond the island. Even if he does his best, he might still not be happy here.

And I don't want to force him to stay just because of me.

I hold him tight and whisper in his ear, "You should go back."

"What?" he mutters.

"To the island."

He looks up at me, frowning. “Why?”

“I don’t want you to be unhappy,” I say, taking a deep breath.

“I am happy. I have you,” he says, holding me even tighter as if he’s afraid I’ll leave him.

Tears well up in my eyes. “Don’t lie.”

He lets out a big breath.

Yes, I used his words against him. But sometimes we have to hear what we don’t want to hear. Listen to our mind instead of our heart.

We both sigh. No more words are needed to describe our situation.

I love him, and he loves me, but sometimes we need more than love to survive.

We both knew it was coming.

The truth.

He doesn’t belong here.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Accompanying Song: “[Triggers](#)” by IAMX

Lock

I've never quaked in my shoes before, but now I'm quaking. I can't stay put, my whole body agitated by the adrenaline rushing through my veins as we stand here on the square in the middle of the park.

Will they come?

“They'll be here soon,” Jules says, watching me tap my foot.

I nod and fold my arms, leaning against the wall while I peer at all the people passing us. I feel tense, as if I'm ready to strike out instantly, even though they're just people. But I don't trust them. I don't trust anyone out here.

I've never liked people in general ... mostly because I don't understand them, and they don't understand me. They accuse me of things I don't comprehend, and I fail to see why they like living this way.

Add an accident on top of that, and you've got a recipe for disaster.

People hate me, and I get it.

I'm dangerous. Wild.

I don't belong with them.

My father warned me too ... that I'd never find a home, and that I shouldn't even try to escape.

Yet I did.

I didn't believe him either.

He always treated me worse than the people out there, so I thought I could risk it. When I escaped the compound he kept me in, I was determined never to return.

But damn ... the outside world was just as unforgiving.

Still, he was wrong when he said I'd never find a home.

I have two now. The island ... and her.

My woman.

She trusts me. Loves me unconditionally. Helps me when I need it the most. And what do I have to give in return? Nothing.

I'm out of my element here. I can't provide, can't work, can't give her what she needs the most. A life like all the other people.

A life that doesn't involve me.

"They're here."

I sigh, and my body immediately grows rigid the moment I catch them walking toward us. The girl is small and thin with pearly blond hair, but the guy walking next to her is like twice her size, with muscles to rival mine. He looks younger than I am but still very strong.

That must be him.

My brother.

But when I take a closer look at the girl next to him, my eyes widen.

She looks a lot like ...

That girl who died.

* * *

Accompanying Song: “On The Nature Of Daylight” by Max Richter

Jules beckons them to come over, and they do. She greets them by shaking hands and exchanging names.

“Juliet,” she says.

The girl doesn’t respond, but her fingers start to move.

“Her name’s Ella. She doesn’t talk to strangers.” His voice is coarse, like mine. “Name’s Cage.”

“Okay ... hi!” Jules responds. “Nice to meet you both.”

Cage then throws me a glance, checking me from top to bottom before mumbling, “Is that him?”

Jules nods and steps aside as Cage approaches. He narrows his eyes at me as he inspects me and so do I. I don’t know if I can trust him. If he is who he says he is.

“Lock ...” he mumbles. “You definitely look like the one in the picture.”

I nod slowly, grinding my teeth.

“Tell me what the cage looked like,” I say.

I want to hear it from his mouth. Every little detail.

“Glass in a concrete attic with a bed and a shower. Small lights. A fighting ring underneath. Father made me fight others in exchange for women. For

her.” He briefly glances at Ella with a gaze so fierce it reminds me of my love for Jules. “She was in that glass prison with me, but we’re free now, and she’s mine,” he says, pointing at the girl named Ella. “I chose her, and she chose me.”

His words do ring true to my own experience. Just the thought of that glass cage gives me goose bumps. But how does he know the exact thing I lived, yet we’ve never met?

The girl suddenly approaches and starts to make strange symbols with her fingers again.

“We were kept apart,” Cage says, translating for her. “And you’re older than I am, so Father probably learned from his experience with you.”

“Yeah. So?”

“Tell me how you escaped,” he asks.

“Father let me out of the compound sometimes. Showed me around. Taught me things about the world outside. It was my reward.”

“So you didn’t get women as a prize?”

“Sometimes … but not a lot.”

He growls and spits on the ground. “Typical.”

The girl starts to use her fingers again.

“She wants to know if you know anything about me.”

I shake my head. “I just saw my face on the television.”

“We’ve been searching for you for a long time,” he interjects, looking me straight in the eye.

There’s a moment of silence, and then out of nowhere, he jumps me.

Or at least, that’s what it feels like, and I’m just about to hit him when I realize he’s hugging me.

I’m incapacitated. Completely blindsided.

Jules tears up a little as I put my hand on Cage's back and accept his warm embrace.

I didn't expect this, but it's welcome.

"Finally ..." Cage mumbles as he releases me. "We meet."

"Shall we go grab something to eat? You guys must be dying to catch up," Jules says to make it a bit less awkward.

"Dying?" Cage frowns. Ella makes some strange gestures again after which Cage adds, "Ahh ... yeah, sure. Why not."

But as they both turn around, I stay put.

I can't stop staring at that girl—Ella—and how badly I want to ask that single question that rests on the tip of my tongue.

It rolls out without my permission. "You ... you're related to that *girl*, aren't you?"

Everyone stops walking, and Jules frowns at me.

Ella cocks her head and her lips part, but no sound comes out except for a slight groan.

"What girl?" Cage asks.

Jules's eyes widen, and she slaps her hand over her mouth. "No ..."

"Yes," I say. "It's her. It has to be."

Ella makes a few symbols in the air and freezes when I try to approach her. Cage blocks my path.

"Yes," he says for her. "That girl was her sister."

I lick my lips and let the information sink in. Jules sits down on a ledge next to me and closes her eyes, sighing. "I can't believe it. Is this real?"

Cage nods. "But we already knew."

Both of us look up at the same time. "What?" Jules mutters.

Ella appears from behind Cage and starts to make those motions again. Cage translates for her. "She knew when she saw your picture in the compound. She remembered you. Chased you through the woods. Saw her own sister in your hands."

I shudder and forget to breathe.

Once again, I'm coming face to face with my mortal sins.

"She saw her die," Cage adds.

It feels like a stab to the heart.

But Ella still approaches me, her steps soft but deliberate, and she leans down in front of me. Grabs my hand. Squeezes.

For the first time in a long time, my eyes tear up.

I sink to my knees and fall to the ground in front of her, holding my head low.

"I'm sorry. When I escaped, I was so lonely. I didn't know how to talk to people, how to get them to like me. Everyone was frightened. No one understood me. But your sister ... she talked to me. She wasn't afraid of me. And I just wanted someone to talk to," I ramble. "I didn't want her to die. But she fell when she ran away from me, and then you came. I still remember the look on your face." My hands form fists. I'm that angry with myself. "I'm sorry... I wish I could bring her back."

People around us are looking at us. At me.

Let them look.

The only thing I care about right now is making things right.

"It's been a long time," Cage says. "But she hasn't forgotten. She loved her sister very much."

"I will do anything you ask me to. Tell me," I say, still not looking up. I don't dare look at them. I took away something she called family. Something I can never replace.

Suddenly, two hands wrap around my face and lift me up.

It's her ... Ella. The girl with the pearly blond hair and the smile of an angel.

She nods.

"But she forgives you," Cage says.

I stare in disbelief.

Just like that, the load I've been carrying for so long falls off my shoulder. Releases me from the chains that have kept me down for so long. And my sins drift away in the wind.

There are only two words I can say. "Thank you."

It's quiet for some time. Like a pause in time, but no less important.

A hand on my shoulder follows, squeezes too ... It's Jules. I can smell it.

"You've punished yourself enough," Jules bends over and whispers into my ear. "Forgive yourself."

I nod a few times, but before I can get up, Cage offers me a hand with a smile.

I take it and smile back.

And together we walk.

Finally united.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Accompanying Song: “Believer” by Imagine Dragons

Lock

I stare in awe at my brother fighting off his opponents in the ring.

He invited me to come watch. I didn’t know what he meant by opponents until I saw him step into the ring with a roar. People around us are cheering ... not just for the fight, but also for him.

It makes him more pumped, and his strikes are harder than before the people started chanting his name. And the moment his opponent goes down, it erupts.

I hold my hands over my ears to block the noise.

I don’t know how he does it.

Why he likes listening to them ... and why he puts himself out there like that.

People make him feel wanted and strong ...

Me? I just want to run away whenever I come in contact with another person.

I sigh and watch the match in silence, wishing I'd feel different about it all, but something still nags at me.

Father made us fight for rewards, and we both hated it, which is why I'm so surprised Cage is still doing this. It's like he somehow still enjoys it.

Or maybe because now he won't have to kill anyone.

Me? I want no part of this.

And the moment it's over, I try to quietly slip out the back.

However, a hand on my shoulder stops me. "Hey, where you going?"

It's Cage. I turn and clear my throat. "Just ... wanted to catch a breath." It's both a lie and the truth.

"C'mon, let's go celebrate," he says, putting his arm around my shoulder and pulling me along. "What did you think?" he asks. "Did I punch him good or what?"

"Yeah, great," I answer.

"Not good?"

I shrug. "You like beating people up?"

He smirks. "It's what I do best. So that's what I do."

"But why?"

"To earn money."

"Money ...?" I frown. Hate that stuff. It's why Father did all those horrible things to us. It's the sole reason we had to suffer.

Why doesn't he care?

"You know ... to buy stuff. You need money to give your woman what she needs," he says, eyeing Ella who's waiting for him in the locker room.

“If you want, I can introduce you to someone and hook you up.”

“As in fighting?” I ask, raising a brow.

“Yeah. To earn money.”

“Ah …” I hold up my hand. “No thanks.”

“Let me help some other way then. Want me to show you around town? Help you get started?”

I frown. “I prefer not.”

“Why?”

I shrug. “I just wanna take it slow. Besides, I don’t see the point.”

“In what? A job?”

“No, everything. Here,” I reply.

He snorts. “You’re not making any sense.”

“I know,” I say. I don’t mind. He fits in well here, but just because he does doesn’t mean I will. Or that I want to.

“My point is, dude, you’re gonna have to search for a job too, if you wanna survive and make your woman happy.”

I make a face. “Don’t wanna talk about that now.”

“Sorry.” He laughs. “I just figured you wanted to know.”

“Is that why you invited me to come watch you?” I ask, raising a brow. “To give me tips?”

“Well, I figured … since you’re new to it and all …”

I cross my arms. “That I’m what? Inexperienced?”

He shrugs, but a grin still spreads across his lips.

“Did you forget I was the first one to escape?” I ask. “I’ve seen the world. I know what people like, what they do, what they want. It’s not my thing.”

“Then what is?” Cage asks as Ella hands him a towel, and he wipes off his sweat.

I stare off into the distance, picturing the jungle and fresh lakes. “My island.”

“Hmm …” He nods. “Must be a great place. Can’t wait to see it.”

I freeze.

Is he going to?

Does that mean I’ll have to share my island?

“Relax,” he says, laughing. “We’ll come when invited only.”

“Right.” I shake my head. “Except I’m here now. Just like you.”

“Right …” Cage winks.

Well, fuck me.

He’s just as arrogant as I am.

Guess he really is my brother.

Still, it makes me wonder why I never knew about his existence in the first place. Why Father kept him from me is a mystery to me. Maybe he thought it’d be another incentive for me to want to leave the prison he built. He did everything in his power to keep us both there… and still, we escaped.

“What happened to … the compound?” I ask, after a moment of silence.

“The police raided it. No one was found.”

“What about Father?” I ask.

Ella’s face contorts, and she glances back and forth between Cage and me.

Their faces are all I need to know the truth.

“You know what happened to him.” Cage replies, swallowing. “It’s for the best.”

I nod, letting out a sigh of relief. “Agreed.” Still, I can’t let go of the compound so quickly. “But we weren’t the only people in that prison. What happened to all of them? The girls?”

Ella licks her lips and looks at Cage questioningly. “Well,” he says. “One of the girls who shared a cell with us, Syrena … She was sold.”

“Sold?” I frown.

“Yeah. That’s what he did too. Lots of girls who couldn’t get pregnant for whatever reason. He sold them to rich and powerful men. Like pets.”

I want to smack the wall with my fists. Goddamn that man and all his evil.

“We’re still looking for her.”

“And the others?”

“I don’t know.” He shrugs. “They vanished.”

“I hope they ended up somewhere safe,” I say.

“We don’t know. But the police are on it, they say. So we’re gonna trust them, right?” He glances at Ella, who nods in agreement.

I rub the back of my head and close my eyes, sighing. “Man, I can’t believe it. I thought he would’ve changed his ways after I escaped. But of course not. Bad people will always be bad people.”

“Right …” Cage mutters.

“God, I fucking hate this world,” I say, grinding my teeth.

Cage slams his locker shut and suddenly asks, “Hey man, do you even want to be here?”

“What?” I mutter, pulled from my thoughts.

“This place. The city. The people. Do you even like it?”

I frown and purse my lips, but there’s no response I can give them that will satisfy them.

He won't understand. He wasn't shunned like I was. He had a girl to guide him.

What did I have? Broken dreams.

I have never fit in.

He does.

He likes this place. More than I ever will.

He approaches me and places a hand on my shoulder. "It's fine, dude."

I shake my head. "It's not. Jules needs to be here."

"Yeah ... but what if you can't take being here, among the people?"

"It's not that," I say. "It's the technology too. Doors that can't open without me standing in a strange spot, small devices people can't stop staring at ... books."

"Oh, yeah ..." He chuckles, gazing at Ella for a moment, which makes her blush. "I had a lot of trouble getting used to all that too. But I learned, eventually. And you can too."

"Is it worth it?" I ask, looking at Ella specifically. "Did it make you happy?"

She nods.

"I didn't do it for her. I did it for me," Cage says, cocking his head. "If you don't want to do it for you, then don't. It's not right."

I sigh. "It's not that easy, and you know it."

"Yeah, it is. You hate people, and you miss the island. Why not go back?"

And there it is.

The final straw.

He's right.

I'm not fit for this city. These people. The technology they use. The things they can do with those paper bills. How difficult it all is ... I don't fucking care. I don't want to fucking learn. I just want things to be simple.

Like the island.

"Fuck ..." I say, leaning back against the wall.

Cage gently pats my shoulder. "It'll be okay. Just talk to her about it."

I look up at him. "You think?"

"Yeah. And if not ... well, then it wasn't meant to be."

As he turns and starts undressing so he can take a shower, his words still spin in my head.

Wasn't meant to be ...

Maybe he really is right.

* * *

Accompanying Song: [The Rocket Builder](#) by Johann Johannson

Juliet

It's been a few weeks since we last saw his brother and Ella, and things have turned out much better than I thought they would. I never expected I'd get to meet a part of his family, let alone that it'd be this much of a success.

We even got to see pictures of their baby boy, Forest. Such a beautiful name.

Maybe we'll get to meet him too, one day.

After Lock went to Cage's fighting match, we all met at a local bar for a drink. We talked about Ella's parents and how badly Lock wanted to apologize to them too, but Ella thought it was a bad idea, as Cage explained. She preferred not to tell them at all about what he did to her sister because it would hurt them too much. Instead, she'll tell them about Cage's brother, and let the man who took her sister be someone else.

It was her choice, so we accepted it. She seemed glad, so I guess that was what we wanted.

I get the feeling everyone wants to start with a clean slate.

I'm happy we got to make amends. Lock has finally stopped blaming himself for what happened to the girl.

Suzie. That was her name. According to Cage, Ella said she's at peace in heaven.

I just pray Lock can move on too now that she's forgiven him.

It's a miracle, to say the least.

We can only hope the police won't come after him either. But the case is so old now, and we've all changed. Not only mentally but physically too. We don't look the same anymore, and I doubt they're actually still looking for him.

We're safe now. For the time being.

I've even gone back to work, so I could say hi to everyone and let them know how I was doing. And also because I needed to say goodbye to Pete and Ollie. There was a gathering at work to mourn our loss and to answer questions anyone may have had. I'm glad they didn't ask much of me, though. No one blames me, which I'm happy for. It's already tough enough to have witnessed them dying. And to be the only one to survive.

But right now, I'm okay. I've said my goodbyes; I've made my amends.

Within a few days, I'm sure I'll be back at work again, doing my thing just as always.

Except something still gnaws at the back of my mind.

Something I can't ignore.

Lock still isn't happy.

It shows in everything he does. Whether it's learning how to cook or watching the television or exploring my home. His face never lights up.

Even after I've made him taste literally everything from the supermarket and took him to the city to show him around. Books didn't work either because he never learned how to read. The only thing that remotely excited him was the zoo ... until he found out the animals were all stuck in a cage too.

I had to physically stop him from freeing them.

When we walk across the street, people look at him as if he's a freak show. I know he's huge, but that doesn't give them the right to stare. But I guess people don't understand.

Just like when I tell him to go and take something to the cash register, and he doesn't even know what to do when he's there even though I gave him the cash. The people judge him, laugh at him, and ridicule him behind his back.

It makes my blood boil.

But what can I do?

Even if I educate him and teach him everything there is, he'll still be at a disadvantage. It'll still remind him of the fact he's different. That he never had a chance at the life they live.

Kids can learn ... but adults?

It's much harder, and I can tell it's making him doubt himself so much. The more time we spend in the city, the more he's fading away.

I knew then and there it was never going to work.

He has to go back.

So I've packed up our things and forced him back on the plane. Lock asked me what we were going to do, but I didn't want to tell him because he'd try

to persuade me that everything was fine when it wasn't. So we flew back all the way to the island where we were taken with the boat. I asked around before we went, and there is a company willing to take him there.

But the moment Lock sees the ship, he turns around and stares at me in disbelief.

"We're going back to the island?" The excitement in his eyes is too powerful to ignore.

I nod, smiling. "Yeah. It was supposed to be a surprise."

He shakes his head and grabs my hands. "No. I can't accept this."

"It's where you belong," I say. "You said so yourself."

He cocks his head. "But you don't."

I bite my bottom lip, not knowing how to respond. "I ..."

"Stay," he says, looking straight into my eyes. "This world ... the people ... are your home."

I shake my head, my eyes turning watery. "No."

"Yes. I want you to be happy," he says.

"Please ..."

"No. I can't leave knowing you're not happy." He tips up my chin. "Your love means everything to me, but not at the cost of your happiness. Go home."

A tear rolls down my cheek as I open my mouth, but he stops me from talking by covering my mouth with his and sucking out the anxiety and fear. His kisses numb me to the point of letting it all go.

"I love you," he whispers. "But you need to be here."

I peer over his shoulder to the man standing on the docks, waiting for Lock. "You ... should go," I say.

He nods and slowly lets me go. “Find a man who can give you what you need,” he says. “Find someone who will call you *his* with pride.”

I lick my lips, unable to smile. The cold immediately returns to my body, and I shiver as he turns around and walks to the man, convinced this is the right choice.

But I’m not so sure.

What do I need?

What is it that I want in life?

I love my job; I love my house. I love my family and co-workers. I love my city and everything this world has to offer. But without him, it’s ... empty.

And even though guilt eats away at my heart, I know I made the right decision the moment he smiles as he steps onto the deck and the boat starts to move away from me.

I wave until it disappears.

And I’m crushed by the weight of my own heart begging me to follow him.

Instead, I turn around and leave.

* * *

Accompanying Song: [The Rocket Builder](#) by Johann Johannson

I can’t drive myself to get on a plane back.

Instead, I book a room at the nearest hotel and fall on the bed. I burrow my face into the pillow and cry, my screams turning into mere soft squeaks in the fabric. Every passing second feels like an eternity in this dark, damp room. After a while, I have no more tears to cry. I sit up and stare at the wall in front of me. The emptiness around me makes me feel sick to my stomach.

Too nauseous.

I quickly jump off the bed and run into the bathroom, throwing it all up in the toilet.

When I'm done, I turn on the shower and step under, letting the water rinse away my pain and sickness.

I rest my head against the wall as the water cascades down my back.

I feel hot and cold at the same time.

Everything aches.

My body. My stomach. Even my goddamn breasts.

I suck in a breath, my eyes flashing open.

What if ...?

Turning off the shower, I jump out and grasp a towel, drying myself off as quickly as I can. After putting on my clothes as fast as I can, I grab my purse and rush out the door. I ask the concierge for the closest pharmacy and hail a cab to take me there.

The lady at the cash register looks at me as if I've lost my mind, so I quickly go and pay the cabby to take me back to my hotel. When I get back up to my room, I throw the box away and take out the test.

Blowing out a big breath, I sit down on the toilet and pee on the stick.

My heart is pounding when I place it next to the sink and stare at it.

Time seems like it's infinite, and I can't stop tapping my feet and biting the inside of my cheek.

That's when the stripe appears.

For a moment my heart stops beating.

A second one appears.

Trembling, I pick up the stick and read the back of the box.

Pregnant ...

I'm pregnant?

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CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

Accompanying Song: “She Remembers” by Max Richter

Juliet

“Mom?”

My phone is shaking in my hand, just like my voice.

“Honey? Are you okay? What’s wrong?”

“No ...” Tears are already rolling across my cheek.

“Tell me what happened. Where are you?”

“A h-hotel. I j-just said g-goodbye t-to Lock,” I stutter, almost unable to pronounce the words.

“What?”

“He’s back on the island.” I sink down to the floor in front of the window.

“Why? I thought you two were happy?”

“I was ... We were ...” I mutter, wiping away the tears. “But he belonged there.”

“No ... No!” she yells. “What kind of nonsense is that? You two loved each other!”

My lips part, but I don’t know how to respond.

“How ...?”

“Honey, I’ve seen how you two look at each other. You’re crazy mad for each other. A mama knows those things. She can feel it.”

“It doesn’t matter,” I interject, not wanting to hear how badly I loved him.

I know exactly how I feel about him.

How I felt.

None of it matters anymore.

He’s gone.

“Love *always* matters,” Mom says with her stern voice. “Honey, why didn’t you go with him?”

“What? No ...” I sigh. “He said ... I don’t know. I ... this is my home.”

“So? You can make a new home. You like him, don’t you?”

I start to fumble with the carpet, but then my hands still find their way to the pregnancy test lying right beside me on the floor. I pick it up and stare at it.

“Mom, I’m pregnant.” It’s quiet for so long, I’m not even sure she’s still here. “Mom?”

“Oh, god. Pregnant?” she mutters after a while. “I’m going to be a grandma?”

I chuckle and rub my forehead. “Mom ...” I sigh.

“Sorry, I get excited when I think about it.”

“So you think I should keep it?”

Now, she sighs. “Honey, you should do what you want the most.”

“I don’t know what I want.” That’s why I called her.

“Follow your heart. What does your heart tell you?” she asks. “Does it say stay and go back to your work? Live your life? Or does it say be with him?”

I bite my lip and mumble, “I ...”

“Listen,” she says. “Don’t think. Close your eyes and listen.”

I do what she says while holding the test tight and let the energy from my body decide my voice.

When I was on the island, I wanted to go home so badly.

But now that I’ve been there, it’s not what I remember it to be.

It’s not the same anymore.

Not since I met him.

Maybe that’s why I was so reluctant to fall.

He changed me in more ways than I can possibly imagine.

Because of him, I’m not even remotely interested in my own job anymore. In the science behind life. All I want is to live it ... to experience it in real life. To finally live after feeling like I’ve been standing still, frozen, my entire life.

And the thought of doing it with him brings a smile to my face.

“I think you’ve already decided.”

I smile to myself. “Thanks, Mom ...”

“Don’t worry about it. But what are you going to do now?”

“I ...” I don’t even know.

“I’ll take care of all your business. Just ask and tell me your info, and I’ll do the rest.”

I laugh. “Thank you, I appreciate it.”

“Anything for my baby girl and my soon-to-be grandbaby.” She giggles.

“Right, but … I can’t.” I shake my head. “It’s dangerous. If I’m pregnant, I can’t birth a baby out there.”

“Why not? Women have been having children since god knows how long. They didn’t have hospitals back then. You can do it.”

“But what about medicine? Food? Proper diet?” I get up from the floor. “There’s no internet, no running water, no electricity. There are not even books.”

“You don’t need that.” She scoffs. “Your dad and I went hiking up the mountains for weeks on end when we were young. We never missed any of that. We managed using our tools.”

Oh no, here she goes again with those stories. “Yeah, Mom, I know. You’ve told me more than once.”

“My point is, if you go there prepared, you shouldn’t miss anything. Just bring a generator, one you can power yourself. And get some dry shampoo and some books. A small water filter for drinkable water. Maybe a porta potty.”

“Mom!”

“I know, I know. The point is … you’re making up reasons now.”

“I know I can buy all that stuff and bring it with me. But what if it’s still not enough?”

She mumbles to herself for a few seconds. “Well, then we can always get someone to fly to your island or go there with a boat. Maybe like once a month.”

“But who would do that? With an isolated island?”

“Who wouldn’t if you pay them?”

I open my mouth, but I can’t think of a good answer.

She's right.

I am making shit up not to go.

Why? Because I've been so attached to the easiness of my life living in the city that I've grown attached to the simple things.

But do they really matter if it means giving up the only person in this world who could make my heart stop?

No.

"But my job—"

"You can quit," she interrupts.

"But—"

"Juliet." Her voice is stern now. Just like I remember it being when she was scolding me for not doing my best. "Stop making excuses for yourself. He makes you happier than anything else. I've never seen you as happy as when you were with him. As much as I'd like to say he's bad for you, you two belong together."

I smile, wiping away the tear rolling down my cheek. "Thanks, Mom. It means a lot to me."

She's right.

Why do I let all these things hold me down?

We can create a solution for everything.

"Oh shush, don't make me cry too," Mom says. She chuckles and so do I as I sit down on the bed and look at myself in the mirror.

And for the first time in a long time, I'm happy with the person I see.

* * *

Accompanying Song: "When She Came Back" by Max Richter

Lock

Weeks later

I reel in the fish with the net I wove, but only one flounders at the bottom. It's enough for one person, I guess.

Sighing, I pull it up and throw it into the box, ready to cast out my net again.

I hope there's more fish coming soon because otherwise I'm going to need to hunt too. I was really looking forward to just relaxing in my hut, but I guess that's not going to happen now.

Although I guess I should be happy my hut survived.

The men who came to the island to clean up the bodies and the helicopter made it seem like nothing ever happened. I'm surprised they left my hut alone.

I clear my throat and focus on the task at hand.

In the distance, I notice something approaching.

I shade my eyes with my hands and look beyond. That's strange. I've never seen a boat come this close. Not since ...

I swallow away the lump in my throat when the memory of her resurfaces. I can't think about her. She's happy where she is, where she belongs. Even though I would've died to keep her with me, she was never at home here. We're two different people with different needs, and when those don't align ... nothing can be done.

I have to move on. Forget about her.

It's the best thing to do right now.

After all, she'd want me to be happy.

Like I want her to be.

However, even as I'm fishing, I can't stop staring at the approaching boat. What is it doing here, so close to the shore? Are they here to collect something she left on the island? Or are they here to come and get me?

A shiver runs up and down my spine, but I ignore it and focus on the task at hand. The fish don't want to come into my net, and it's pissing me off. I'm about to go grab my newly made spear again when I notice the boat has stopped somewhere near the shore ... but a smaller boat is approaching now.

Inside it are two people. One is steering while the other one holds a bag.

I can't tell who they are, but I still don't trust it.

Not one bit...

Until the one with the bag stands up.

Her short hair floats in the wind, a breeze picking up underneath her dress, making it flow beautifully. And the smile that follows when we stare into each other's eyes is one that makes my heart stop.

I'd never forget that smile.

Not in a million years.

I drop my net into the water, not giving a shit about the fish anymore.

She jumps out of the boat, leaving her bag behind with the man steering the boat.

I run into the water, just like her.

I don't feel the cold, or the stinging underneath my feet, or the sun burning on the top of my head. All I feel is the adrenaline rushing through my body as I rush into the water, deeper and deeper.

Nothing can stop me from reaching her.

Not even the waves crashing into me.

She wades toward me in her dress, which clings to her skin as her body gets wetter and wetter. But none of it will beat the smile on her face.

That face ... I thought I'd never see it again.

I can't go fast enough, and once I'm close enough, my hands can't help but grasp for her and pull her into my embrace.

Hold.

On.

Tight.

I smother her with my love, running my hands all over her body in a desperate attempt to get closer. Her hands touch my face and wriggle through my hair. She jumps into my arms and wraps her legs around my waist, locking them in place.

And I kiss her so fucking hard that it feels like I'm pouring all my love into her mouth.

Our mouths lock in a furious battle, not wanting to stop, despite the fact we both need air.

God, I fucking missed this mouth.

“Are you real?” I mutter, out of breath, almost unable to believe it’s true.

“Yes, I’m here,” she says, chuckling.

“But why ...?”

“Shh ...” she whispers in my ear. “You already know.”

She’s right.

I do.

I’ve known for a long time, yet it never sunk in.

I didn't want to believe it because a part of me still believed being home would make her happy.

But neither of us stopped to realize ... she made *me* her home now.

Just like I made her heart my home.

It's not the place you live that decides your happiness. It's the people you share it with.

And I want nothing more than to share this island with her ... forever.

With her in my arms, I wade back to the shore, ignoring the guy setting foot on my land. He's probably bringing in her stuff anyway, and it doesn't matter where he puts it; it's not going anywhere.

It's just her and me right now, and I know exactly what to do.

"Thank you!" Jules says to the man as he drops off her stuff and goes back to his boat again.

"Good luck and see ya soon!" he says.

"He's agreed to drop off stuff every now and then," she says, but I don't care about any of that.

How she made up her mind and goes about her business is her thing. I want her here with me. And now it's finally happened, like a dream come true.

Together with her, I topple down onto the sand and fall on top of her, immediately covering her mouth with mine.

She giggles and tries to talk, but I keep kissing her. I can't stop.

And even though she kisses me back just as eagerly, our lips still unlatch. Breathing hot air against my lips, she murmurs, "I have to tell you something."

"What?" I plant my hand down in the sand just beside her face.

Her face starts to glow. "I'm pregnant."

Pregnant.

A baby? *My* baby?

A fire burns inside my heart as the word repeats over and over again in my mind.

“I want to keep it,” she says, rubbing her lips together. “That’s why I came back.”

“It’s mine?” I ask, cocking my head.

When she nods, I grin, and I immediately dive back in for more licks and kisses, my tongue darting out to lick her skin. I want to taste her ... everywhere.

I don’t ever wanna stop.

I give her all the kisses that I always wanted to give her.

All the kisses she deserves.

I don’t let go.

Not in a million years will I ever let go again.

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EPILOGUE

Accompanying Song: “[Legendary Lovers](#)” by Katy Perry

Juliet

Only a few months later, I’ve already gotten settled on the island. No one from the government seemed to have noticed him living here all that time, so I figured they wouldn’t notice when there’s two either.

I quit my job via email on a working phone. It took a while to get reception, though, but the telephone company was willing to step up and help me out. Same goes for the company we hired to bring us food and supplies like medicine every week. Sure, it cost a bit of money, but I’ve got a savings account to plunder, and if we run out, I can always start selling the fruits of the island. They are plentiful.

And Mom also told me she will jump in and help us if we ever need it, which I appreciate. Even Ella and Cage were happy for us when I told them via a phone call that we’d moved back. And Cage insisted he wanted to help us out with the funds, no ifs, no buts. I couldn’t say no. His help is welcome, and we appreciate it.

We've also set up a proper porta potty and a shower this time, not too far from the hut, along with a mini fridge powered by a generator, so we can keep our meat and fish fresh.

Life's perfect now that I'm together with Lock, and the island feels much more like home now that I'm a willing occupant. Plus, it does feel good to walk through the jungle completely naked without feeling judged. The only one looking at me is Lock ... and I love the way he looks at me.

Me ... and baby bump.

Because I've grown quite a lot over the past few months. It won't be long now until I can feel the kicks, and I can't wait.

The only thing we're worried about is if things will go okay, but we've already hired a specialist who will come to the island to help me with a natural birth.

Mom and Dad will probably come to visit too after that. And maybe Lock's brother and Ella, if they have the time. Everyone is welcome; they just have to find a ride, but that shouldn't be hard.

I've found people are quite willing to help if you ask nicely. And being upfront about what I need is something I've learned to do quite well over the past few months. I guess that's one of the perks of living with a man who doesn't mince words.

I clear my throat and force myself to stop drifting off in my mind. I've got work to do.

I stuff the seeds into the soil and cover it with dirt. Sweat drips down my forehead, so I rub it off with my arm as I cover the last bit of earth. Then I pick up the bucket of water and start pouring it all over the field until I've watered every single one of the trees we've planted.

When I'm done, I stop and look at all the great work we've done.

Seeds are planted over the whole area now. It won't be long until tiny saplings start to grow, and maybe in a few years, the trees will finally be back.

It will be as if the helicopter never crashed here.

Then we'll finally have made amends with the ruin we created when we set foot on this island. But I'm already smiling because I can be proud of what we've done here.

Even if I can no longer be a wildlife biologist in my professional life, that doesn't mean I can't still do what I love the most; study and take care of nature.

But as I turn around to show Lock all the work I've done, something hits me in the face.

Something sticky and ... dark.

I wipe it off with my hand and cringe ... mud.

Lock's laughing so hard he's struggling to breathe.

So I quickly grab a handful of mud and chuck it right back at him, hitting him right in the face.

He spits and wipes it off too, momentarily fazed. But then he gathers himself and scoops up more mud, throwing it at me. I dodge and pick up more too, making a ball out of it before I hurl it his way. It lands so hard he almost falls down.

The whole place is slippery as it starts to rain, but neither of us stops.

I throw another one, which he expertly dodges, after which I slip and fall on my ass. I hide my face in my arms, and Lock immediately runs toward me, sinking to his knees in front of me.

“Are you okay?”

I look up and grin. Then I smash two balls of mud on either side of his face.

For a second, he doesn't know what hit him, but then he begins to laugh, and he jumps me, pushing me down to the ground. I can't stop giggling as he's tickling me and rubbing my face full of mud.

“Okay, okay, I surrender!” I shriek.

He rubs some more mud onto my belly covering my entire body, and we're both panting from excitement. We're both covered in mud and water ... and laughing all the way through it.

And I can't help but stop and gaze at him in wonder ... remembering this is exactly the way he looked when I first met him. Completely covered in mud ... but this time, I'm not scared. I'm in love.

"Are you mine?" he murmurs, running his fingers through my hair.

I nod, and he leans over me and presses a soft but smoldering kiss on my lips, and I can't help but fall even deeper in love with this man.

This man ... my man.

He locked up my heart, but I was the one who threw away the key.

"Under Lock ..." I mumble as my thumb brushes over his face. With my other hand, I rub my belly and add, "And Key."

* * *

Want more from Ella & Cage? Keep reading to the end of this book!

There's also a FREE BONUS BOOK included in this copy, FATHER, a filthy preacher romance!

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FATHER



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Description

Confess your sin.

People call me Father, but I prefer Frank because I'm the worst preacher you'll ever meet.

Days spent completely wasted pull a number on you, especially when you've got a truckload of baggage that comes with it.

Until this beautiful girl in the back of the church takes my breath away.
...And we end up committing sacrilege in the confessional.

Did I mention I'm filthy?

Bad doesn't even begin to describe me, and after one taste of what she's got to offer, I want more.

Too bad having a dirty mind isn't the only thing we've got in common...
Our past is laced with sin.

Author's Note: This book is not for everyone. It's raw. It's vulgar. It's downright offensive. But it's oh so delicious with a capital D. If you are easily offended, please don't read this book. But if you like a bit of humor mixed in with raunchiness and brawling, you'll love this book. Contains disturbing situations, strong language, and graphic violence.

Prologue

A druggie, a criminal, and a preacher walk into a bar.

I know you're expecting a joke here, but there is none.

Well, at least not yet.

With a smirk on my face, I sit down on a stool and nod at Chuck, the bartender, who shakes his head at me when he notices me. "Save it; I don't wanna hear it," I growl. "Gimme a whiskey on the rocks."

"Hi to you too," he growls back, chewing on a toothpick as he turns around to grab the liquor. "You know, I could save you time and just give you the bottle."

"No, I'm good. I prefer booze when it's slow and painful," I retort.

He snorts and shakes his head again. "Sometimes, I really wanna tell you to get the fuck outta here." He grabs a glass and tosses in some ice cubes then pours my drink.

"But then you'd be missing all that sweet cash," I reply.

He slides it my way. "You found my weak spot."

"That's my job," I muse, taking a sip. The kick immediately hits me in the guts, but it only makes me want to take another. I'm a sucker for pain.

"Maybe you should go easy on yourself tonight," Chuck says.

"You don't have to look out for me." I put down my drink and look at the cold moisture gathering on the outside of the glass. "I'm a lost cause anyway."

"That ain't true, and you know it."

I shrug, taking another sip. I fucking hate talking about this shit.

“Everybody needs someone to look out for them once in a while.”

“Yeah, well, I got it covered,” I say, blowing out a sigh. “You want my money or not?”

He nods. “You know I damn well do.”

“Then stop talking and pour me another.” I shove my glass forward and stare at him until he grabs the bottle again and starts pouring. “Keep going.”

“You got anyone to drive you home tonight?” he asks.

“No. But I know you’ll get me a cab.”

He smiles when he realizes I know him all too well.

Right before the whiskey hits the edge of the glass, I hold up my hand, and he stops. I take a big gulp of the whiskey and let out a breath. “Fuck, yes. Exactly what I needed.”

“What you need every damn day of the week, you mean.”

We both laugh.

However, the smile disappears from his face the moment two shadows block the light.

“Hey, you there.”

I don’t reply. My name isn’t fucking ‘You there.’

“You deaf or something?” one of the guys behind me says, but I just keep drinking.

Meanwhile, Chuck turns and starts washing the dishes like he doesn’t know who they are even though he damn well does. They come here every other Friday, trying to start a fight with a random guy so they can shake him for cash.

This time, they picked the wrong one, though.

“Hey, motherfucker. Turn around.” One of them taps my shoulder.

Frowning, I put down my drink and glance over my shoulder, still not answering their catcalls. “Got something to say?”

Two ugly fucks stand in front of me. One with a bald head covered in swastikas and the other covered in pimples that are bursting as he talks.

“Yeah, who the fuck are you and what are you doing here?”

“None of your fuckin’ business,” I reply, taking another sip of my whiskey.

The little pimpled one mutters, “Jesus, isn’t he some kind of pri—”

“Who cares,” the bald one growls. “He can’t be here. This place is ours ...” the bald one growls.

“Is your name on the sign?” I ask, raising a brow.

“The what?” the pimpled one says.

“The sign. Outside.” I point at the door. “You’re welcome to go look if you need some help.”

“Fuck you,” the bald one curses, showing me his gold teeth.

“Well, aren’t you a pretty lady,” I muse.

He presses his thick thumb against my chest. “Shut your fuckin’ pie hole, you Bible thumper. Now give me your fucking money or else ...”

“Or what? You’re gonna hit me?” I say, unimpressed.

“Yeah ... and worse,” the pimpled one threatens.

I gaze at Chuck who seems to be hiding his laughter in his sleeve while he tries to dry the dishes. “Hey Chuck, did you hear that? They’re gonna hit me. *Me*.”

Chuck makes a face and rolls his eyes, and I burst out laughing. “Good one.”

The bald one gets so mad, he grabs my collar and almost pulls me off my stool.

This is a point of no return for me.

Normally, I would let them off with a warning, but he crossed a line right there.

No one, and I mean no one, touches my collar.

That thing is sacred.

“Chuck …” I mutter.

“Frank”—he sighs—“can ya not—”

“Go,” I interrupt.

“Money or pain. Choose,” the bald one growls while Chuck slowly backs away into the supply room.

Grinding my teeth, I say, “Neither.”

He lifts his fist ready to attack. Right as it comes close to my face, I lean sideways and narrowly avoid it. I quickly grab his wrist and hold him in place as I jam my knee in his face. Then I kick him away fast enough to protect myself against the knife the pimpled one just pulled.

He tries to slash me with it, but I block it and grasp his wrist, twisting it hard enough to break. He screams, and I punch him in the jaw, making him fall backward.

The bald one gets up and grunts as he tries to bulldoze me. I jump away from the bar just in time, and he rams his head straight into the wooden bar, knocking himself out. I laugh as the other one gets angrier by the second, his face so red I’m almost worried it might explode. That’d be a sight to behold.

“You motherfucker! You’ll pay for that!” the pimpled one screams, grabbing his knife again.

He thrusts it at me, slashing along my cheek. The blade leaves a small slit, and blood seeps down my face, but I don’t even notice the pain.

All I can focus on is grabbing him by the back of the head and shoving his face down onto an empty glass on the bar. He squeals as the shards enter his

skin while I slide his face along the bar like I'm serving up some arrogant little shit with a side order of bald scum.

"Think you can pull that trick on me? Not today, bitch," I whisper into his ear, ramming his face against the wood again.

He fights back by throwing punches into the air, so I quickly grab his hands and force them behind his back.

"Didn't expect that, did you?"

The asshole under my grip whimpers from the pain, and as I tighten my grip, he begins to cry. "I'm sorry," he squeaks.

"Sorry, my ass," I hiss, holding him down firmly. "Who else did you steal from this week?"

"No one," he says.

I twist his pinky until he squeals like a girl. "Didn't your mother teach you not to lie to a preacher?"

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry! We only stole two dollars from Chuck."

"Chuck!" I yell. "C'mere."

As Chuck scurries back from the supply room, I hiss into the boy's ear, "Where's the money?"

He sniffs. "In my back pocket."

I glower, not wanting to get my hands anywhere near his ass, but I need to make a point here. Guess every once in a while, I have to sacrifice myself for the greater good.

I reach into his pocket with disgust and take out two one-dollar bills, placing them on the counter. "There you go, Chuck. They're yours."

"Thanks," he says. "But that won't cover the broken chairs."

He points at the mess behind me, and I make a face at him. "C'mon, Chuck, work with me here."

He shrugs and holds up his hands. “Whatever.” Then he goes back into the supply room. “Tell me when you’re done.”

“Tell him you’re sorry,” I growl at the crying little shit.

“I’m sorry!” he shrieks as I twist his other pinky.

For a second there, I wonder if I should take it one step further, but that would make me just as bad as they are. I need to set an example. That’s what preachers do. Or so I’ve been told.

I’m not a priest, and I don’t pretend to be one. I’m just your average joe preaching to the people. However, I won’t stand for bad behavior.

“Good,” I growl, lifting him off the bar and throwing him near his buddy. “Now get the fuck outta here and don’t come back. And take that sorry-ass racist with you,” I spit, grabbing my drink.

“We won’t,” he mutters, grabbing the bald one by the shoulders. Being a shrimp himself, I know dragging a bull of a man outside is a tough job. Especially when no one gives you a hand.

I don’t even give a shit. I just watch, mildly amused by the silliness, while I sip on my whiskey.

“You done now?” Chuck calls out.

“Yeah,” I reply, still staring at the door until the two have disappeared.

“Fucking hell, Frank. Why? Why do you always have to mess up this place?”

“I’m sorry, Chuck. I know I’m shit ‘cause I attract a lot of flies.”

He snorts while shaking his head then grabs a broom and walks to the front of the bar, holding it out to me. “Here. Help me clean.”

I nod a few times and take another sip of my whiskey.

“You’ve got something,” Chuck says, “here,” and he points at my cheek.

Without looking away, I grab a napkin and wipe the blood off my cheek, throwing it down on the floor with the rest of the trash.

“Really?” Chuck raises his brow at me.

I shrug. “What? It’s getting cleaned up anyway.”

He pushes the broom into my hands and says, “You’re one weird-ass motherfucking preacher, you know that?”

I laugh and take my last sip then put down the glass.

“You never change,” he adds.

I grin as we get to work on the broken tables, chairs, and glass. “Nope. Never have. Never will.”

Chapter 1

I run. Faster than my legs can carry me. Faster than the air my lungs can breathe. Faster than the speed of light. But no matter how fast I try to be there, I’m never on time.

In the distance, I hear a scream.

The sound reverberates in my ears, over and over again, until I hear nothing but her voice screaming my name.

“Frank! Frank! Help!”

Faster, faster.

Seconds feel like minutes, and when I finally arrive, I’m too late.

Two men have her arms locked in their grip. They’re dragging her to a car.

Another scream comes from the car, this one much higher and louder.

It pierces my heart, crippling me, but I won’t give up.

I’ll never give up.

I run toward them as fast as I can. But before I can catch up, the two men have already pushed her into the car and jumped in after her. Right as I touch the back, they hit the gas, and the car shoots away right from under my fingers.

The last thing I see is the faces of the people who put their trust in me. And I failed them.

Everything fades in front of my eyes, and I black out ... only to wake again in the darkness covered in sweat. Rain pours down from above as I stare at the woman lying on the dirty ground underneath my feet.

Her limbs twisted.

Her body broken.

Her face shattered.

Blood spilled everywhere.

I hold my breath, and it feels like forever until I breathe again.

But no matter how hard I try ... I can't get her voice out of my head. She keeps whispering my name.

Frank.

Frank...

“Frank!”

I open my eyes and blink a couple of times, unsure of where I am or what time it is. My vision is blurry, and my face feels like it's been inside an oven. I wait a few seconds, and she yells my name again. Only now, it's a completely different voice.

“Frank, get up!”

I lick my dry lips. “Mother ...” I mutter.

I take a deep breath and close my eyes again, trying to forget about what I just dreamed. My head throbs like a hammer struck it several times. And my stomach constricts like someone sucker punched me. God, I hate waking up like this.

“Christ, look at you,” she mumbles, wiping my shirt with something, probably a wet cloth.

I’m way too out of it to even care.

“Get up,” she snaps, patting me like I’m some kind of dog.

“What?” I grumble.

“You look despicable. Wash yourself.”

“What did I do now?”

“Look around!”

I open my eyes and lean up on my elbows. Only now do I see all the empty bottles lying on the floor along with some socks, shoes, and a belt scattered around the room. A splash of liquor stains the carpet ... and I think a bit of puke as well.

“Look at you ...” Mother wipes a cloth along my forehead and cheeks.

“You look miserable.”

“Thanks,” I say with a laugh, but even that hurts.

“I can’t believe you did it again.”

The disappointment in her voice really cuts deep. I hate when she talks to me like that. She’s my mother. Well, sort of. Technically, she’s just the woman who raised me because we’re not related by blood. Her real name is Margaret. I call her Mother because everyone here does. She’s the one who organizes everything at the church, and she’s been my caretaker for all these years. Even though I’m thirty, I still need her more than anything in this fucking world. She’s the only thing that keeps me tethered to this place.

“C’mon, get up,” she nags, pulling on my arm.

I do as she asks and sit up in my bed. I place my hand against my forehead to stop the headache, but it's no use.

Mother walks to my sink and fills a glass with water. She rummages in her pockets and takes out a few pills. "Take these." She holds both out to me.

I know she won't leave me until I do what she says, so I just take them.

"Where were you last night?" she asks.

"I guess that's obvious," I muse, grinning a little, but she smacks me with my own Bible.

"Frank Romero! How many times do I have to tell you to stop drinking!" With every word, she gives me another slap. "You drunk!"

"Okay, okay, I get it!" I hold my hand up to stop her from slapping me again. "I'm not drunk anymore." That's a lie, but I don't care. Anything to get her to stop.

"Then man up and get your filthy ass cleaned up," she growls, looking at me with those deathly eyes. They always terrified me when I was young. They still do.

If anyone ever told you old ladies were timid and gentle, they were lying.

I let out a long-drawn-out breath and get up from the bed, only just noticing I'm still wearing yesterday's pants.

"You have ten minutes to get dressed," she says firmly, putting the Bible back on my nightstand. "And not a minute more."

"Why? I haven't even had breakfast yet." I scratch the back of my neck and yawn.

She puts her hands on her hips. "Frank. Did you even look at the time?"

Now that she mentions it ... no, I haven't.

She frowns. "It's nine 'o clock."

"So?" I shrug. I still don't get the point.

“On a Sunday.”

It takes a while for it to click.

My eyes widen as I say, “Oh ...”

“Exactly.” She taps her feet on the floor. “The church is filled with people already. They’re all waiting. The only thing missing is you, Frank.” She opens the door.

Flustered, I reply, “Sorry.”

“Save it,” she spits. “Just make sure you’re”—she looks me up and down—“presentable.” Then she walks out and closes the door behind her.

I quickly wash my face with water, rinsing off the puke and stench. I look like a mess, and I’m not talking about all my tattoos. No wonder people think I’m a hack. I act like one, so that’s what you’re gonna get.

I dry my face with a towel and take off all my dirty clothes, almost stumbling over them. Snatching the clothes off the hook, I comb my hair and slap myself to wake the fuck up.

I’m still so damn hammered that I can barely walk straight, but I finally manage to dress. Right before I walk out the door, I put on my robe and make sure the white piece of my collar is visible. One last look at the mirror has me blowing a kiss and winking at myself. Damn, I’m so hot I could bake an egg on myself.

Speaking of, I’m gonna grub out on some bacon and eggs when I finish.

I’m tempted to skip town so I can have a proper breakfast instead of doing this sermon, but I know Mother would never forgive me. And boy, do I love her to death.

Before I walk out the door, I snatch the small bottle of liquor I saved underneath my nightstand and tuck it into my chest pocket. Call it a good luck charm. Or a fuck-it charm. Whatever floats your boat. As long as I have my drink, I’m good.

As I open the door from the chancel, all the people sitting in the pews look up at me, and I pause. Their eyes fall on me like spikes piercing my body,

and it's at this moment I feel most judged.

Some would say not to let this feeling overwhelm me, but sometimes, the voices in my head need to shut up for a moment.

I make my way to the pulpit while fiddling in my pocket, looking for the small piece of paper I scribbled on yesterday. I remember writing down a sermon or something of the sort. But when I get to the pulpit and place the paper on it, all I find are random words and gibberish; sentences that don't make any sense. Well, so much for a great sermon.

"Uh ... good morning, everyone," I say with a half-assed smile.

Some people shuffle around in their seat, some cough, and others look bored.

It's the same shit every day, only worse. Every time I'm here, I see another empty seat. People just don't care anymore.

And me? I feel like shit, and looking at them, I honestly don't know why I'm still here.

Why I'm even trying to put up a front.

I clear my throat and try to ignore my raging headache and starry eyesight.

"So ... hope you're all having a great day so far," I say, the speaker slightly squeaking on me. I adjust it a little and continue my babbling. "Or I hope at least one of us is."

People look annoyed.

I guess that's only natural because I am too.

"Let's talk about God. We're all here for God, right?"

Of course, no one answers.

"Yeah, thought so." I chew on my lip for a moment.

"God. God. God. They say He's all around us. Everywhere. Anytime. Looking down upon us to keep us safe. To watch over us. Or so they say."

Everyone's still staring at me, so I guess I'll continue.

"God. You know ... I haven't found Him lately. And I bet a lot of you haven't." I pause. "Have you ever wondered if He abandoned you?"

No one answers, but from the looks on their faces, I can tell half of them agree. The other half I prefer to ignore.

"If God wasn't the One looking out for you? Who do you turn to?"

No one answers, which I expected.

"No one," I say. "No one but yourself. You are the only one who can save yourself."

Some people clutch their purses tight, and others cover their mouths in shock. Like what I'm saying is so strange. Like none of them have ever thought it. Of course, they have. They're just afraid to admit it.

"And you know what? God doesn't care about me. Or you. Or about any of us."

Some jaws drop.

"Why else would He make us suffer so much? Why would He give us so much pain? Why wouldn't He just take it away?" My nails almost dig into the wood. "He wouldn't. Because God doesn't do easy. God doesn't give us anything we need. God wants us to fight for it. God wants *us* to do the work. He's not here to have pity or make your life better. That's your job."

"Frank!" I turn my head to see Mother whisper-yelling at me from the side, but I ignore her.

"I'm not here to tell you what to do. Nor is God. I can only tell you that life will never be easy. It's always going to be tough, and shit's going to come at you and ruin your goddamn life."

More audible gasps.

"And you know what? That's okay. Because life is about pain. And suffering. It's about repentance."

As I speak, my eyes fall on a girl sitting in the crowd. A beautiful girl with wavy, dark brown hair just past her shoulders, sharply defined cheekbones, and thick eyebrows topping big blue eyes. She looks like she's in her twenties ... pretty, and definitely eye-catching. So much so that I can't even remember what I was saying.

All I can think of is her ... and then I notice the little boy sitting next to her, watching his feet dangle below the pew. She grabs his hand and squeezes.

Her eyes ... I can't stop looking.

For some reason, my brain stops functioning.

Even if only for a second, the worries disappear. And I don't know why, but somehow, someway ... she feels familiar to me.

Which is strange because I've never seen her here before.

A cough from another churchgoer pulls me from my thoughts, and I clear my throat and continue.

"We go through life because we must. All for the sake of the afterlife. For heaven, we do it all. Heaven ... Boy, I think we'd all love to be there right now." I look at the girl and wonder what she's thinking. If she's ever thought of heaven. If she realizes right now that when I picture her naked in front of me, that would be heaven.

Luckily, no one can see inside my head.

Instead, everyone's gone quiet now.

I mutter, "And as far as I see it ... you can live out your life to the fullest or give up. God doesn't give a shit anyway. He just wants you to make a choice. And whether you choose to accept is up to you. We're all going to die anyway."

Mother suddenly barges up to the pulpit and turns off the microphone then glares at me profusely. She doesn't need to say a word. I turn around and stumble off, grabbing the small bottle of liquor in my pocket and drinking it down in one gulp.

I don't give two shits that everyone in here can see me drink.

I'm already going to hell anyway. Might as well make it a fun trip.

Chapter 2

I rummage underneath my bed and take out two *Playboy* I've been hiding from Mother. With a grin on my face, I plop down on my bed and sift through the magazine until I find a pretty picture of a naked lady and start rubbing myself.

What?

I never said I was a saint. Far from it, actually. I've done some very bad shit in my life. People would be afraid of me if they knew. But that all happened before I became a preacher.

Not in the official sense, of course. I'm not ordained. I just like to give back to the people, and I do it by preaching.

However, preachers have needs too.

And boy ... my needs have been piling up since I saw that girl in church on Sunday. Something about her electrified my body. Like it suddenly came alive again after a long sleep.

For some reason, I can't get her off my mind.

No matter how many days pass, I can't stop thinking about her, wondering who she is, and why she's started visiting my church. Why she's here. If she ever has the same naughty thoughts as I have about her.

I admit it. I'm not ashamed to say I'm infatuated with the very thought of having her right here in my bed.

Is it wrong? Hell yeah, but I don't care.

Right now, I just wanna blow off some steam, and beating my meat seems like the perfect way to do it.

So I grease the pipe with some gun oil from my nightstand and start to rub one out.

However, the longer I stare at the pictures on the magazine, the less in the mood I'm feeling. I don't know what it is, but random nude chicks just don't do it for me anymore. And whenever I think of *her*, my cock springs right back into action.

So I close the magazine and my eyes and focus on the image I have of her in my mind; her sultry eyes focused solely on me as she strips down, removing her clothes piece by piece. So sensually, so carnal that I touch myself.

I groan from the thought of having her bounce on my length, her tits jiggling in my face, and I come so damn hard it spurts all over.

“Fuck …” I hiss, biting my lip.

God, oh God.

You and I both know I needed that more than anything.

I grab some tissues and pat myself down to clean up the mess. Right then, the door opens, and Margaret's eyes widen at the sight of my sloppy joe.

“Oh, God,” she mutters as she slaps her hand in front of her eyes.

She's never sworn before, so I can't help but laugh.

“Lord Almighty,” she mutters, turning around and slamming the door behind her.

“Sorry,” I say, hoping she can still hear.

“Pray to God I forget this as soon as possible.”

I laugh again. “I'll beg him for mercy, I promise.”

“Of course, you will.”

I don't even have to see her roll her eyes because I know she's doing it.

“Can't you just not do that?” she asks.

“No,” I reply, grinning like a fool as I get up from the bed and throw away the tissues. “Preachers have needs too.”

“I don’t wanna hear it!” she quickly interjects, making me shake my head.

“I came to tell you someone’s waiting for you in the confessional. Multiple people are waiting, actually.”

“Great,” I huff, grabbing my pants and pulling them on.

I hate that fucking confessional. It’s too … official, and I’m not a priest. But since the people asked Mother specifically to put a confessional in the church, she couldn’t refuse, despite my hesitations. The people wanted this, so she gave it to them.

Maybe the people in this neighborhood like the privacy the confessional offers. And if that’s what people want, we’ll give it to them. Anything to help, right?

“They’ve been waiting for a while now,” Mother adds.

“Yeah, yeah, I’m coming,” I reply, staring at my tattooed body in the mirror as I put on my shirt and collar right. “Don’t get your panties in a twist.”

“My what?” she scoffs.

I open the door and see her standing with her arms folded. “Nothing,” I say. “Let’s go.”

“I’m not going in there with you,” she says, frowning.

“Like I’d want you in there,” I retort. “We’re not stuffing a clown’s car. This is a church.”

Her eyebrows are so low I swear they’re permanently stuck. “You know, half the time I really don’t know what you’re saying.”

I smile and pat her back as we both walk through the corridor. “That’s a good thing; trust me.”

“Well, I’ll see you when you’re done, okay?” She raises her brow. As if keeping tabs on me is anything new for her.

“Yeah, yeah,” I mutter. “I’m going.”

We each go our own way. I straighten my collar before I go up to the main area and look around. A few people are in the pews, praying or silently sitting there, overthinking their sins. For those who glance my way, I give them a fake smile and a nod as I walk past and enter the confessional.

The wooden bench underneath my ass feels so damn hard that I find it hard to stay seated, but I guess we all make sacrifices for the greater good. Besides, I’ve got to keep up appearances of being a semi-okay preacher.

But dammit ... I hate how confined this space is and how ancient it makes me feel to look at the latticed wood between me and the other side.

Especially when an older lady sits down and closes the curtain then stares at me profusely like she can gape straight into my soul. Scary shit.

She makes the sign of the cross and begins her talk. “I’ve been doing a terrible injustice toward one of my boys,” she mutters. “I should’ve punished him harder, but I just couldn’t. Not because I didn’t want to, but I felt so disgusted; I didn’t even want to confront him even though he’d earned it.”

“What has your boy done?” I ask.

“He’s been ... well, how do I say this ...” She smashes her lips together and frowns, looking down at her feet.

I lean in closer. “Done what?”

“He’s been doing ... inappropriate things.”

“Like what?” I ask, cocking my head because I can’t believe where this is about to go.

“When he’s in the shower or in his bed, I’ve heard him make noises.” She looks away in disgust, her eyes clearly in despair.

And I honestly don’t know how to respond.

“Like dirty noises. And he’s still a boy. He shouldn’t be doing those things.”

I snort, trying to hold back the laughter, but I just can’t.

“Are you … are you laughing?” she asks after hearing my sniffling.

“You’re confessing about not punishing your boy hard enough because he was jerking off?”

Her eyes widen, and her face tightens. “Excuse me?”

“Is that seriously what you came here to do?” I ask, raising my brow at her.
“You do realize wanking is absolutely normal for boys his age?”

Her jaw drops and nothing comes out of her mouth, which I’m thankful for.

“Ma’am, you don’t have to confess something that trivial.”

“Trivial? Trivial?” She repeats it like she didn’t hear what I said. That or she’s very, very mad. Crazy mad indeed.

“That sort of thing is disgusting!” she hisses. “I can’t believe you would say such a thing, Father.”

“Well, you came to me, not the other way around.”

“Oh!” She makes this squeaky sound that makes me wanna reach into her cubicle and slap the shit out of her just for coming in here with that ridiculous shit. Wasting my time.

“Are you for real?” she sputters.

“Realer than you,” I quip.

She grimaces. “You’re supposed to do your job.”

“I’m supposed to listen to real confessions here. Things that matter.”

“Are you saying my boy doing filthy things to himself doesn’t matter? That I should just leave it?”

“That’s exactly what I’m saying.”

She sighs out loud. “But you’re a preacher. You’re supposed to carry out God’s will.”

“So?” I shrug, trying not to let her get to me, even though I really wanna say something about that shitty comment about ‘God’s will.’ Fucking hell.

“If you wanna know, I sent out the troops this morning too.”

“Troops?” She looks really confused now.

“Yeah, you know. Spank the monkey. Rope the pony. Milk the bull.”

She looks at me like I’ve got peanut butter stuck on my face.

“Rubbed one out.”

“Are you implying …”

I cock my head. “My dick was hard this morning.”

Another soft squeal leaves her throat.

“Don’t worry; it’s not anymore.” I roll my eyes. “Not by a long shot. Although I did have a very long shot this morning.” I grin to myself.

“I can’t believe this.” She shakes her head in disbelief. “A preacher, out of all people. You should be ashamed of yourself.”

“Ashamed? Far from it. Everyone has needs,” I reply. “My point is, if you want to stop feeling guilty, you gotta stop thinking everything is a sin.”

“The Bible says you can’t—”

“The Bible also says you can’t mark your body.” I pull down my sleeve and show her my tattoos. “See this? Think God hates me now?”

“Oh, my Lord …” She clutches her chest. “Why did I ever come to this church?” she mumbles to herself. “I should’ve stayed with my regular one.”

“They were tired of your whining there, weren’t they? That’s why you left.”

“What?” A scowl appears on her face. “How dare you? I’m leaving.” She gets up from her seat, clutching her dress like she’s afraid I’ll see something. As if I’d ever wanna see her cooch.

“Good, and stop complaining. Maybe your son will stop wanting to play whack-a-mole then.”

“It’s because people like you rot his mind and make him sin!” she yells, the curtain already opened. Everyone can hear us now.

“He’ll never stop being an ass because he’s living with you, and that’s the worst kind of hell anyone can have. But you know what? I’m going to forgive you because I’m a nice person. And nice people do that kind of shit for other people, you know?” I get up from my seat and wave her away. “Just go … And thank the Lord for His mercy because I know you ain’t getting it anywhere else.”

As her self-righteous, scorned ass turns around and struts away, I look out at the people staring at me and yell, “Next!”

Then I go back inside the confessional and slam the little door shut.

Chapter 3

After I’ve listened to everyone’s sins, I go back to my room and grab one of the bigger bottles I hid in the bookcase and take a large gulp. It always lessens the severity of the headaches, strangely enough.

Suddenly, my door bursts open, and Mother comes waltzing in.

“Frank,” she barks.

“Oh, God …” I mutter, putting the bottle on the small kitchen cabinet in the corner. “Not now, please.”

She marches to me and snatches the bottle away. “You’re drinking again.”

“Yeah. No shit.” I shrug. “You would too if you had to listen to that nonsense.”

“Listening to people’s confessions is not shit, Frank.” She grabs my arm. “I don’t understand. What’s wrong with you?”

“What’s wrong with me?” I scoff. “Nothing. Absolutely nothing.”

“You never used to act this way,” she says.

“Yeah, well … people change.” I clear my throat and sit down on my bed.

“You’ve got to stop drinking like this.” She shows me the bottle like I don’t know I’m a fucking drunk.

“You know why I do it,” I reply.

“That doesn’t make it okay. Don’t you think you should stop?”

“Nope.” I lean back and let out a breath.

“Frank …” She sighs again in the same way she always does when she’s disappointed with me. “It’s enough. You’ve suffered enough.”

“Don’t,” I growl. “Don’t go there.”

She slams the bottle down on my nightstand. “You know as well as I do that you’re wasting your potential.”

“Does it look like I give a fuck?”

“Frank!” She looks pissed and rightfully so. “Doesn’t this church mean anything to you?”

“Of course, it does.”

“Then how can you treat it this way? Your sermons have turned into doomsday predictions. Your presence is making people turn their cheek on their faith. You ruin their days by not giving them proper advice during confession.” She folds her arms. “You’re chasing people away.”

I turn to face the wall, so I don’t have to look her in the eyes. It’s humiliating.

“Look what you’re doing. Look what you’re doing to yourself. To us. The church. Shame on you.”

I take her mental beating because I must. Because I know I’m fucked up and that I’m doing everyone a disservice. I feel guilty … but at the same time, I know I can’t do shit about it. I’m stuck in my own torment.

The only solace I’ve found lately is in the alcohol.

And that girl who I saw.

“Think about your sins. We’ll talk later.” Mother turns around and leaves, the sound of her closing the door reminding me of myself when I closed off my heart.

* * *

I saunter across the pebble path, clutching my drink close to my heart. The sun shines brightly, but it doesn’t warm the coldness deep in my soul. Looking at all the headstones makes my body feel heavy and my head weary, but I still continue walking. I don’t stop until I finally see the little stone angel perched atop the stone. Each step I take feels heavier before I finally halt in front of the grave.

“Kaitlyn …” My breathing is shallow and ragged. Just whispering her name makes the tears well up in my eyes.

I quickly take a large gulp from the bottle. The burning sensation in my throat makes the pain even more real, and I *want* to feel it. Every last drop. It’s not enough.

Staring down at the ground, I wonder when it ever gets easier. If it’s supposed to.

From this place, I gather the strength I need to fight, but the effect is waning with every passing day. I don’t know how long I can continue.

Another big gulp down the gutter. The more time I spend here, the more I wanna get drunk in the middle of the day. I don’t care that I’m on public property. That I could be seen by anyone. I just don’t care anymore. Not about any of it.

“Hi.”

A squeaky voice makes me turn my head only to see a young boy standing on the pebble path. He’s clutching a few blades of grass, pulling them apart with his fingers as he looks up at me.

“What do you want?” I ask.

“Nothing,” he muses.

Frowning, I put the bottle to my lips while he stares me down profusely.

“What are you drinking?” he asks.

“Something for grown-ups,” I reply, tucking it away into my secret pocket. I don’t want to give him the wrong idea. I know I’m a shitty-ass preacher, but I don’t wanna expose a kid to my fucked-up life. I don’t want them to think this is normal, so if I can prevent it, I will.

“Can I have a taste?” he asks.

“No,” I scoff, shaking my head.

He cocks his head. “Why not?”

“Stop asking so many questions.”

I fish my pack of cigarettes from my pocket and take one out, lighting it in my mouth.

“Are you a priest?” he asks.

“No,” I reply, taking a drag and blowing out smoke.

“But you have that thing ...” He points at his neck, probably meaning my collar.

“Yeah.”

“What are you then?”

I chuckle. Kids ask so many strange questions. Like they’re oblivious to the world. Gotta commend them for it. I wish I was still that innocent and ignorant.

“Whatever you want me to be, but most people call me Preacher. Or Father. Whatever. I don’t care.” I take another drag.

“So you do belong in church.”

I tilt my head and fold my arms. Can’t believe that little shit just told me off like I’m not supposed to be here. “I can go wherever I want to, kid. I’m also

a human being with a life outside the faith.”

“Okay … but why are you smoking?”

I look at the cig in my hand and then back at him, and I shrug. “It relaxes me.”

“I thought preachers weren’t allowed to do that.”

I snort. “Yeah, well, there’s a whole lot more we’re not supposed to do. Doesn’t mean we actually listen to the rules.”

He nods. “So you’re like my brother?”

“Your brother?” I raise a brow. “How so?”

“He doesn’t listen to anyone either.”

I don’t think I wanna know what this is about. However, the more I look at the kid, the more I have the feeling I know him from somewhere. And I do … because I suddenly remember his face. He was at the church the other day with that beautiful girl.

A smirk spreads on my lips. “What’s your name, kid?”

“Bruno,” he says with a big fat smile.

I take another long drag of my smoke and chuck it, blowing out the smoke into the air. “You have a sister, right? Or was that girl I saw at church your mother?”

“Sister, but she’s at work. We go to your church every Sunday.”

“That’s good, kid. Keep that up.” I smile when he grins. “But hey … You’re not alone here, right?”

“No.” He shakes his head. “My brother’s here too, but he told me to go for a walk, so I did.”

“Ah-ha.” No wonder he’s stalking me. “Where’s your brother now?”

“There.” The boy turns and points at a young guy, maybe ten years older than he is, sitting at a picnic table with his head bent over his arms to hide

something, but when I see a tiny whiff of smoke, I know exactly what he's doing.

"Wait here," I tell the kid, and I pass him to go to his brother.

I approach him from behind and watch him heat a spoon filled with liquid.

When he finally notices my presence, I quickly snatch his spoon, chucking the liquids out onto the grass before grasping the syringe and snapping it in two.

"Hey!"

"Are you crazy?" I yell. "Doing that in front of your own little brother?"

"And who the fuck are you?" he growls, getting up from the picnic table, but before he has a chance to get up in my face, I push him back down.

"Sit down."

"What the fuck, man?"

I grab his jacket and force him to look at me. "Are you stupid or something? Trying to get yourself killed?"

"Fuck off, man. I didn't do nothing."

"You were trying to shoot heroin. I know what the fuck that looks like," I spit. "And you're doing it in a fucking cemetery. With your little brother standing watch. How dare you."

"Mind your own fucking business, all right?" He swats me away.

"You're his brother. You're supposed to take care of him."

"So?"

"Does this look like taking care of someone to you?" I growl, and I point at the little kid whose standing far enough away he won't hear us. "That kid looks up to you. He loves you. He needs you. And you're sitting here trying to ruin your own goddamn life."

He's not responding, but from the look in his eyes, I can tell it's beginning to sink in.

"Don't you see it? That look in his eyes." I grab his face and force him to look. "Look at him. Look at your own brother and tell me you don't see it."

He sniffs. "I'm sorry, okay?"

"If you do this, there's no going back. He will lose you, and you will lose him. Either you end up in jail, or you're dead by the end of the year."

He swallows the lump in his throat as he looks at me with scared eyes. I can tell he's a newbie.

"Is this your first time?" I ask.

He nods. "Some of the guys gave it to me."

"What guys?"

"Friends. From the block. Said they'd help me get more money if I tried out their shit."

I grind my teeth, trying not to boil over when I'm a raging volcano inside. I know exactly what this means. This neighborhood is notorious for its drug problems, and now the dealers are recruiting again by first getting them hooked and then forcing them to work.

"Don't," I say. "Even if they do give you money, it won't ever be enough. And it'll keep getting worse. Whatever they told you, it's a lie. That money is not worth it, trust me."

"How do you know?" He makes a face at me. "Aren't you some kind of—"

"Preacher, not a priest."

"Whatever. What do you even know about me?"

"Enough to tell you that your brother will die too if you continue with this."

He looks at his little brother and then back at me like he's waiting for an explanation.

I place my hand flat on the picnic table. “Once they get their hands on you, it’s only a matter of time before they try to persuade your little brother too. Do you want that to happen to him?”

“No, of course not.” He rubs his arms and lowers his sleeves, covering up the spot he was about to inject.

“What about your sister, huh?”

He raises a brow at me. “How do you know I have a sister?”

“I’ve seen her and your little brother in church. But that’s not the point. Do you or do you not want to see her turn into a druggie? Or worse, have to sell her body on the streets?”

“No, of course not.” He snarls in disgust. “Do you think they’d do that?”

“I’ve seen it happen so many times. I live and breathe this neighborhood. I see everything. I’ve seen girls wasted on drugs, sucking every dick they can just to pay for their next hit. And I’ve seen guys like you come and go like bodies at the morgue.”

He bites his lip and looks down at his trembling hands.

I place a hand on his shoulder. “Just promise you’ll find another way to make money. I know this seems like the easy way, but it isn’t. And do you wanna do that to your little brother? Who believes so much in you? Who trusts you to do the right thing?”

We both look in his direction now and watch him throw small stones into a pond up ahead.

“I love him; I swear, I do,” the guy says.

“Good.” I pat him on the back. “Leave all this junk behind.”

He nods and gets up from the picnic table.

“Go to him. Take him out for something to eat. Whatever. It’ll make you feel better,” I say. “And if you ever feel like shit, come to my church. Okay?”

“Okay.” The dude smiles, and I pull him in for a bro-hug. Everyone needs a little bit of support sometimes—even dudes like him who are at rock bottom and looking for a way out.

As he walks toward his brother, I ask, “So I’ll see you in church with your sister next Sunday?”

He glances over his shoulder and nods stiffly, which is good enough for me.

Besides, the mere thought of seeing her again heats me up.

But that was not the point of this conversation.

I needed to do this. For me. For him. For the boy. For the world to have one less criminal in it. Even if it means so little because it’s a blip in the entire scheme of things … every little thing can make a difference.

Fuck me.

Guess I’ve got some good in me after all.

Chapter 4

With a bottle in one hand and a cigarette in the other, I traipse around the church, wistfully staring at the paintings on the wall. I don’t know what I’m doing, but I can’t stay in my room while I get drunk either. It feels so damn dark and damp in there. Besides, it’s not like anyone’s going to see me. It’s almost ten p.m. at night. Mother’s already fast asleep, and everyone else has gone home. And who the fuck would visit a church this late at night? Exactly.

Especially not this church. My notorious reputation is spreading like a disease, and soon, there won’t even be a soul left during the day. It wasn’t always this way. There was once a time I was actually a great preacher, but it all went to shit. It’s all my fucking fault.

Maybe I should've never become a preacher. It would've saved everyone a lot of trouble.

Sighing and wallowing in my own misery, I lean against the stone pillar in the corner as I take a swig from the bottle. It's then that I notice a girl standing in front of the big cross hanging on the left side of the church.

My eyes widen, and I blink a couple of times to make sure I'm not dreaming.

A girl in this place? This late at night?

The more I stare, the more I realize I've seen her before.

She's *that* girl ... the one I've been consumed by since I first saw her. The one consuming every inch of the little bit of positive space in my brain. The one girl who gives me that buzz I need to survive.

What is she doing here?

Her lips move, and she mutters some words under her breath. I'm too far away to hear, but I can see make the sign of the cross on her chest as she looks up at the statue of Jesus. I can't stop looking at her elegant posture and the graceful way she moves.

But then she turns her head ... and looks straight at me.

I'm captivated.

Completely mesmerized by her pristine eyes.

And I realize she's caught me standing here with a bottle of vodka and a cigarette. Me, the preacher of this church.

I quickly hide them behind my back and turn around to hide behind the pillar. Like that will magically take away the fact she's seen me in my most shameful moment.

“Father? Is that you?”

Her voice.

It rings through my ears, making my heart stop and start all over again.

The sound of perfection.

I want to hear her say it every day. Is that wrong?

I take a deep breath and turn around to face her. “Hi there.”

She walks toward me with hesitation.

I quickly place the bottle on a small table standing in the corner and put out my cigarette in a potted plant after taking one final drag.

“I’m sorry if I’m bothering you,” she says, clutching her fingers.

“Oh no, it’s fine,” I reply, smiling awkwardly. “I was just taking a nightly stroll.”

“With a bottle?” she asks, peeking over my shoulder.

“Ahh … it makes me sleep easier.” I’m having a really hard time coming up with excuses.

“You were about to go to sleep? I’m sorry; maybe I should’ve come at a better time.” She averts her eyes, almost as if she’s ready to leave again, but I don’t want that.

“No, no, it’s fine.” I place a hand on her arm, and the moment I touch her, a hot flash shoots through my veins.

We stand in front of the pulpit as she gives me her first smile.

I don’t know why I need to memorize this moment, but I do.

Like it’s important. Something I will remember for the rest of my life.

That smile is a smile of one in a million.

So beautiful.

She clears her throat. “I just wanted to say thank you.”

“For what?”

“Bruno told me he talked to you yesterday at the cemetery. You left quite an impression on him.”

“Oh, yeah?” I smirk.

“He said you helped Diego rethink what he was doing.” She bites her lip, and my eyes hone in on it, and I can already imagine sucking on it. God, I’m such a horny bastard when I’m intoxicated. No, screw that—I’m *always* a horny bastard.

“Look, I know my brother’s hanging out with the wrong people and doing things he shouldn’t be doing. But you changed his mind. So I wanted to thank you for that. You didn’t have to do that.”

“Oh, it was no problem. I’m here to help people.” There I go again, being smooth as fuck when I’m the world’s worst preacher.

“Well, thank you for that. At least someone is looking out for the people,” she says.

I smile and scratch the back of my head, not knowing how to take the compliment. I don’t get them often. “Thanks.”

“So what’s your real name?” She chuckles. “Other than Father, of course.”

“Frank,” I answer. “And yours?”

She holds out her hand. “Laura.”

Laura. I like the sound of that.

We shake hands. “Nice to meet you,” I say.

“Yeah ...” Her smile really makes my brain numb.

It’s quiet for some time, and I wonder what else I could say to make her stay.

I don’t know why I feel this way, but I want her close. Her presence alone causes all the pain in my mind to fade, just like when I smell the grass after a thunderstorm.

“So ... praying, huh?” I mutter, trying to break the ice.

She looks up at the statue of Christ and nods. “Yeah, sometimes you just have to. For the sake of your own wellbeing, you know?”

“Well, if you need someone to talk to, I’m here.”

“Hmm ...” She looks at me briefly before glancing back up at the cross. “I don’t know. It feels so wrong.”

From the way she smashes her lips together, I can tell something’s bothering her. “Is it something you want to confess?”

“Isn’t it too late for that?” she asks.

“No, any time is fine. The church is always open.”

“Oh, that’s good to know.” She smiles. “It’s hard to wait when things weigh down on you.”

“I definitely understand. When life gets you down, it can be hard to trust yourself to work through it. Sometimes, you need a little bit of an extra push. Someone to tell you things will be all right. A nod from up there.” I wink.

“Yeah ... I feel like ... I owe it to Him or something. Is that weird?”

“No, not weird at all. Everyone feels like that sometimes.”

“Even preachers?”

“Yeah, even me.” I grin, and the way it makes her smile sets my heart on fire.

Hot damn, Frank. Keep your head straight, and your heart buried.

“Is it ... I want to ...” She starts and stops several sentences. “Could we? Is it possible to confess?”

I frown. “Sure.”

“I mean ... in the confessional?” She seems flustered, and I’m flabbergasted for a moment but then compose myself.

“Yeah, of course.” I hold out my hand, gesturing toward the confessional. “Ladies first.”

She chews on her lips again as she turns and walks toward it, tentatively sliding aside the cloth covering the entrance. I open the little door and go inside, sitting down on the wooden bench. Her face now hides behind the lattice screen, the design forming an intricate pattern on her face. Just like the ink etched into my skin. Stunning.

“So … tell me what’s on your mind,” I say.

She breathes out a sigh and makes a quick cross symbol. “I … have been keeping a secret for some time now, and I don’t know if I can ever tell anyone about it. I am so ashamed.”

“Feeling shame is natural. It helps us learn the difference between right and wrong.”

“I did something so wrong …” she continues, her voice softer than before.
“So … indecent.”

“If you want to feel better, you have to admit to yourself what you did.”

She nods, mulling it over. “I … I …” She briefly glances at me, her face turning completely red, before she looks away again. “A few days ago, I felt this incredible urge to … to …”

“Say it out loud. It’s the only way to confront your fears.”

“Masturbate.”

My eyes widen, and I find it hard to take down the gulp of air I just breathed.

My dick just grew an inch.

She drops her face into her hands. “Oh, God … I’m so ashamed.”

“No, don’t be.” I clear my throat, exercising a pure force of will to get my dick to go down. “Feeling urges is normal too.”

“Not in church,” she whispers.

“Why? I … do it too sometimes,” I mutter.

“You do it too?” She frowns at me like she can’t believe what I’m saying.

“Of course. Every human has needs. If God didn’t want us to make ourselves happy, why did he make it so pleasurable?”

She looks confused. “Well, that’s one way to put it.”

“The church is here to make you feel welcome.”

“Not like that.” She shakes her head.

“Not like what?”

She leans in closer, whispering, “I masturbated … in the bathroom … here.”

“Here?” I look her straight in the eyes.

“In *church*.”

Fuck. Me.

The mere mention of her fingering herself in this place makes me picture all kinds of unholy acts. More specifically … catching her in the act. Oh God, how I would’ve loved to have seen that. To have been there myself and enjoy the sight of her touching herself. That’s what I’ve been fantasizing about—her naked body ready for the taking—and now she’s telling me it could be a reality.

Well, not yet. But close enough.

And for some reason … I want her to tell me all her dirty sins. I want to know every filthy little detail.

“When?” I ask.

“Last week. Does it matter?”

“Yes.” I blink a couple of times. “God needs to know the precise truth … otherwise, your sins can’t be forgiven.” I made that up on the spot. Hey, a dude’s gotta do what a dude’s gotta do.

“I just … couldn’t control myself anymore. I don’t know why. Probably just a weird day.”

“Oh no, nothing weird about that,” I muse. Probably should’ve kept that to myself, though, because she keeps looking at me like we’re both being immoral.

Well ... maybe we are.

But I really don’t care.

I mean I’m a half-drunk, half-assed preacher in a small wooden cubicle with the most attractive girl I’ve seen in a long time, and it’s turning me into a horndog. See, it’s not like I can get any worse.

She swallows, visibly unsettled. “I ... I’m done. I’m sorry, Father Frank.”

“It’s okay ... but only if you forgive yourself.”

She nods. “Thank you.”

And suddenly, she’s up from her bench and out of the confessional.

And I’m left with a boner as high as Mount Everest.

Damn.

I clear my throat and take a deep breath before I step out. When I look around, no one’s in sight. She disappeared. Maybe she was so ashamed she couldn’t bear to look at me any longer. I can imagine—as it’s not something you’d want to tell *anyone*, let alone your preacher. But she felt the need to do so, and I was there to listen. That’s all that matters.

And now, I gotta go take care of this boner.

I casually stroll through the church back to my room and grab the first magazine underneath my bed, flipping it open on my bed. I throw off my robes, pull my dick out, and then start rubbing one out.

It feels so wrong, but I can’t control my urges anymore.

Like I said, it’s natural.

I just hope God will forgive me for having these filthy thoughts. For wanting to fuck her brains out.

I mean who can forget about a girl saying she masturbated? No one.

Not a man on this earth wouldn't picture her touching herself, fantasizing about watching her do herself.

Not even a preacher can resist.

I turn the page and continue to jerk off, my veins pulsing with greed as I imagine her sitting right in front of me with her pretty mouth opened wide, ready to receive my blessing. God, I'm such a filthy fuck, but I can't help it. This is who I am, and nothing will change that.

I'm so drunk on arousal and alcohol that I moan out loud; the thought of having her ready and willing to take me was too much to handle.

I close my eyes and picture her rubbing her pussy while also pinching her nipples, licking her lips in anticipation of my cum. And I come.

I come so hard it squirts all over the pages of the magazine and my bed. I groan and rub myself until every last drop is gone and my bed is a giant mess. Breathing out loud, I open my eyes again. From the corner of my eye, I spot something. No, someone ... gawking right at my naked, flexing butt.

I glance over my shoulder, and the moment I realize Laura caught me in the act, I know I'm fucked.

Big time.

Her eyes zoom in on my still rock-hard dick, slowly trailing across my tattoo-covered body before widening as she looks me right in the eyes. She slaps her hand in front of her mouth as I rip the sheets off the bed to cover myself up.

“Fuck,” I hiss.

If I'd known she was still here, I would have never done this.

And why didn't I lock my fucking door?

I'm so infatuated with her that my head doesn't work anymore. That, or the booze is clogging up my brain.

The fact of the matter is ... she saw the preacher jerking himself off to a couple of magazine tits. If that isn't unholy, I don't know what is. Did I just scar her for life?

"I'm so sorry," she murmurs through her fingers.

But before I can tell her it's okay, she turns around and runs.

Chapter 5

It's been days since I last saw her, and I'm not sure if she's ever coming back.

The moment she ran from the church was the moment I knew I fucked up real good. I tried running after her, but by the time I'd dressed, she was already long gone. More than anything, I wish I could find her, but with only her first name as a clue, I don't have a chance.

I just hope and pray to God she doesn't tell anyone what she saw.

If Mother finds out, I'm screwed.

She'll probably throw me out on the street right away.

I've already given her so much trouble; this could be the last drop in the bucket. She's told me so many times before it was the last time she'd forgive me my sins. A man can only break the rules so many times before it catches up with him.

Still, I feel like I need to make something up to Mother. Because she, of all people, deserves better. She deserves a better me.

So with that thought in mind, I go visit an old friend who's been having trouble lately. He hasn't come to church in ages, and Mother's worried about him. Rightfully so, I'd say, because, in all the time I've known him, he's always hung out with the wrong people. Same as Laura's brother—gang business.

However, this morning he called for help, and since Mother picked up the phone, she obviously said yes the moment he asked if I could come to his home. I don't like it, because I already know he's going to try to hand me his problems instead of dealing with them himself. But Mother doesn't know him as well as I do.

Sighing, I knock on his door and tap my foot until he finally opens.

A screaming baby is the first thing that greets me. Then his ugly mug.

"Dude, finally." He tries to hug me, but I stand there awkwardly, cringing from the screeching going on right next to my face.

"Hey, Ricardo, nice to see you too."

"Come in, come in," he says, opening his door further to allow me in.

It's a mess inside. Pots and pans lie scattered on the kitchen counters, and stains mark the furniture while flies fly through the room.

"Jesus, Rick, ever clean this place up?"

He shoves aside a few of the dirty cups and baby toys and tries to make room for me to sit on the couch. "I know, I know. It's a mess. I'm a mess."

"I can see why you haven't come to church lately," I say, sitting down.

He sighs. "It's not because I don't want to. I just can't." He puts the baby in a makeshift crib while it still cries, shushing it with a blanket. It won't stop.

"Because of the baby?" I ask.

"Not just that. I mean yeah, but I've been busy with the gang too. You know how that shit goes."

He looks at me like I'm supposed to understand.

I don't.

It's been ages.

Literally.

“That, and Nadia left me with that *thing* so she could go to *work* or something. Like that’s more important.” He scratches his head nervously. “She seriously fucking left me with that fucking baby.”

“Calm down,” I say. “It’s not a thing. It’s a baby. Boy or girl?”

“How should I know?” He reaches for his pack of cigarettes and lights one up.

I make a face. “How do you *not* know? It’s not that hard to find out.”

“Like I don’t know that!” He blows out the smoke.

“Calm. Down,” I repeat. “Is this why you called me?”

“Yeah. Why else would I call you?”

I sigh again. “And here I thought this would be some gang shit or something.” I shake my head. “Rick and a baby … how about that.”

“I didn’t plan this. We broke up. We weren’t even together, dude. And all of the sudden, she comes out of nowhere and flops this baby in my hand, saying it’s mine and telling me I should take care of it. She even demanded money, dude. Fuck!”

He kicks the trashcan, which falls over, causing garbage to tumble out over the floor.

Meanwhile, the baby is still screaming like a firetruck.

“Dude, calm down,” I say. “This ain’t gonna go any better if you don’t stop screaming.”

“Tell that to that *thing*!” He points his finger at the baby like it’s some kind of monster. “It hasn’t stopped screaming since she dropped it here. And why? Because she thinks her job is more important than mine is. Like I don’t have anything better to do than to take care of some stinking, screaming baby all day.”

“Her job *is* more important,” I remark, raising a brow. “Because hers isn’t illegal.”

“So what?” He shrugs. “I make cash.”

“And you seriously think that’s going to be enough to support a baby?”

“Hey, I didn’t ask for this, okay? If I’d known she’d do this to me, I’d have never stuck my dick up her snatch.”

“Yet you did.” I roll my eyes. “Do you even know how babies are made?”

“Of course, I do.” He glowers. “I had school. Junior high. Top dog.”

“Top dropout, yeah,” I retort. “You know it takes two people to make a baby.”

“She was on the pill.”

“Maybe she forgot one. It happens,” I say.

“Who gives a shit how it happened. The point is I cannot take care of that thing.”

“Stop calling it a thing. What’s the baby’s name?”

“I don’t know … Sofia or something.”

I get up from the couch and approach the baby. “Sofia, huh?” I pick her up from the cradle, and I put her on my shoulder, patting her back while soothing her. “It’s okay. Shhh. Mommy’s going to be back later tonight.”

I look at Ricardo for the answer to that.

“I don’t know; she said she’d be back when she was done with work.”

“When was she last fed?” I ask.

“I dunno. I tried to give her Cheerios, but—”

“You gave a baby Cheerios?” I interject.

“Yeah … with milk, of course, so they were soggy.”

I close my eyes and sigh out loud, rubbing my temples. “You can’t feed a baby Cheerios. They need baby formula.”

“It was milk. I thought it was okay.”

“Cheerios …” I shake my head. “Goddammit, Ricardo.” I immediately apologize to God in my head for using his name in vain.

“Dude.” He picks up the box and shows me the back. “It says right here. Nutritional.”

“What do you think she’s going to chew those up with? Imaginary teeth?” I open her mouth and show it to him. “Look at that. She needs liquids.”

“Milk is a liquid.” He shrugs, which makes me roll my eyes again.

“Buy some baby formula.” I pull her up so I can smell her, and the stench immediately makes me gag. “And some diapers while you’re at it.”

“What? Now?” he asks.

“Yeah, now.” I stare him down until he gets the message, picks up his keys, and leaves the apartment.

Fifteen minutes later, he’s back with a whole truckload of Pampers and three brands of baby formula.

“I didn’t know which one to get, so I grabbed ‘em all.”

I chuckle. “Well, at least you know how to bring home the goods.”

“What now?” he asks, looking at me like it’s my kid.

I place Sofia on a table and say, “C’mere with some diapers.”

“Aw, hell naw, I ain’t doing that shit.”

“Come. Here,” I growl.

He sighs and stomps but eventually comes closer, and I show him how to pull off her clothes. “Go on,” I say. “I’ll help if you need it.”

He frowns while glaring at me then rips off her diaper. The stench that greets us makes him yowl and pinch his nose. “Jesus Christ.”

I chortle. “Better get used to it.”

While standing as far away as he can, he pulls it away from underneath her, and I hand him some napkins so he can clean her.

“Put on a clean one,” I say.

He does what I tell him to although it takes him three tries to get it on right. When it’s done, we quickly dress her again, and he jumps away with the dirty diaper, dumping it in a plastic bag like it’s a toxic hazard he wants to contain.

“Lord, help me get through this,” he mutters, grabbing some of the baby formula. “How does this work?”

“Follow the instructions. Put it in the microwave. Test it on your wrist, so it doesn’t burn her tongue.”

He grabs the bottle the baby’s mommy left him, fills it as instructed, and then puts it in the microwave. When it’s heated, he tests it and brings it to me. I contemplate having him feed her, but I’m convinced he’d only make a mess, so I decide to do it myself.

I grab her and hold her in my arms while putting the bottle to her lips, and she greedily takes it, gulping down the milk.

“Good girl …” I whisper. “You were just hungry, that’s all.”

“So, is she gonna calm down or what?” he asks.

“If you take care of her, she will,” I say, hinting that it’s his fault.

When she’s finished, I put down the bottle and pat her back, hoping she’ll burp. She’s still crying, which isn’t a surprise at all, considering how he took care of her. Or rather, not.

He sits down on the couch again and rubs his face. “What am I supposed to do, Frank?”

“What are you supposed to do? And you ask me that? You’re the dad.” I try not to look at him as I hold the little girl tight and rub her back, trying to calm her down.

“Fuck, Frank. You always know … everything. And you’re a fucking priest.”

“I’m not a fucking priest,” I hiss, trying to keep my voice down. “I’m a preacher.”

“Preacher, priest, Father, whatever. It’s all the same to me.”

“Like you’d know. You barely come to church.”

“I know. The boys won’t let me.”

“Then try harder,” I retort. “Who gives a shit about them anyway?”

“I do.”

“No, you care about the money. You wouldn’t lie awake one single day if one of them died right now.”

He’s silent, so I guess my rant is working.

“I know because I felt it. I’ve been in the same position you’re in now, and you know it. They’re not your friends.”

“But they give me what I need.” He pulls out a tiny bag of cocaine and draws a line on the table in front of the couch. I set the baby down in the makeshift crib. Right before he snorts it up, I swipe my arm across it.

“Fuck! Dude, why—”

“You should know better.” I grab his collar and pull him up. “You have a fucking baby.”

His eyes turn red. “Let go of me.”

“No, listen to me,” I growl. “See that little girl there?” I point at her. “She’s yours, whether you like it or not. That little soul counts on you to do the right thing. She didn’t ask to be born. You created her by being a selfish little shit. And now you think you can run away from your responsibilities?”

He shakes his head. “I don’t fucking know how to take care of a kid!”

“Then start learning!” I shove him back on the couch and stare at him. “Stop the drugs. Now.”

“What? Forever?”

“Yes!” I ball my fists. “You wanna call yourself a man? Then act like a man. Be a daddy to that little girl.”

I walk over to her and grab her, cradling her in my arms to show her to him. “See this? Her blood runs in your veins. You caused this. Now you have to deal with the consequences.”

“But I can’t ...” he mutters, his eyes turning red.

“Look at her,” I yell, forcing him to look at her tiny face. “That’s your daughter.”

He begins to cry. And now the baby too.

“Stop crying,” I tell Ricardo. “And man up.”

“I’m only nineteen. I’m not a man.”

“No. You’re a kid who did adult things, and now he realizes the world ain’t as easy as he thought it would be. Time to grow up, kid.”

“Frank ... how do you do it?”

“One step at a time,” I say, and I gently rock the baby back and forth until the screams become less and less.

“What about the money?”

“Get a job. A *real* job.” I look him directly in the eyes, so he knows I’m serious. “Stop drinking. Stop smoking. And clean this place up, it’s a fucking mess,” I say.

“But I can’t do it all—”

“Yes, you can!” I growl. “Dammit. That’s what it means when you create life. You do everything and anything to take care of it. Even if it means sacrificing your own goddamn soul.”

He shakes his head and laughs a little, wiping away a tear. “Look at you. A swearing preacher.”

“I don’t give a fuck. God doesn’t give a shit if I swear or not. He gives a shit whether I take care of His children. That’s what matters.”

“Like her …” he mutters, looking at little Sofia.

“Yeah. And you.”

“Me?” He raises a brow at me.

“Yeah. Believe it or not, we’re all important, including you. It’s time you fought for the right things. You deserve better than this. *She* deserves better than this.”

It’s quiet for some time. “You’re right …” he says, looking into the distance. “I’ve fucked up.”

“Everybody fucks up from time to time. It’s about seeing it, and learning from it, and doing it better this time around.”

“But what about you? Are you doing any better?” he asks, his gaze penetrating mine. It’s like he can see straight through me.

“This isn’t about me. You know my past. I’m doing the best that I can. Are you?”

I know he can’t answer that question, and he doesn’t.

He sits there silently while I tend to his kid.

This sweet little child, sucking on my thumb. She’s an angel. And holding her like that brings back memories I tried to keep buried for so long.

I don’t want to remember them.

And as soon as she’s fallen asleep, I bring her to him and place her in his arms. “Hold up her head.”

He holds her like I tell him to, and for the first time since I came here, I can see a flame burning in his eyes. A smile slowly creeps onto his face. “Okay, I admit, she is kinda cute.”

I take a deep breath and nod. “Yeah, she is.”

“What now?” he asks, looking up at me.

“Now, you get your shit together and raise that baby.”

Chapter 6

When I’m finally back in my home, the church, I collapse on my bed with a roaring headache. Ricardo’s unkempt apartment kept me busy all day, trying to help him out. I couldn’t walk away; not with that little girl stuck with him. She’s the victim in this story. She has no choice, and I wanted to give her the best I could, even if I barely know her. It’s the least anyone can do.

But the more time I spent with her, the more depressed I became. Every time I looked at her, I could feel my heart shrivel up and die a little more.

I curl up into a ball and pull the sheets up to my neck, cocooning myself in my own warmth as I try to forget about Sofia.

At one point while I was there, I even contemplated taking her away from him. But what would that accomplish? Another kid in the foster system. There’s no way they’ll allow a baby to be under the care of a preacher like me either. It makes no sense. It’s a bubble I had to quickly burst for myself.

I want every kid to have a good life, and only the parents can give them that. As long as Ricardo mans the fuck up and starts acting like a dad for her, it’ll be okay.

And I’m sure he will ... Today was a wake-up call for him. I could see it in his eyes. All he needed was a firm hand and a push. My words did just that for him. He immediately threw away all his coke and started cleaning up, just like I told him. I hope he realizes he can’t go back to where he used to be ... for her sake.

Enough thinking about someone else’s kid.

I twist and turn in bed until I slowly fall asleep. It's a tough one, but I close my eyes and force myself to sleep.

Soft jazz fills the room with life. I blink a couple of times and open my mouth to speak, but nothing comes out. I walk through my house, light bulbs lighting my way like fireflies. Warmth covers me as I watch her dance in the middle of the living room. She smiles at me and holds the baby close to her chest, waving its little hands around as she spots me.

I smile as I approach her, grabbing her shoulders to dance along with her. I press a kiss to her forehead and imprint this feeling onto my brain, so I can remember it forever.

Forever. And ever.

That's what this is supposed to be.

Everything fades. The red wallpaper turns lime green. Wooden tables make place for larger ones. Chairs are added, and more plants suddenly appear. The room is light, but my body feels weighed down. The more I try to move, the less my body reacts.

It's like I'm frozen in place.

Frozen ... while everyone and everything around me continues to change.

It's like time has sped up while I'm still me ... forever.

And in the midst of it all, a boy runs around the house with his toys ... but his image is so unclear. The more I try to look, the more he fades away. Until everything in this room has disappeared, and all that's left is an empty house with moldy wood and spider webs in every corner.

I shoot up in bed and turn on the light.

Panting loudly, I feel my face. I'm so damn hot and sweaty ... and tears are running down my cheeks.

I pull off the sheets and sit on the edge of the bed, burying my head in my hands. I rub my face, trying to shake the images from my mind, but nothing I do works.

It never works.

So I do the only thing I know.

I get up, put on my casual clothes, and go out.

* * *

Four hours later, it's the middle of the night, and I'm drunk again.

Yep, like that's so much of a surprise.

"Pour me another one, Chuck," I say, sliding my glass to him.

"I think you've had enough." He slides it right back.

"Oh, c'mon. I'm a paying customer." Now it's my turn to slide it again.

"I care more about you than your money. Sorry." He picks it up and tucks it into the soapy water.

"Fucking hell ..." I slam my hand on the bar. "What's a man gotta do to get some liquor around here?"

"How about not being a drunk fuck?" Chuck retorts.

I laugh. "Like you know me any different."

"I wish I did," he says, washing the glasses.

"I'm not fun to be around when I'm sober; trust me."

"I doubt it's any worse than this."

"Keep pushing me, Chuck, and I might start giving you a personal sermon."

"Fuck no. I'd rather you drink yourself to death." He grabs a bottle of whiskey and slams it down in front of me. "Have at it."

“Aw … thank you, Chuck. If I didn’t know any better, I’d almost think you like me.”

“I don’t. I just want you to shut up.”

I laugh again and put the bottle to my lips. “There’s the Chuck I know.”

“Yeah, well, the Frank I know took better care of his church.”

“Oh please, like you know.” I let out a burp. “You never show up.”

“You know I hate church.”

“Exactly.”

“But you and I both know *you* don’t,” he says. “You used to love your job.”

I laugh again because it’s really funny. Or ironic. I don’t know any more at this point. I’m too drunk to care.

“Yeah … I remember a Frank who actually cared about the church. Gave it all he had. And now he’s a sad slob getting drunk every night.”

I slam down the bottle. “You’re g-goddamn right.” I fish in my pocket and take out a few bills, slapping them on the counter too. “There you go.”

“Going already?”

“I’m d-done listening-g to your w-whining,” I reply with a half-assed tone. God, I’m so drunk, I can’t even talk straight.

“Want me to call you a cab?” he asks.

“Nah, I’m good. I’ll w-walk,” I mumble.

He shrugs and takes the money off the counter, and I turn around. But before I go out the door, he still opens his mouth. “See you tomorrow.”

Goddamn motherfucker.

He knows me too well.

I don’t respond. I don’t think I could even if I wanted to. If I think about it, all that comes out of my mind is a bunch of gibberish and mumbo-jumbo

that I can't even understand, let alone him.

So I walk out and stroll across the street, wandering aimlessly. Rain pours down from above, drenching my clothes, but I don't give a crap. The chill makes me shiver, but I don't seek shelter. Instead, I stumble along the sidewalk, almost hugging the wall while I try to find my way home.

Now that I think about it ... I don't even know where that is.

Or where I am.

Or what I'm doing.

And before I know it, one small pebble makes me tumble and fall face-first into the mud.

I don't bother trying to get up. This sad slob has lost his will. It's dripping down into the gutter along with my soul.

Guess today really did a number on me.

I can't get up. My muscles won't work, and the longer I lie here, the less they respond. My eyes slowly open and close, and I find myself drifting in and out of consciousness.

In the distance, I hear a voice.

It's calling for me.

Beckoning me to get up and walk.

I blink and look up, and in front of me is an angel. Her silhouette illuminated by blinding light. Her voice so pure, I swear I've died and gone to heaven.

“Frank. Frank!” Someone slaps me, and the more it happens, the more I wake up out of my trance. “Frank!”

It's the voice. But it wasn't an angel. Or maybe it was.

“Laura,” I mutter, my voice hoarse.

“Oh, God ...” She clutches my body and tries to lift me up, but I’m too heavy for her. “Get up, Frank. C’mon.”

With the power of her voice alone, I manage to crawl up from the ground. With her support, I can stay upright without falling down. I can’t think. I can’t talk. All I know is that warm hands wrap around my waist and lead the way.

Chapter 7

Matthew 11:28 – “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.”

When I wake up again, my head roars with pain.

I immediately clutch my face and roll around to stop the light from entering my eyes. God, I wish someone hadn’t opened the blinds.

“Morning ...”

I squint and see that beautiful angel again, her body glistening in the light of the sun with the rays dancing on her skin. I only now realize it’s Laura ... and that I’m completely and utterly infatuated with her.

“Did you sleep well?” she asks.

I nod, but when I try to answer, my throat dries up, and I cough.

“Here, have some water.” She hands me a glass, and our fingers briefly touch during the exchange, causing sparks to shoot up my veins like fireworks.

God ... I can’t remember the last time I touched a woman who gave me these feelings. Please forgive me.

I swallow and gulp down the water in one go, thirsty for more. “Thanks.”

She takes back the glass and pours me another until I'm sated, and I place the glass on the table beside me.

I look around and notice the room isn't what I'm used to. The walls are a salmon color, in the corner is a small wooden chair and a wardrobe, and the blanket I'm lying under feels ruffled. It's much more somber than my room, which I didn't think was possible.

But the point is ... it's not my room. I'm in somebody else's house.

"Where am I?" I mutter, squeezing my eyes to make the light less painful.

"My home. Sorry, I had to bring you here. It was closer, and I couldn't carry you all the way back to church."

"Carry me?" I mutter. "Oh, God." I rub my face and blow out a breath then sit up straight. "I remember now ..."

"I found you out on the street. You seemed intoxicated."

I look down at my hands, ashamed of myself. How could I look her in the eyes? I'm the son of a bitch she had to take care of. A fucking preacher being taken in by a girl because he was too drunk to walk back home.

"I ... I'm so, so sorry." Words cannot explain how terrible I feel right now.

Literally, I feel like I've been struck with a hammer.

"I shouldn't have put that on you," I add.

"No, it's okay ..." She smiles so sweetly that it tears up my heart. God, what did I do to deserve her? Nothing. I did nothing, yet she still crossed my path like it was meant to happen.

"If you hadn't found me, I don't know where I would've ended up." I try to laugh it off, but it's as serious as can be. "I could've died."

"No, don't be silly." She chuckles, but from the look in her eyes, I can tell she knows it was serious.

I was way beyond drunk. I was hammered. Completely wasted to the point of blacking out.

“But you’re here now. Alive.” She smiles again. “How do you feel?”

“Like someone smacked me with a table.”

She grins. “Sounds like you had a lot to drink.”

“Tell me about it ...” I mutter, slapping my face to wake myself up properly.

“Well, I hope it was fun,” she muses.

“Not really.” Wait. Did I just say that out loud? Guess I did, because she’s looking at me all weird and shit.

“But ... why drink then?” she asks, but then she holds up her hand. “Wait, don’t answer. I’m sorry. That was kinda rude to ask.”

“No, it’s okay. I know I drink too much. It’s a habit.”

“Is it because of ...? I’m sorry ... um ...”

“What? Because of you ... Oh ...” I look away, smashing my lips together as I’m thinking about how to accurately put this without making it sound dirty as fuck. “About that... I just had an off day. I’m sorry you had to see that.”

“An off day?” She repeats me like she doesn’t believe me.

Of course, she doesn’t because I’m lying. Why can she see straight through me? Dammit. “I mean, I was drunk, and I was stupid.” I slap my forehead again, just thinking about her seeing me naked and jerking off.

“It’s okay. I ran because I panicked and I didn’t know what else to do, but now that I think about, it really doesn’t matter.” She swallows, grabbing my hand. “I get it. We all have needs.”

“Yeah, but most of us don’t expose ourselves to other people,” I say. “Let alone preachers.”

She struggles to hide a laugh. “Well, yeah, you are the last person I expected to do that.”

“I’m not your average preacher.”

“I could tell ...” She struggles to hide a smile.

Was that a dick joke or an ass joke?

Or am I imagining things now?

Whatever it is only makes me like her more. Girls who aren’t afraid to enjoy the good side of life. And judging from her confession the other day, she sure seems to be enjoying herself from time to time.

“Hmm ... Maybe I shouldn’t have spoken about that ... *thing*. In confession.” She looks away, but I can clearly see the blush on her cheeks.

I place my hand on top of hers. “Like you said, we all have needs.”

She nods, dipping her tongue out to quickly lick her top lips then rub her lips together. God, what I wouldn’t give to lick them too.

Contain yourself, Frank!

I clear my throat. “I wanted to apologize to you for seeing that. I should’ve locked the door.” I look her in the eye as I speak, not wanting this to feel fake to her, even though I’m going to ask her something very personal. “Can we ... keep this a secret?”

“A secret?”

“I’d prefer if Margaret didn’t find out.”

“Margaret?”

“Yeah, the old lady at the church. You’ve seen her, right? She’s basically the one who organizes everything there.”

“Oh.” She frowns. “Yeah, of course. But ... only if you keep my confession a secret too.”

“Done.” I hold out my hand, and she shakes it. “That’s an easy one since confessions are strictly between the confessor, the preacher, and God.”

“What?”

I burst out into laughter. “Relax, I’m not going to tell anyone about your little sexcapade in the bathroom.”

Her whole face turns red again. “Shh … not so loud. We’re not alone.” She looks at the door, which is opened slightly.

“Oh, sorry.” I smile, and somehow, that makes everything right again.

She picks up a wet cloth and holds it to my forehead. For some reason, it feels really intimate. It’s been a long time since I had someone take such diligent care of me. Since I last felt feminine hands touch me in such a delicate way.

“Thanks,” I say as she slowly wipes the cloth along my forehead and cheeks.

“You’re welcome.” She smiles back. “You were sweating so much last night. But you look a little bit better now.”

“You stayed with me all night?” I ask.

She nods and gestures to the makeshift bed on the floor, which consists of a pillow and a blanket. “Slept over there.”

“Oh, no … you shouldn’t – I took your bed?” A pang of guilt stings in my stomach.

“It’s okay. It’s not the first time. “Bruno sleeps here often when he’s sick. He doesn’t like being alone.”

“Bruno … your little brother, right?”

She opens her mouth and then closes it again, containing whatever she was going to say.

“We don’t have a lot of rooms, but it’s cozy. We like it this way. And we’re happy,” she muses, making me smile because she’s content, even with what little she has. I wish I could say the same.

She continues to pat me down, the cold water giving temporary relief to my overheated body. God, what I wouldn’t give for an entire wipe down of my body right now. Everything. But I’ll take a cold shower too.

When she's about to pull away, I grab her wrist and murmur, "Thank you."

"Don't mention it. It's the least I could do."

"So ... you're not mad at me?" I ask.

Her brows draw together, and it's the best angry face I've ever seen. I could look at this all day and still feel completely at ease.

"No, of course not." Her smile is so bright ... it makes me forget everything I was thinking. And for some reason, my hand automatically reaches for her face, wanting to get closer to divinity, to whatever it is that makes me feel this way about her. With the back of my index finger, I brush her cheek, her hair flowing past my hand smoothly. My eyes focused solely on her. I can't take them off.

But then I realize what I'm doing is incredibly awkward, and I clear my throat and pull my hand back before it gets even more awkward.

It's quiet for some time, and I know she can sense the awkwardness too.

Luckily, she breaks the ice before I blurt out something stupid. "Do you ... Would you like to stay for breakfast?"

"Uh ..." I think about it for a second, but I can't find any excuses not to. Especially not with the way she's looking at me right now. "Sure, why not."

"Cool." She gets up and grabs something off the cabinet in the far corner. "I washed and dried them. I couldn't get the stain out, but this is as good as I could get it." It's my clothes from yesterday, and she hands them to me.

"Whoa ... thank you so much. You didn't have to."

"Yeah, I did," she insists. "You were a mess."

"Thanks, I guess." I frown.

"You're welcome." She winks, and it sets my heart ablaze.

Fuck me; I like a woman who knows how to taunt me.

But she'd better be careful with that.

“I’ll see you in a minute then?”

“Sure.” I nod and throw the blanket off me.

It’s only then I realize she took off my clothes … and I’m sitting here in bed in only a pair of boxer shorts. Great.

She snorts and covers her mouth with her hand, to which I immediately reply, “Like you haven’t seen that before.”

“I’ll just go.” She shows herself out before I embarrass myself any further.

I quickly put on my stuff, which smells so damn fresh; like lilies … or any other fresh flower. Like I can fucking tell. The point is it smells good, and I like the feel of it. So smooth. Maybe I should ask her to wash my clothes more often in exchange for payment. Would that be weird? It probably would.

As my internal monolog rambles in my head, I fluff up my messy hair in the scratched mirror hanging on the wall and straighten my collar, making sure I look pristine before I go out. Can’t let anyone else find out I’m an alcoholic … I mean, she’s got brothers and shit. Gotta keep up appearances for her sake. I don’t want to embarrass her too.

When I’m ready, I pop out of the room.

I’m immediately greeted by Bruno and Laura’s grumpy brother, Diego, who slams his coffee down on the table. “What’s he doing here?”

“Diego!” Laura hisses from the kitchen, giving him the evil eye.

“What?”

“He’s our guest,” she explains as she stops cooking the eggs and turns to face him.

“I never invited him.”

“Well, I did.” She taps her foot and puts her hand on her side. “Stop being such an asshole.”

“Tell him that.” Diego eyes me now, and I feel like I’ve walked into something so personal, I’m about to excuse myself.

“It’s okay, Laura,” I say. “I’m not hungry anyway.”

She immediately marches over to the table, grabs a chair, and points at it. “Sit.”

“Really, it’s not needed,” I say, trying not to get between them.

“I’m not taking no for an answer,” she declares, glaring at me and the chair until I finally sit down. “You’re my guest, and we feed our guests properly ...” She looks over at Diego. “*And we treat them with kindness.*”

“Fuck off,” he mutters with his mouth still on his cup.

She grabs his plate and brings it to the kitchen.

“Hey! I wasn’t even done yet.”

“Can’t be nice?” she spits. “Then you don’t eat.”

He rolls his eyes while scooting his chair back. He stands and then saunters out the door, slamming it shut behind him.

Laura sighs and rubs her forehead. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t apologize to me. You didn’t do anything wrong.”

“I know.” She puts a fork and knife in front of me along with a plate. “I hate when that happens.”

“He’s a stubborn kid. But he’ll grow out of it.”

“I pray to God he will.” She sighs. “He’s so hard to handle.”

“I can imagine,” I say. “Diego just needs a bit of a push, that’s all.”

“Yeah, well ... leave that up to his dad. He’d smack some sense into him if he could.” She chuckles awkwardly, but her laughter dies out as quickly as a snuffed-out flame.

“Is he around?” I ask, hoping I’m not out of bounds with my question.

“No ... and I don’t want him to be,” she declares. “We live on our own.”

“So you’re like their caregiver or something?”

“Yeah, I rent this place, and they stay with me. I’m the only one they’ve got, so I have no choice. Family, you know.”

“I get it,” I say, nodding. “And your mother ...?”

“I prefer not to discuss my family,” she says, adding a smile while setting some spices on the table. “If that’s okay.”

“Yeah, of course.” I clear my throat. “Sorry, I didn’t know. I wouldn’t have asked otherwise.”

“It’s fine,” she says. “Anyway, want some milk with your coffee?”

“No, I like it black,” I answer, and she sits down with me.

I’m flabbergasted by the amount of food she puts on the table. Eggs. Biscuit. Muffins. Sweet rolls. Coffee. And even some homemade fruit salad.

It’s quiet for some time until she breaks the ice again. I don’t know why I always grow silent with her. I can’t help but stare, and then I completely lose my words when I’m around her.

“Well ... eat!” The big smile on her face snaps me out of it.

I grab a sweet roll as she pours coffee into our cups. “Bruno! Breakfast,” she yells down the hall.

“Coming!” the little boy yells back.

Laura grabs a glass of water and takes a pill, which I recognize as birth control. Well, you can never be safe enough. Especially when you intend to fuck a guy like me because I fuck often and I like pussy a lot.

I’m in the middle of spreading butter on my roll when Bruno strolls in without pants and with one finger in his nose while the other one is smashing buttons on what looks like a handheld video game device.

“Bruno! Why are you naked?”

“Naked? I’m not naked,” he replies, flicking his booger into the air.

“Ugh, Bruno, stop doing that, please.” She closes her eyes and lets out a long-drawn-out sigh.

I chuckle to myself. The kid’s a lot like me—walking out of his room without any care for how he looks, what he does, and with his addiction right there on display. No fucks were given.

“And put on some pants,” she says. “Or you’ll permanently scar Frank.”

“Scars? He’s got scars?” The kid’s eyes glow with excitement, and I laugh at the sight.

“No, kid, but I do have some ink on my skin and invisible scars.”

“Invisible scars?” He lowers his gaming device and focuses on me, his eyes glimmering with enthusiasm.

“Scars of the soul …” I say, making silly hand movements like it’s magic or something, which makes Laura chuckle.

“What’s ink in your skin?” he asks.

“You know, like tattoos,” I answer.

“Tattoos? You’ve got tattoos?” He seems genuinely thrilled. “Can I see them?”

“No, Bruno. Stop asking so many questions. You’re bothering him,” Laura insists, drinking her coffee.

“Aw …” He looks disappointed.

I rub his head until his hair is messy. “Maybe some other time, kid.”

“Put on some pants,” Laura says. “He doesn’t wanna see your naked ass.”

“It’s fine,” I whisper to Laura. “I’ve seen so much ass in my life, nothing will faze me at this point.”

She makes a face and shrugs. “All right, if you say so.”

Bruno smiles as he sits down at the table and places his video game beside his plate. “What’s that?” He points at my cup.

“Coffee. Want some?” I hold it out to him, after which Laura gives me the death stare.

“No, thanks. I already took a sip a week ago, when Laura wasn’t looking, and I didn’t like it.”

I snort as Laura’s jaw drops, but she doesn’t make a sound, which makes it even better.

I love this little squirt already.

I take a bite from the sweet roll and groan a little. Fuck, that’s good.

“Like it?” Laura asks.

“Mmm … so good,” I answer.

“Her eggs are good too,” Bruno says, picking one up. “I love them.”

“Not much to mess up there,” she muses.

I grab an egg and peel it, taking a bite. “Delicious.”

“See?” Bruno grins. “Told you so!”

“You’re a smart little man. Eggs are good for you, did you know? They make you grow and become strong.”

“Laura says the same thing,” he muses.

Laura gives me a coy smile as she takes a grape from the fruit salad and stuffs it in her mouth.

“So are you her boyfriend?”

She spits out half the grape. “Bruno!”

I laugh and take a sip of my coffee. “Nope.”

“Are you sure?”

“Take a biscuit” Laura growls, stuffing it into his mouth to stop him from talking.

“Oh, wait,” he says, munching on his biscuit. “You can’t. You’re a priest, right?”

“Preacher. And I can,” I answer.

“So you can marry someone?”

“Yeah,” I answer.

“Hmm … Odd.”

The kid’s so curious. I wonder if he even knows what a preacher is.

“So you work for the church then?” he asks.

“I don’t work for the church, but I do give sermons.”

My eyes widen.

Sermons. I was supposed to give one today.

“Shit!” I jump up from my chair.

“What?” Laura asks.

“I’m supposed to be at church. Shit!”

Bruno chuckles. “He’s swearing.”

“Shhh …” Lauren shushes him, and then she looks at me. “So you have to go?”

“Yeah, I’m so sorry. Breakfast was real nice though. Thanks.”

“Take it with you,” she says, and I take the opportunity to stuff a roll into my mouth.

“Thanks so much for everything,” I mutter through the biscuit, sounding like an idiot.

“Don’t mention it.”

“So we’ll see you in church then?” Bruno asks as I make my way to the door.

I pause and look over my shoulder at Laura. “Ask your sister.”

Then I leave the house.

And it strikes me. It’s the first time in ages when I’ve actually felt guilty over not being where I’m supposed to be. That I know I messed up and have to make it right. It’s like somehow, someway, Laura turned the switch inside my brain that forces me to come face to face with my demons.

And conquer them all.

Chapter 8

“You’re late!” Mother hisses at me as I walk into a church filled with people.

“I know,” I whisper back. “Sorry.”

“Where were you?” she asks, stopping me in my tracks.

Everyone’s looking at me, but I try to ignore the gazes as I whisper, “Out.”

“Drinking again?”

I nod. There’s no use in denying the truth.

She sighs out loud and then pats me on the back. “Go on.”

I take it as her approval to give the sermon. I was almost afraid she’d kick me out right here, right now, but she’s giving me another chance, and I’m grabbing it with both hands.

I make my way up to the chancel and stand behind the pulpit. I realize I didn’t prepare anything, so I guess I’ll have to wing it … again.

I clear my throat. “Good morning, everyone.”

Crickets.

Not surprising, considering my last speech.

“I know last time I wasn’t the brightest star in the sky … but let’s focus on something positive today, hmm?” I look into the congregation, hoping they agree, but they all seem to be staring ahead like I’m not even there. Like I’m talking to zombies or something. Well, one granny does seem like she’s wilting away in her seat. Wouldn’t surprise me if she died.

I snigger to myself, but then I see Laura and her two brothers sitting in the pews again. And somehow, I can’t think of anything else than seeing her pretty face after waking up from my drunken night. Like crawling up from the pit of hell and coming out in heaven.

I swallow away the lump in my throat and clutch the pulpit.

“Today, I wanted to talk to you about joy. Fun. The riches of life and earth.”

People shuffle in their seats like they’re finally waking up.

“As we all know, a long, long time ago, God created the earth and then mankind to enjoy its riches. God created us in his own image, and we, in turn, worship him as the one and only truth.”

The intense look in Laura’s eyes is so distracting; I find it hard to focus.

“God teaches us to love each other and to love ourselves. To be happy with what we have and to enjoy this life he gave us on this earth.”

Some people nod, but I can’t look away from Laura. There’s something about her … something that changes my entire mood. Something that makes me wanna be a rebel again. Makes me wanna be bad.

“So then why do we not allow ourselves a little enjoyment once in a while?” I ask.

Margaret’s eyebrows furrow as she stands in the far left corner of the church, watching me like a hawk.

I hold my head up high. “God creates us exactly the way he wanted us to be. To deny that would be an insult to his name. So that means he created us *with* all the needs we feel. And if you feel that goes against your belief, then answer this question: How is it possible for someone to love another or themselves, if something they do or think isn’t right? And do you think that

loving yourself is more important than following a set of arbitrary rules? Or do you think that God intends for us to experience everything there is on this earth? Because I think it's the latter."

Laura shifts in her seat, biting her lip as her fingers slide through her hair. I imagine it's my hand running through her hair, my hand touching her face, my teeth biting her lip.

Fuck me.

I grip the mic a little bit harder. "To trust in God means to trust in His plan for us. To trust in His ideas of what it means to be human. He created us exactly the way we were intended to be. So enjoy this life you have. Go out. Live a little. Do some things you never dared to do."

I grin, seeing all the confused faces.

"Party out loud. Live on the edge. Go skydiving. Go crazy. Smash something you don't like. Go skinny dipping. Make love to your partner in the car or on the table."

And there go all the jaws again, dropping like stones in a lake.

"Sex is nothing to be ashamed of, people. It's a natural function of the body, the way God made it. If he didn't want us to enjoy it so much, he wouldn't have made it so enjoyable to begin with. So live a little."

"Frank!" Mother hisses from the sidelines, but I ignore her.

"And whatever you do ... don't judge yourself or others. That's exactly what God didn't want you to do. Love thy neighbor as yourself, remember?" I smirk. "And if you think it's weird to have these feelings, it's not. I have them too. Everyone does."

Audible gasps follow.

"What, you thought a preacher didn't have needs? Wrong." I laugh. "Like I said, we're all human."

Mother storms up to the chancel again and snatches the microphone, shoving me aside. "The sermon is now over, everyone. Thank you for coming. We'll see you next Sunday." Her voice is unhinged. "Hopefully."

She releases the mic and pulls me back with her to her room in the back of the church, slamming the door shut behind us. “Frank. Explain yourself.”

“What?” I shrug. “I wanted to tell them the truth. Isn’t that what faith is all about? To make the people feel better?”

“Not about their sins!”

“Maybe you and I just disagree on what a sin actually is.”

She picks up a Bible and shoves it into my arms. “I suggest you re-read this because you’ve obviously forgotten what it’s about.”

“Or maybe I’ve learned to take it to the next level.”

“Frank.” She sighs and rolls her eyes. “You’re testing my patience here.”

“Look, I’m sorry, all right? I know I’ve messed up a lot in the past.”

Her laughter interrupts me. “That’s putting it lightly.”

“My point is I’m trying, okay?”

“Not good enough.”

“This is who I am. Who I wanna be. Who I feel comfortable being.”

“Oh please, you’re only acting this way because you were drunk and didn’t prepare anything. You used to be so good at this, and now look at you. A bumbling mess.” She places a hand on my shoulder. “It’s time you got your spirit back.”

“And how do you propose we do that?”

“Do a little soul searching. Talk to God. Go to the chapel and pray. It’s the only way to find the answers for you, Frank.”

I sigh. “Do I really have to?”

One stern look is all it takes to get me to relent.

“All right, all right.” I hold up the book like it’s the only truth there is. “I’ll talk to God. See what he has to say about my awesome personality.”

She rolls her eyes again as she grabs the door knob and opens it for me.
“Please. Next time … do me a favor and don’t show up.”

I shrug it off as I walk out. “Fine.”

But I can’t even say bye because she’s already closed the door on me.

Damn, she really is disappointed in me.

I hate that look on her face, but what can I do? I am who I am.

Or at least, I became this way a long time ago …

Some days, I wish I could undo everything I did in the past. Maybe then I would’ve been a better preacher. Too bad God never invented time travel.

* * *

I stand at the image of Jesus in the small chapel on the far right side of the church and make the sign of the cross on my chest. I close my eyes and pray like Mother told me. I don’t just do it because she wants me to. I do it because I want to. I need help.

Like so many times before, I seek His guidance when I’ve lost my way.

God only knows how many times I’ve begged for his help. His mercy. For this pain to end.

Yet I still live. It’s like He wants me to suffer.

Maybe He thinks it will make me a better man, but so far, I don’t see any of that yet.

I should try more. Fight harder. Defy the odds even though they’re stacked against me.

Because He must be keeping me alive for a reason.

“God … please show me Your way,” I plead, as I stare up at the beautiful fresco on the ceiling. “I don’t know what to do with myself. I used to love this job so much, and now, look at me. I’m a mess. I’m drunk all the time

just to cope with my life. And now ... now, I've even fallen for a girl who comes to church."

I sigh out loud and lower my head, feeling the shame hit hard.

"Is it wrong? Is it wrong to want someone to the point of it becoming an obsession? It can't be healthy to fantasize about her so much. It feels like a disservice to the memory of ..." I can't even say the words without choking up inside.

"Is it cheating? Am I morally corrupt when I want that girl? Even if only for just a day? Could I have that without feeling guilty? Without feeling like I'm sacrificing the vow I made?"

I shake my head, knowing no one can answer these questions except me.

But it still helps to talk to someone about it, even if He won't talk back.

"I will do my best, God, to serve you as I always have. I promise I'll do better. I promise I'll make this right, someday. But first ... I need to fix myself. Please guide me. Amen."

I nod and let out another breath. A small fragment of the weight has been lifted off my shoulders. Not enough to completely forget, but enough for me to be able to smile again.

Until I turn around, that is.

Because guess who's standing in the small opening to the chapel area?

Laura.

"I'm sorry ... if I'm interrupting," she mutters.

"It's all right." I wonder if she heard me speak ... and if so, what part.

"I was looking for you, and then I found you here talking, and I was a bit ... mesmerized." She smiles briefly, looking down at her feet.

"Is there something I can do for you?" I ask.

"I was wondering if you ... would be able to take my confession again?"

I rub my lips together from the thought of being alone again with her. The last time was already so fucking hard ... literally, I was hard. I bet it's going to be even harder this time. My dick, of course.

Fuck.

“Yeah, sure.”

I think my cock responded there. Definitely not my brains. Or maybe my brains are under her influence like my whole entire body just drifts to her. As they say ... like moths to a flame.

I follow her out into the main area. Silently traipsing behind her, I’m still thinking about what I said in there ... and if she heard the whole damn thing. But if that’s the case, she’d probably be running right about now, and she isn’t, so that’s a relief.

We both enter the confessional, and I sit down on the wooden bench while she closes the curtain.

“Thank you for seeing me.”

I make the sign of the cross on my chest and say, “Of course. Tell me what’s bothering you.”

“My sins ...” she mutters. “I can’t stop them.” Her eyes flicker with mischief. I wonder if she’s thinking about her time in the church bathroom. If she did it again.

Her hand moves to her chest, and she pulls one of the buttons of her shirt loose. “I feel bad for feeling this way.”

Fuck. Am I dreaming?

What is she doing?

I can’t believe this is happening, so I pinch myself, but it doesn’t work.

Another button pops. “I’ve been thinking about this for a while now.”

With a sultry look in her eyes, she pops another, and her hand slides in. My mouth salivates from the sight, and blood pumps to my dick.

What the fuck is happening here?

“I don’t know why … I just can’t contain myself sometimes.” She starts rubbing her tits right in front of me, and even though they’re still hidden behind her shirt, her nipples are clearly peaking. And fuck me, does it make me hard.

“What are you doing?” I ask, unsure of what to do with this.

Should I walk? Should I defy temptation? I have to say; she’s making it really hard now. Both the decision and my cock.

“What I want to do …” she whispers, leaning forward so I can look into her shirt.

I swallow away the lump in my throat, trying to resist the temptation to look, but she’s making it difficult, and that’s an understatement.

“This is my sin,” she says, and she licks her fingers and rubs them across her nipples. She moans, and my dick bounces up and down in my pants.

“Is it wrong?” she asks, biting her lip.

I blink a couple of times to try to keep my composure, but I’m burning up with desire. Fuck me; I want to reach through the gaps of the lattice partition so badly.

“It feels wrong,” she whispers, and her hand travels down her body. “Tell me to stop.”

“Only God can tell you what to do,” I answer.

What kind of answer is that? Fuck.

“I can’t speak to him the way you do,” she says, eyeing me. “So … intimately.”

So she did hear *everything* I said.

Damn.

Her hand dives between her legs, underneath her skirt, and my cock bursts with need. “I believe you, Frank. You said needs were okay. And I have a

lot of needs.”

I lick my lips. “Oh, I can definitely believe that.”

“And I feel … like I need this.” She rubs herself while she looks at me. It’s like she’s not even ashamed anymore. And it’s all my fault. “Like you need this,” she adds.

I frown, rubbing my lips together because I don’t know what to do or say. I can’t admit it. But fuck, do I want her badly. However, I’m a preacher. I shouldn’t even be thinking about this.

“You snooped on me,” I say. “In the chapel. How much did you hear?”

“Enough.” The left side of her lip tips up into a smile. “Was that bad?”

For some reason, it makes me wanna smile too. Guess the cat’s out of the bag. “Maybe.”

“Bad … I like bad,” she murmurs, biting her lip again while she spreads her legs. “I like it when it’s wrong.”

“Is that why you did this before? In the bathroom?”

She nods, and her hand dives down her panties. “I know this is what you want. What you’ve been thinking of all this time … Me,” she says. “C’mon, say it.”

I shake my head. “You know I can’t. We’re in a church.”

“No one has to find out …” she whispers, pressing her fingers to her lips. “It could be our dirty little secret.”

I try to ignore the voice in my head telling me not to cave in, but it’s already too late. My hand rests atop my dick, and I start rubbing it through my clothes.

She closes her eyes and leans her head back against the hard wood, and I take the opportunity to let my eyes glide up and down her body, enjoying the view. She touches herself so seductively that I immediately find myself rubbing faster and faster, trying to keep up the pace. I imagine how her body would look naked. How slick and wet it would be when I brushed my

dick along her lips. I can picture it all, and that makes this all so much more frightening. Because ... if I already gave into this, there's no telling what I'll do next time I see her.

"Fuck ..." she murmurs, licking her lips. A soft moan escapes her mouth, and she adjusts herself so I can see her even better. My hand dives into my pants because I'm unable to stop myself any longer.

When she briefly opens her eyes and sees me jerking off, she purrs, "Do you like this?"

"I'd be lying if I said I didn't ..." I mutter, stroking my length. "But it's wrong, and you know it."

"Then why are we doing it?" she asks.

"Because this is our dirty little secret," I hiss, feeling the veins in my dick throb with excitement. "And I need to see just how naughty you can get."

She grins and slides her panties to the side with her index finger, showing me her naked pussy. And fuck me, it makes me one hungry motherfucker. What I wouldn't give to be able to suck on her clit.

"Is it wrong that we're doing this?" she asks. "Because I'm so damn wet right now."

"Do you even care people are just a few feet away from us?" I ask.

She shakes her head, grinning even more. "That only adds to the excitement."

God, this fucking woman ... she sure knows how to make a guy's heart throb. And his dick too.

At this point, I really don't care anymore.

Screw the consequences.

Fuck morals.

I've thrown every rule out the window.

I rip down my zipper, unbutton my pants, and pull my dick out of my boxer shorts.

Her eyes widen and immediately focus on my length; her lips parting as if she's preparing to receive it.

"My eyes are up here," I muse, smiling.

She winks and then continues to rub her clit right in front of me. She doesn't even look remotely scared of discovery, and I love it. With long strokes, I pleasure myself to the sight of her. Each time a soft whimper escapes her lips, my dick reacts, hardening under my touch. Fuck, I wanna come so badly.

Holding my shaft, I picture her hands running along it instead of mine. I imagine shoving her down on my bed and ramming my dick into her pussy, finally fucking her brains out.

With squinted eyes, I watch her be filthy. Her clit looks so delicious; I wanna lick it, but this damn lattice panel is in the way. God, what a tease she is. Especially when she rubs her tits too. We're both reaching an epic climax soon, and I don't think I wanna stop it.

She moans, and her eyes roll into the back of her head. My breathing is rapid as I watch her come undone, her body quaking from the powerful shocks. And it's so fucking sexy that I come.

"Fuck," I hiss through gritted teeth, unloading myself.

My cock shoots all over the wood, coating the confessional with cum. I furiously beat my length to release every last drop, squirting it everywhere. By the time I'm done, I'm completely out of breath, the entire confessional is covered in my jizz, and Laura is grinning at the scene I left like a motherfucking vixen.

She's already corrected her panties and buttoned her shirt like nothing ever happened. "Impressive," she mutters under her breath, and I wonder if she's referring to my size or my load. Either way, I'm happy.

She reaches into her pocket to take out a few tissues. "Here." She tucks them through the lattice, and with a frazzled look on my face, I grasp them.

“Thought you might need these.”

“You think of everything ...” I mutter under a heavy breath as I wipe the cum off and then try to wipe it off the wood. No pun intended.

“I’m always prepared,” she muses, winking again.

“What about your confession?” I ask.

“You know we didn’t come here for that ...”

As she gets up, I ask, “Why?”

She shrugs. “Because I saw you struggling ... and I know you needed this.”

“So it was all a lie?” I frown.

“No ...” She smiles. “But everyone needs someone sometimes ...”

“I don’t need a pity fuck,” I reply.

She raises a brow and shakes her head. “It’s not.” Then she opens the curtains.

“So you wanted this?” I ask before she goes.

She doesn’t answer. All she does is smile and close the curtains, leaving me here with my dick out. I’m completely wiped out by one girl and her fingers.

With what remaining energy I have, I make the sign of the cross on my chest. “Jesus Christ, I beg your forgiveness ... because, by God, this woman will make me commit more sins than I ever have.”

Chapter 9

In my tank top, I sit on the bench in the park, enjoying the breezy wind. For the first time in ages, I’m completely sober, and it feels so damn ... strange.

Like I can see the world through a much clearer lens. And I'm not sure if I like it yet.

Still, it's something I think I can be mildly proud of. I may be a shitty preacher, but at least now I'm not also a drunk one.

It's sunny outside, the perfect day for a random visit to the park.

Except for the fact it's not so random that I'm here.

You see, in the middle of the park, a group of women is having a yoga session that involves lots of stretching and downward dogs. Now, you might be thinking I'm a giant perv, and on that, I would have to agree, but there is one clear difference from my normal routine.

Yes, I've done this before, albeit with a different group of women in an entirely different park. And I mean, what man doesn't like perky lady butts in spandex? A gay man.

No, I'm not ashamed.

Today, I don't give a shit about any of those women ... except one.

Laura.

She's been on my mind ever since that spicy encounter in the confessional, and I've wanted to talk to her since. But one doesn't just casually stroll up to a woman and discuss dirty sex, now do they?

No.

However, I'm not letting this slide either.

She did something to me that can't be undone.

When she stepped into that confessional and touched herself right in front of me, she opened a door neither of us can close.

Now that I've had a small sample of what she has to offer, I want more. So much more.

She makes me unable to control myself, and for a man with needs like mine, that's a dangerous thing.

I've followed her all the way from her home to this park just to watch her. I don't know if that's creepy or not, but I just grasped any opportunity I could to see her. I have yet to think of an appropriate moment to approach her, but for now, I'll be content with gawking at her juicy spandex butt.

Fuck me; the way she tightens them as she bends over to touch her toes makes me wanna put my dick in her ass.

Is that wrong?

Yeah, it probably is.

But so help me God, I will do it. It's only a matter of time before she comes to me again, and we have sex like mad rabbits. One thing's for sure, though ... I won't let her run off with a tease like that again.

"Hi."

Frowning, I turn my head only to see Bruno standing next to the bench where I'm sitting. "Uh, hi."

Shit.

I knew he was here, but I never actually expected him to approach me.

He's been playing on the kid's playground while Laura exercises, and I honestly completely forgot about him even being here.

Why would he come over to me? I'm not interesting. Not even remotely.

God, this is so fucking awkward.

"What are you doing?" he asks me, crushing a leaf he just picked from a tree in his hand.

"Uh ... just relaxing in the park," I answer, trying to laugh it off like it's no big deal.

"Are you here because my sister is?"

My eyes widen, and I laugh again. "No, of course not! Why would you think that?" My voice sounds so ridiculous; I'm such a bad fucking liar, it's unbelievable.

He shrugs. “Well, I know you followed us from our home.”

Mortified, I close my eyes and sigh.

“It’s okay. I can see why you like her. She’s nice to people.”

“Yeah,” I agree. “Very nice.”

He smiles at me in such a cute way that it’s hard for me to maintain my badass composure.

“So whatcha doing?” I ask him.

“Nothing,” he says, letting the crushed pieces of leaf in his hand fly away.
“I was playing in the sandbox, but I got bored.”

“Why? You can create so many things with a bit of sand.”

“I know, but it’s no fun if you don’t have any friends to play with.”

I nod, feeling a bit sorry for the little guy. “I see.”

The awkward silence returns, and I feel like this is some kind of invite for me to come play with him or something. But I’m not sure I want to let Laura out of my sight. What if she sees me in the sandbox with him? She might think I’m some kind of weird-ass stalker.

That’s because I am, but still.

“Father Frank,” Bruno suddenly begins, “why aren’t you in your church clothes?”

I shrug. “Because it’s hot outside, and I’m just a regular person now.”

“So you’re not a person in church?”

I snort. “Of course, I am. But in church, I need to look like I work there. But I’m not working right now, so I get to dress however I like.”

“And what are those black things on your skin?”

Frowning, I look at where he’s pointing, and I realize it’s my back, which is covered in tattoos. “Oh, those are the tattoos I mentioned, remember? They’re drawings but on the skin.”

“Cool! Can I have them too?”

“No,” I say sternly, but then I soften my voice again because I don’t wanna sound like a dick. “Tattoos are for grown-ups only.”

“Why?” He seems disappointed.

“Well … because they’re permanent. They can’t be erased.”

“Really?” His eyes glow. “Awesome.”

I snort and shake my head. “You’re a funny one, kid.”

“Thanks,” he says. “You too.”

I’m not sure if that’s a compliment, but I’ll take it.

“But … I thought priests weren’t allowed to have tattoos?”

“I’m not a priest, Bruno,” I reply. “I’m a preacher. And who told you that?”

“My brother,” he says, making a figure-eight in the dirt with his shoes.

“Well, your brother was wrong.”

“How come?” He cocks his head.

“I’m a special preacher. A bad one.” I turn to face him and squint, trying to look as menacing as I can. “You don’t wanna mess with me, kid. I’m wicked.” I make a scary face, and the kid bursts out into giggles, which makes me smile.

That’s when I notice Laura walking our way.

I clear my throat and sit back again, trying not to look like a perving creep, but here I am… being a perving creep.

She cocks her head when she recognizes me and smiles deviously. “Hey, don’t I know you from somewhere?”

“He’s Father Frank, sis!” Bruno says. “He was in our house eating breakfast! Did you forget?”

“No, silly, it was rhetorical.” She rubs his head, messing up his hair.

“What’s rhet-rhet-orca?”

She chuckles. “It means it wasn’t really a question.”

“Should I even answer then?” I muse.

She turns her attention to me as she rubs her forehead with her towel. “Well, well, what a coincidence.”

I smile and enjoy the view. No point in denying anything, especially since there’s been no allegation. Yet.

“So Bruno already found you. Are you stalking us or something?” she asks, raising a brow.

Ah-ha, there it is.

“Nah.” I grin. “Just your friendly neighborhood preacher patrolling the area.”

She rolls her eyes, but I can tell she’s barely able to keep the laughter inside.

“Got something to confess?” I ask.

She snorts. “Like you don’t already know *everything*.”

“I do!” Bruno raises his hand.

“Oh, yeah? Tell me then, what’d you do?” I inquire, inching closer.

He closes his mouth and freezes, so I lean in even closer and pat the bench. “Sit.”

He does what I ask, and then I turn my ear to him so he can whisper.

“I peed in the sandbox.”

My grin turns into a full-on outburst of laughter.

“What?” Laura asks.

I turn my face to Bruno and whisper back into his ear, “Is that the real reason you didn’t wanna play in the sandbox anymore?”

He nods.

“What?!” Laura’s voice is even louder this time, and she’s even thrown her towel over her shoulder like some kind of statement.

Bruno looks at me as if he’s pleading me not to tell her—probably because she’d get mad and rightfully so. But I think I’ll play along with this game.

So I twine my fingers and smile like a motherfucker. “I’m sorry. Confessions made to a preacher are strictly confidential.”

Oh, that look on her face right now.

Blood-boiling rage.

Magnificent.

“Frank …” she hisses.

I shrug, still smiling as I lean back.

“He did something; you gotta tell me. This isn’t a joke,” she grumbles. “What if it’s something embarrassing or wrong?”

“You mean like that thing we did in church?”

Her eyes widen, and the shock on her face is amazing to see.

“What thing?” Bruno asks.

“Nothing!” Laura hisses. “Frank …”

I look at Bruno and say, “Bruno. If you say you’re sorry, your sins will be forgiven.”

“Does that mean God forgives me too?”

I nod. It’s hard to explain these things to a kid as young as he is.

He draws a cute cross on his chest and mumbles, “I’m sorry.”

“Good.” I pat his back and then look at Laura. “See? He’s repenting, so he’s forgiven of his sins.”

She narrows her eyes and snarls at me. “You are so bad.”

“I know.” I grin because I consider it a compliment.

I get up from the bench and dust off my pants. “Well, I guess this is my cue to run.”

Bruno jumps off too, saying, “Thanks, Father Frank!”

“Don’t mention it, kid.”

I start walking even though I wasn’t done with Laura yet. However, I can’t talk to her in private with Bruno around. It’s just not happening.

“What did Bruno do?” Laura yells.

I glance over my shoulder. “You’d like to know that, wouldn’t you?”

“Yes!”

“Guess you’ll have to come to church then because that’s the only place we’ll talk confessional business.” And with that, I give her a thumbs-up and walk out of sight, leaving a flabbergasted and annoyed Laura behind.

Chapter 10

I’m outside the church at night, leaning against the building as I put a cigarette in my mouth and light it. Only after being alone for a good five minutes, Carl, who’s the church’s pianist and general handyman, walks out and sees me, and he walks right to me. Not a day goes by when I don’t look at his malformed ear and nose. Damn. No wonder people don’t come to our church anymore. They’re either shocked by me or scared of him. We’re like the ghosts at a haunted house at the fair or monsters in Frankenstein’s mansion.

“Hey,” he says, perching himself beside me. “Got a smoke?”

I glare at him, wondering when he started smoking. Even though he’s only four years younger than I am, I feel like I need to protect him from bad shit or something. Not that I’m such a great influence.

I sigh and rummage in my pocket, handing one to him. He puts it in his mouth, and I light it for him. We both blow out smoke and continue to stare at the busy streets in front of us.

“So uh ... can I ask you something?” Carl says out of the blue.

“That depends,” I say.

“Do you still have some of those old contacts?”

“Old contacts?” I lower my cigarette and eyeball him.

“Yeah, you know ... with the dealers and shit.”

I tap my cig and ask, “Why?”

He shrugs and takes another drag. “I dunno. Been thinking about doing some side business.”

“What? Is the church not enough for you?” I growl, putting my cig back into my mouth.

“I just ... Look, I don’t want this to be awkward, but I really need to earn more. So I thought, why not get another job? I mean it can’t be hard right?”

I snort and shake my head. “You have no fucking clue what you’re talking about.”

“But you were part of that—”

“Stop,” I interrupt.

I can’t believe we’re talking about this.

“What? Why? I just wanna earn more.”

“Not that way. Not with them.”

“Look, I know they’re bad people, but I need the money more than anything.” He chuckles and chucks the cigarette away. “My medical bills are stacking up, yo.”

I think he’s referring to his apnea as a result of his nose, and maybe even the continued use of medicine for the pain. I can’t imagine what it must be

like, and I really don't want to, to be honest. Too many bad memories.

"C'mon, dude, you know how long I've been working here. I wouldn't ask if I wasn't desperate."

"No," I reply. "Not happening."

"What? You're not even going to give me the contacts? I'm not asking you to vouch for me. I just wanna talk."

"Not. Happening." I flick my cig away and fold my arms. "You don't know what you're messing with."

"Don't treat me like a kid," he huffs.

"I don't give a shit how old you are," I say, tapping on his chest. "You're still younger than I am, and by default, that makes me more experienced."

"Fuck that logic."

"No, fuck you wanting to die."

"Die?"

"Did you forget what happened to you?" I grab his ear, and he screeches, after which I release him again. "Next time you get involved in that shit, you'll lose a finger or two."

Two days, he went missing, and when we finally found him on the steps of the church, he refused to discuss what happened. But I know ... you only need to look at his face.

"They're a different gang," Carl says.

"Who gives a shit? Exchange one motherfucker for another motherfucker and you still have shit."

"I'd have money," he says. "And how would you even know what they'd do or if it would happen again? Nothing like this ever happened to you." He points at his nose, which has been chipped away by acid.

"That's because I knew what the fuck I was doing. But make no mistake, kid, I paid the price."

“Maybe I’m willing to pay too,” he says.

I grab his collar. “Don’t you *ever* fucking say that again. I lost something precious to me. Something no one can ever replace. And all thanks to those motherfuckers you wanna work with.” I shove him away and spit on the ground. “You should be ashamed of yourself for even bringing it up. How dare you? You know as well as I do what happened that day.”

He swallows, visibly shaken by my honesty.

“I don’t have anything important.”

“Your life,” I growl. “*Nothing* is worth giving that up.”

“But you did it too ...” he retorts. “And then you just gave up? After going through all that?”

“Too. Late. I gave up too late. And that’s why you need to be smart now, Carl.”

He swallows again, leaning away from me, his eyes still skidding around while he probably thinks about his options. If he should do it or not.

“Don’t you even think about it, Carl. It’s not fucking worth it. Not a dime in the world, trust me.”

“But I can’t pay ...” he says. “The church ... it’s not enough.” Tears well up in his eyes.

I place a hand on his shoulder. “Look. I will ask Margaret if she’s got any more jobs for you, okay? Would that be good?”

He nods, closing his eyes.

I grab him with both hands and shake him softly. “Promise me you won’t do anything stupid.”

He sighs. “Fine.”

“Good.” I slap him on the back. “Now go back inside. You know they’re waiting on you to fix the lights.”

He nods. “You coming?”

I contemplate it for a second, wanting to stay out here for the fresh air, but I realize it's probably better if I support him while he's down, so I agree and follow him inside.

He goes to Mother's room where she asked him to fix a couple of things while I sit down on one of the pews in the church. It's empty right now; no visitors, no churchgoers. I love these days of peace and quiet. Even Mother is leaving in a few minutes; off to play bridge at the old ladies' club where she's a member. And when Carl's done with his work in her room, he'll also be leaving, allowing me to finally enjoy a nice bit of alone time in the church.

I wanna enjoy it, but that conversation I had with Carl really put a damper on my mood. It's not every day that I get confronted with my past. And I don't like it one bit. Mostly because of the memories involved ... the ones I try to bury so deep no one can reach them.

But now ... ever since Laura came into my life, those memories have been bubbling to the surface, and strangely enough, it doesn't even hurt as much as I thought it would. Or maybe I was stuck in my own little world of drunken pain until she came along and somehow quenched that thirst I felt.

But it doesn't feel right.

I sigh and lean over in the bench, clutching my face as the guilt washes over me.

I shouldn't even be thinking about her.

I should be repenting ... day in, day out ... praying to God for mercy.

Begging him to forgive me for what I've done.

For what was taken away from me.

Yet whenever I talk to him or plead with him to give me an answer, a reason for it all, I just get radio silence, and I'm left with empty nothingness.

The large wooden doors creak, but I stay put. I'm not in the right mood to help people right now.

However, when I notice a girl sits down next to me, I look up and a hint of a smile forms on my lips.

“Laura. What are you doing here?”

“I … saw you outside, so I thought I’d come say hi.”

It’s been minutes. “And you waited until now?”

She swallows, seemingly having trouble with her words. “Yeah … uh … Bruno, Diego, and I were playing soccer in the alley next to the church, and I happened to overhear your conversation. I wasn’t sure if I should even come up to you or talk. And then you went inside and so … well, here I am.”

“So you … eavesdropped?” I frown. I did not expect that from her. Then again … I didn’t expect her to start rubbing her pussy in a confessional either. People can surprise you.

She rubs her lips together and smiles coyly. “It wasn’t on purpose. I mean I was there, and I can’t turn off my ears.”

I sigh out loud and shake my head. “How much did you hear?”

“Enough to know you had a completely different job before.”

“You can say it out loud,” I say. “No need to hide it if you already know everything.”

She licks her lips and takes in a big breath. “You were a drug dealer.”

I’m not saying anything, but I guess not denying it either speaks volumes.

“Or you did something with those drug dealers. What did you do exactly?”

“Anything and everything I was told.”

“How long ago?” she asks.

“Long time … Nine years.”

“Wow. So you’re like what … thirty now?”

I chuckle. “Close enough. Twenty-nine,” I answer, looking her straight in the eyes. “You?”

“Twenty-five. But I’m mature for my age.”

Oh, yes … that I already knew.

“So why did you become a preacher then?” she asks.

I take a deep breath, hoping this conversation won’t go in the deep end.
“Oh, you know. I just kinda rolled into it.”

“How?”

I narrow my eyes at her. “You sure do ask a lot of questions.”

“I’m just curious.” She shrugs. “I wanna get to know the guy I showed my pussy to.”

I laugh out loud from that comment. Can’t help it. Her dark humor matches mine so well.

“On point,” I muse. “But aren’t your brothers waiting outside?”

“Nah, I told Diego to take Bruno home.”

“Hmm … so you’ve got plenty of time on your hands.” I lick my lips at the thought of fucking her right here on this pew. I’m such a filthy pig.

“So … talk.” She winks, pulling me from my wicked fantasies.

“Well, if you really wanna know.” I clear my throat, lean back against the wooden bench, and stare up at the large statue in the back. “I wasn’t a good kid back in the day. I mean my parents … they were druggies, so they couldn’t do shit for me.”

I still have her undivided attention, despite sharing that dark piece of me, so I continue.

“Since they didn’t take care of me properly, I took care of myself. And after a while … I ran away.”

“Oh, wow …”

“Yeah. I ended up at this church, right here. Margaret, you know her. She practically raised me.”

“Oh, my ... I never expected that. No wonder I hear you call her Mother sometimes.”

I nod. “She is my mother to me. The only one who truly cared about me.”

“So you were prepped really well for the role as a preacher then?”

“Yes and no.” I take a deep breath again. We’re arriving at the part I hate the most. The part I regret more than anything. “When parents don’t take care of their children, it leaves a mark on their lives. Like a scar. It never fades, no matter how much you scrub. When my parents brought me into this world, even though they never wanted me in the first place, it made me feel like I didn’t belong.”

“That must’ve been horrible ...” She bites her lip but listens to my every word.

“It was but mostly because I couldn’t deal with that sense of rejection. Still can’t. I mean look at me. I’m a drunk, useless fuck because of it.”

“Hey, you’re not horrible. We all come with baggage,” she says. “I mean my brothers and I ran away from our dad and went to live with our aunt because he was that abusive. And when she died, I was the only one who could take care of my family.”

“That must’ve been hard on you,” I reply.

“Yeah, but we all have a past that shapes us. It’s not necessarily bad.”

“I am ...” I sigh. “It was just never enough for me. No matter what Margaret did, she couldn’t fill that void left by my parents. I became increasingly unhappy with myself and the world, despite the fact she tried to make it as joyful as possible. I still sought my worth somewhere else. I wanted to feel good. Like I was somebody. Someone people wanted around.”

“You hung around with the wrong crowd.” She fills in the blanks perfectly.

“Exactly,” I say. “I joined a gang. Did whatever they asked. Loved the praise and hated the refusals but I went with it anyway. I knew I was disappointing Mother, but that didn’t stop me from seeking out more. Her love just wasn’t enough for me. And to this day, I regret that decision. I came back to her on my knees, begging for her help, and she still gave it to me. She let me back into her home, back into her life, back ... into her heart. She even let me become a preacher for this church. Why? I did nothing for her. I took and took without giving back. There’s no way I can ever make it up to her.”

“Why?”

“Well, how do you make up that you didn’t appreciate the love a stranger gave you, despite the fact you had nothing to offer her in return? What she did was selfless ... and what I did was selfish. There’s nothing good about me.”

I sigh.

It’s tough to think about, but at least I’ve got some shit off my chest now. It helps a little.

“That’s not true. I see how you are with people; you do want to help. You can be a good person; I know it.”

“Hmm ...” I wonder how deep she can see. There’s much more she doesn’t know ... and I’d rather she didn’t. Some things are better left hidden.

“Would you say that if I told you I once robbed a crippled lady?”

She keeps looking at me with those pristine blue eyes that make me wanna drown. Fuck. How can I ever say no to her? How can I ever deny her anything if she keeps looking at me like she would accept the most heinous parts of me?

“Would you still want to talk to me if I told you I once sold drugs to a homeless boy?”

I swallow away the lump in my throat, feeling more and more angry with myself over the awful things I’ve done. Reminiscing about these things is never good for one’s self-worth.

“Would you ever want to see me again if I told you I'd killed someone?”

She gasps and blinks, and I look down at my hands that dangle between my thighs. “You can go if you want. I won't stop you.” I pause. “But you need to know that's not who I am. Not today. Not anymore. I don't kill anymore.”

It's quiet for some time, but she doesn't move.

Instead, she does the most peculiar thing.

She places a hand on my knee and says, “I don't judge people on their past sins. I judge them by their strength and their ability to do what's right in the present.”

My lips part, but I have no clue how to respond.

“You were threatened, weren't you?” she murmurs.

I nod, unable to discuss this subject.

“If you didn't do it ... they'd kill someone dear to you.”

“Yes ... but I also did it to prove myself, and it was wrong.”

“You did what you thought you needed to do. And you've already repented for that by preaching for these past nine years. You have to stop punishing yourself.”

I close my eyes to stop myself from feeling too much. She reads me like a book, and her words slice through the tangled veins coiled around my heart like a knife through butter.

She squeezes my leg slightly and says, “I'm not leaving. I know you're struggling. That's why I came to you. I feel you ... You're like me.”

Those words. I know exactly what she's talking about. From the moment I first saw her, I already knew we had a connection on a different level. Something you can't taste or touch, but something out of the ordinary. Something that makes us understand each other.

And I do the most irresponsible, stupidest thing ever.

In broad daylight, for every passerby to see ... I grab her face with both hands and smash my lips to hers.

Chapter 11

1 Peter 4:8 – “Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins.”

Her lips are as tantalizing as I imagined them to be. Fiery, so damn delicious, and when she kisses me back, it only makes me want her more. Even though it feels wrong, I can't stop, and I won't. Her mouth is so sweet and everything I hoped it to be.

My tongue darts out to lick her lips, eager to find its way in. Her lips part, allowing me to slip through and claim her mouth as mine. And fuck me ... does it feel good.

As I come closer, her fingers grasp my shirt and pull me in. Our mouths are locked in a lustful battle, needing more and more. Heated kisses make my body crave hers, and my hand instinctively reaches down her chest, brushing my fingers along her tits before letting my fingers slide up her blouse.

I lick the roof of her mouth, and when she moans, my cock responds with a thump in my pants, wanting out so badly. I groan when her hand travels down and grabs my dick.

“Fuck,” I hiss against her lips.

She grins and kisses me again, rubbing my length through the fabric, and fuck me, does it feel good. I immediately reach for her tits, not caring about her blouse and bra still being in the way, and I squeeze them tight. The more I touch her, the more I can forget about my troubles, and the more I want to be deep inside her.

“You don’t know how fucking long I’ve wanted to do this,” I murmur as my lips travel along her neck.

“How long?”

“Since the first time I saw you.”

“I know … I’ve seen you looking … that’s why I did all those dirty things with you.”

I lift my head and look into her mischievous eyes. “Then why did you ask?”

“I just like to hear how much you’ve been craving me,” she teases with a smirk, and it makes me wanna smash my lips to hers again.

“You should be more careful, taunting me like that. Unless you’re okay with committing the dirtiest of sins … right here in church.”

“Right here?” she moans.

“Yeah, did you think I’d let you go anywhere? Not a chance,” I growl, placing a few hot kisses on her neck and shoulder.

“Fuck … I don’t think I’d be able to say no, even if I wanted to,” she mutters as I massage her tits.

I chuckle and whisper into her ear, “So you want me to fuck you?”

“Is that wrong? Is it wrong that I’ve been fantasizing about being fucked by a preacher?” She rubs me so hard my cock is stiff as wood.

“Fuck no,” I say, grinning against her skin as I give her another kiss. “I’m about to make both our fantasies come true.”

I flick her bra to the side and let my hands roam free, brushing past her nipples until they harden. With my other hand, I grab her hair and pull her head back, grunting as I lick her skin. I feel like an animal, but I don’t even care anymore. All I want is to bend her over and fuck her in every goddamn hole until I’m sated. Right here, right now.

Does that make me a bastard?

Maybe.

But this church has seen worse.

Much, much worse.

I know so because I was the cause. Just like I'm the cause to her sitting right here in my arms, waiting to be taken. My desires drew her in like a moth to a flame, and her willingness to be naughty only made me that much more interested in her.

But now I'm tired of waiting. I'm going to take it all.

Except for the moment I wanna rip her blouse off, a door opens to the left, and I scramble to take my hand out of her blouse. "Shit," I hiss.

"What the fuck?" she mutters, and I place a hand over her mouth, shushing her.

"Quiet. It's Mother." I place a finger on my lips, and she nods. "I'll take care of this."

I slip off the bench and will my dick to go down as I watch Mother walk out into the main area. I meet her halfway, and she gives me this peculiar look like I'm not supposed to be here.

"Still here?" she asks.

"Yes," I say with an awkward smile as I walk beside her. "I'm not interested in going out tonight."

"Well, that's a first," she scoffs. She briefly glances at Laura, whose face is completely red, and they both wave at each other.

"I'm going to meet the girls," Mother says.

Girls. I snort. They're not even close to young.

I guess she means the women she plays bridge with.

"I know," I say, accompanying her.

"I told Carl he could go, so he went out the backdoor. I've already locked it. But if you're staying here, I don't need to lock the front, do I?"

“No, I’ll take care of that,” I say. “You go out and have fun.”

Right before we arrive at the big doors, she turns around and asks, “Are you sure? I mean... I’m a bit worried about you.”

“Yes, it’s fine! I’m feeling great.”

“Are you sure?”

I roll my eyes and put my arm around her shoulder, opening the door for her. “Yes. Now go out and have some fun, will you? I’ll watch over the church; don’t worry.”

“All right,” she says as she scurries out. “Don’t stay up too late. You need a good night’s sleep. Maybe it’ll finally be a new beginning for you.”

“Uh-huh ... I will,” I reply, and I wave goodbye before slamming the door and locking it with the key I’ve got stashed in my pocket.

When I’m sure Margaret’s gone, I turn around and see Laura standing in the middle of the hall, staring at me.

I don’t wait.

I’m so tired of fucking waiting that I do the first thing that comes to my mind.

I run toward her and grab her, lifting her up, and I smash my lips to hers and kiss her like the hungry wolf I am. She wraps her legs around my waist as I take her bottom lip between my teeth and nibble, wanting to taste every inch of her. I can’t get enough; that’s how horny I am... or maybe I’m addicted to her.

Kissing her as I go, I carry her all the way to the front of the church until her back hits the altar. There, I set her down right on top of the white cloth. In one fell swoop, I manage to chuck almost all the items off, including a chalice and a few unlit candles.

“We’re desecrating holy ground,” she murmurs as I continue to steal kisses from her.

“If you’re gonna do it, you’d better do it good,” I growl back, grinning against her skin as I let my lips roam free. She moans out loud as I reach her tits and grasp her ass at the same time. Squeezing firmly, I assert my dominion over her body. With my teeth, I tear off the buttons of her blouse and spit them out, shoving it aside so I can finally touch her naked body.

“Fuck … you’re so fucking delicious,” I whisper as I twist her nipples and kiss her on her stomach.

She squeals and giggles a little. “Jesus, you’re horny.”

“Jesus ain’t horny, babe; it’s all me.” I smirk at her eye-roll, and in one swoop, I’ve ripped down her panties and lifted her skirt, exposing her bare pussy. Licking my lips, I slide my thumb down her slit, making her squirm on the altar.

“I’m gonna fuck that pussy raw,” I growl, rubbing her clit. “But first …” I bend over and kiss right above. “Lemme get a taste.”

My tongue dips out to slowly slide along the edge, making her practically beg for it. Her fingers tangle through my hair as I roll around her clit. She pushes down, unable to stop herself from wanting more. And I definitely have more where that came from.

She tastes delicious … and I like it a lot when she’s a saucy vixen.

“How much do you want it?” I murmur against her sweet, delicate skin.

She mewls. “Fuck, I want you so fucking much.”

I twirl around her clit, expertly avoiding it while watching her face scrunch up from desperation. “Beg for it.”

“Oh, please, give it to me,” she moans, biting her bottom lip.

I lick my lips from excitement, and her taste only turns me on more. So much so that I start rubbing my dick while I’m licking her.

“Call me by my name,” I whisper, planting a kiss on top of her clit.

“Fuck, just give it to me.” Her voice is heady and feverish.

Another quick dip between her slit has her bucking.

“Who?” I muse, sliding my finger along her entrance until she practically leans in to receive it.

“Fuck me, Frank!”

Fuck me; I love it when a woman is so needy that she’d do pretty much anything for it.

What can I say? I’m a sucker for giving a woman everything she needs.

Pleasure. It’s all mine, and I’m claiming her now.

Chapter 12

I cover her pussy with my mouth and let my tongue roam free. Her engorged clit is so damn wet I can’t help but suck and lick everywhere. Top to bottom, not an inch of skin is missed. She tastes so good, and all I want is more. So when she grips my hair and rubs her pussy against my face, I stick my tongue into her pussy and roll it around.

Her moaning squeals tell me she’s close.

That and the fact she’s as wet as a monsoon.

Fuck me.

I rub my dick even harder, wanting to feel every inch of her pleasure myself. I’m a greedy fuck.

I grab her waist tight, digging my fingers into her skin as my animalistic urges bubble to the surface. My tongue swivels back and forth across her pussy, licking up all her wetness until she begins to squirm underneath me. I know she’s close—I can feel it—so I shove two fingers into her pussy and make her feel what I’m going to do to her in a minute.

“Come all over me; I wanna taste you,” I murmur, sucking on her clit.

“Fuck!” she moans out loud, and then her body bucks. Her muscles tense, and she gasps, thumping against my lips. Exquisite heaven right there on

my tongue.

When she relaxes and her breathing slows, I grab her body and twist her around on the altar. She squeals from my roughness, and I spank her ass.

“Told you I wasn’t going to be the nice preacher.”

“Well, that licking session you gave me *was* nice,” she jests, so I spank her again.

“That was *my* present to me. And fucking your pussy will be the second one,” I growl, slipping my index finger up and down her wetness. “After you’ve been parading your body around, I think it’s time I gave it a good filling.”

She giggles, and I slap her a final time for good measure before I rip down my zipper and take out my wood. Goddamn, how long I’ve been yearning for this moment. Too long. It’s been too fucking long.

I rub my dick up along her slit, waiting for the noises she makes when she gets aroused, but the more I gawk at her butt, the more I want to have it too.

I wanna have it all.

So I rub my wet finger along her ass and push it in. As she raises her head, mewling, I grasp her hair and fiercely pull her head back. “Ever had your ass taken by a preacher?”

“No, but I’m more than willing to try ...”

“Guess today’s your lucky day,” I reply, grinning.

I shove my finger farther up her butt, and then insert another one into her pussy, rubbing both along her walls. I can feel her tense up, and her moans only add to my own excitement. My cock bobs up and down as I watch her crave my fingers as much as she craved my mouth, and I imagine myself taking both holes. Maybe I will.

“Hope you’ve said your prayers because after I fuck your brains out, you won’t be able to come to church and thank God for your perfect fuck for an entire week.”

I pull my finger out of her pussy and push my cock in without warning, making her gasp out loud. My finger's still in her ass, and I slide it in farther with each thrust of my rock-hard dick. Every stroke is another pump, and soon, her body begins to move along with mine to the rhythm of my fuck.

She's perfect. Just fucking perfect.

Fuck me; I'm so fucking hungry for more.

And at this point, I honestly don't fucking care what's allowed and what isn't. I crossed any line by miles the moment I sucked her clit on the altar, so if I'm doing it dirty, might as well go all the way.

Biting my lip, I pull my finger out of her ass, pick up the only candle still left on the edge of the altar, and shove it up her ass.

She moans out loud, and I grasp the opportunity to fist her hair and pump into her harder, all while the candle is stuck inside her ass. I just love the sight of a willing woman doing all sorts of dirty things without regrets, even if it means defiling the most sacred things.

“Fuck me harder!” she begs, and I increase the pace.

I even twist the candle, pushing it in and out as I go, fucking her in both holes.

Maybe that makes me a filthy bastard but so be it.

Fucking her is my number one priority right now, and if I think of something good, I'll fucking do it because I want to.

I put my finger on her clit and flick it hard, wanting her to come again so I can feel her tighten around my cock. Her whole body starts to rock, desperately trying to get closer to me. Her pussy gyrates against my fingers, and she's so damn wet. I love every second of it, despite the fact I'm desecrating my own damn church.

And I don't give a damn.

“Fuck, I'm gonna come again,” she mutters, out of breath.

“Fuck, yes,” I groan, still twisting and turning the candle in her ass. “Come all over my dick.”

Within seconds, her body quakes again, and the wetness pours out of her. Her muscles deliciously contract around my length, making me come. Roaring out loud, I fuck her so hard, my cock explodes deep inside her with all the pent-up energy. I thrust and thrust, my cum jetting into her and coating her warm pussy. One. Two. Three times, and I’m still not sated.

When I pull out, I’m still rock-hard, so I pull out the candle and replace it with my own stick. She squeals, probably surprised by my stunt.

“Fuck! Jesus, warn me or something?”

“I told you it was gonna be dirty. I need to have your pussy *and* your ass.”

I grunt as I push farther, forcing her ass to adjust to my ample size until I’m completely in. Our cum provides nice lubrication as I thrust in and out, claiming her ass too.

I grab her waist, my fingers digging in, as I take out all the pent-up lust on her. Maybe it’s wrong, maybe I’m selfish, but at this point, I’m far beyond reason.

I just need to fuck.

Fuck.

Fuck.

Fuck!

That’s all I can think of.

So I fuck her as hard as I can. I fuck her so hard that the altar screeches as I drive her against it. I fuck her so hard that a groan escapes from her mouth with each thrust. I fuck her so hard that she’ll beg me to come and release her from my longing.

Beads of sweat pool on her back as well as on my body, which has heated up to the point of me breathing raggedly. So beastly, so utterly animalistic—it’s fantastic.

I slap both her ass cheeks again for good measure, and the reverberations pulsate through my dick. My veins pulse with arousal; my cock ready to dispense its second load. I love the feeling—just like I love her ass and her pussy and my cock being right there inside them.

“You ready for me?” I growl, grasping her hair again so she looks up.

She turns her head slightly, whispering, “Come in my ass. Do it.”

That right there … that pleading voice … is all I need to come undone.

And I do.

I fucking howl like a wolf as I fill her ass with my cum. More and more and more. It’s an endless stream. Like I haven’t come in ages.

By the time I’m done and panting and my cock’s slipped out of her, both her holes are creamed white. The color of heaven itself. Perfection.

If I may say so myself.

I slap her ass, and the cum flows down her legs. “Now that’s what I call a good creaming.”

“Oh, my … Lord.”

That voice … makes all the hairs on the back of my neck stand straight.

Within the space of a second, I’ve turned around and faced the most horrible consequence of my actions already.

Mother is standing right there, in the doorway, with her jaw hanging wide open. A key tumbles from her hands to the floor as she bears witness to the full naked glory of my half-hard dick and a woman covered in my juices, rolling around on the emptied altar.

In a hurry, Laura scrambles off the table and pulls up her panties, which instantly soak completely through. Still, she tries to cover it up with her skirt by patting it down and then continues to pull her blouse together like it will hide the fact we were having sex here. On the altar. “Oops.”

I don’t think ‘oops’ describes this situation accurately.

We're fucked is more like it.

Chapter 13

Mother wasn't supposed to be back yet. And here she is, standing right in front of me, gaping at my naked dick.

"Well, shit," I mutter.

The shocked look on her face turns into pure disgust as she barges over to me. Her lips are smashed together, teeth grinding as she stomps my way, and I quickly push my dick back into my pants and pull up the zipper before she sees any more of my junk and has a heart attack.

I mean I hate her for coming home too early, but I love her too much to be the cause of her death.

Behind me, Laura quickly knots her blouse together, trying to make up for the lost buttons as Mother approaches us. "She looks upset," she whispers.

I nod and focus on Mother, who's now right in front of me.

Clearing my throat, I say, "I thought you were at—"

"You filthy animal!" she screams, slapping my arms with a mini Bible she pulled from her pocket. "How dare you?"

"I'm sorry," I say, blocking my face with my arms to protect myself from her wrath, although I deserve everything she's giving me. "I didn't think you'd be home this soon."

"Really? That's your answer? After disgracing the church's altar with this ... this ..." She glares at Laura, who then mouths, "Okay," to me while squeezing my hand.

"Laura," she says, smiling awkwardly. "And I'm really, truly sorry you had to see that."

Mother keeps her mouth shut, but I can tell she's fuming. And when she turns her head back to me, I swear the look in her eyes is borderline murderous. Maybe I should back away slowly before she chokes me to death. It wouldn't surprise me, after all the shit I've done.

"You disgusting, dirty pig!" Mother smacks me again with the Bible.

Laura slowly slides away from me. "Yeah ... I'll be going now ..." she mumbles, quickly diving away behind Mother and rushing to the door.

That girl escaped a certain doom.

Wish I was smart enough to run. But now that I'm the only one left, she'll never let me leave.

Shit.

"I'm sorry," I repeat.

"You defiled the church," she hisses.

"I know, but ... I thought you weren't—"

"I can come home whenever I *want*; that's *not* up to you to decide," she interjects. "You should be ashamed of yourself. Fooling around with a girl on the altar. Have you lost your mind?"

"No, I was just ... lost in the moment," I reply, sighing to myself, because I know I fucked up big time.

"Your pecker was lost in her snatch is more like it," she growls.

Her words make me chuckle, which I try to hide, but it's too late. The moment she sees it, she smacks the book against my arms again.

"Stop laughing!"

"I'm sorry; it just sounds so funny coming from your mouth."

"I don't care what words I use. What you did was wrong."

"I know, and I apologize. I couldn't control myself," I say. "I have urges. Needs. Mother, don't you understand?"

“Of course, I do, but those things are called ‘beds,’ remember?” She cocks her head. “And last I checked, you were sulking around, drinking yourself numb to forget your memories. Has that suddenly disappeared?”

The mere mention already makes me sour and any joy I still felt from my dirty fuck with Laura quickly dissipates.

“Rub it in, why don’t you.”

“Is this really who you wanna be?” she asks.

Grinding my teeth, I reply, “I don’t know who the fuck I wanna be. I’ve lost track of myself.”

“Then maybe you need to find out who you are before you go around fucking random girls in *my church*.”

“She’s not some random girl,” I growl back, feeling the rage coil around my heart.

“I don’t care who she is. You did something unforgivable. You can say sorry all you want, but the only one who you have to seek forgiveness from is God.” She points at the statue behind me, and my eyes follow, falling onto the statue of Jesus Christ and his merciless gaze as he judges me from above.

And I feel the sudden need to fall to my knees and beg.

“Why?” I ask, tears welling up in my eyes. “Why can’t you give me this one thing?”

“I can’t give you what you want,” Mother hisses. “You need to accept what happened and move on.”

“I was trying to! With her!” I shout.

“Screwing that girl won’t change anything about you.” She taps my chest with her index finger, but the pressure feels like a ton of weight bearing down on my heart.

I shove aside her arm and walk past her.

“Where are you going?” she yells as I walk toward the door.

“Out.”

“You’re going to see her again, aren’t you?”

“Just leave me alone,” I growl back.

“It won’t help. You’ll only end up lost again. Drinking yourself to death.” Her words cut deep like a knife. Mother knows me too well ... so well, she hurts me like no one else can.

The anger inside me comes to a boiling point, and I can’t stop myself from turning my head and screaming, “Just shut up!”

She freezes, her lips parted, but no sound comes out.

A moment of complete silence passes, and I know I’ve done something worse than fucking a girl on the altar. I showed Mother what real hatred looks like. And not just that. I handed it to her on a fucking platter like it was hers to begin with.

While regret pours in, I choose not to answer the immediate sting. I turn around and walk out the door, slamming it shut behind me.

* * *

Revelation 21:4 – “He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.”

With a bottle of whiskey in my hand, I saunter across the cemetery, grasping the occasional stone to stay upright. In the dark of night, two lamps light my way across the pebble path to the stone that crushes my soul each time I see it.

Still, it draws me here to this wretched place I’d never visit if it wasn’t for her.

As I stand in front of it, the weight of her death pulls me to the ground, and I fall to my knees. I wipe away the snot dripping from my nose, sniffing as I stare at the stone in front of me and the ground beneath it.

“I fucked up. I fucked up so badly. It’s all my fault,” I mutter, sniffing again. “I’ve accepted that now. There’s no going around it. I am the cause. I always was.”

I slurp down more whiskey straight from the bottle and sit down on the cold, hard ground, not caring that my pants will get dirty. “I deserve everything. I had it coming. But you didn’t deserve to die for it. I did.” I slap my own chest like it will help. “I should’ve died instead of you.”

I look up at the sky, wondering why this had to happen. “Why, God? Tell me why. Do you hate me so much? I know I’ve been a shitty preacher, but why did you take her away? Why did you have to make me suffer? Huh?”

Tears roll down my cheeks, and I wipe them away with the bottle still in my hand. “I’m a fucking mess. I never did the right thing. I don’t understand. Why?” I yell at the stone like it’ll suddenly start talking back to me. “Why the fuck did you ever marry me?”

Behind me, something snaps, and I turn my head toward the sound. Something behind a tree … or rather someone.

“Laura …?” I mutter, confused as to why she’s here.

Her lips part and she licks them like she’s thinking about what she’s gonna say. “I … I didn’t mean to sneak up on you. I was just …” She swallows. “I’m sorry if I’m interrupting.”

I sigh out loud and turn my head back toward the stone, not knowing what to tell her. I’m a drunk fuck sitting in a cemetery. I mean it’s pretty telling. Still, I wasn’t prepared for her to see me like this.

“How did you know I was here?” I ask, my voice not strong enough to carry the words.

“After you stormed out of the church, I followed you. I was waiting in the alley. I thought since you had a fight with Margaret, I might need to … you know … apologize.”

“Don’t,” I say. “You don’t need to. I made a choice. I live with the consequences.” I can’t even look at her. That’s how disappointed I am in myself that she has to see me like this.

“About that … I’ll help clean up the mess,” she says. “If you want.”

“It’s fine. I’ll do it tonight,” I groan, rubbing my forehead.

It’s quiet for some time. All I can hear are the crickets chirping and my own lackluster breathing while I wonder when it’ll be the last time I’ll hear those. Is it strange to wonder about those things? Maybe. Or maybe I’m too drunk to think straight.

Suddenly, I feel a hand on my shoulder. I flinch, my body uncertain what to do with affection like this. I’ve not felt a warm hand comforting me like that in a long time. And it makes the tears well up again.

“I’m sorry,” I say. “I never wanted you to see this.”

“It’s okay,” she says. “I understand.”

I nod and place my hand on top of hers to show my appreciation. But now I’m beginning to wonder how long she’s been standing there since she said she followed me.

Did she hear everything I said?

“I get it now,” she says, interrupting my thoughts. “Why I found you passed out the other day. Why you seem so self-destructive. Why your speeches are … riddled with rage.”

“You heard …” I mutter.

She squeezes my shoulder. “I’m sorry about your wife. If you want to talk about it, I’m here.”

The moment those words slip from her mouth, my heart breaks open.

I feel so much, but I’ve never been able to let it out. So many emotions running amok and I’ve never found an outlet except for the liquor. Maybe it’s time I started trusting someone else.

“She died … six years ago.”

Laura sits down on her knees beside me and looks me in the eye, waiting for me to open my mouth and speak. She's not looking away, despite my awful, drunken stench. I know she can smell it coming from my mouth, and I know she sees the sorrow in me. I hate seeing the pity in her eyes.

"Was she sick?" she asks softly.

I snort and shake my head, wishing life was that simple.

My life has never been easy.

Never.

Not when I worked my ass off to find someone else's approval of my life.

Not when I finally found love when I thought I didn't deserve it.

Not when they took *everything* away from me.

Grinding my teeth, I reply, "She was murdered."

Chapter 14

Ephesians 6:11 "Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the Devil."

Six Years Ago

I pick up my Bible and eat the last bite of my pancakes before bringing my plate to the kitchen and kissing my wife on the cheeks. "It was delicious. Thanks, hun," I say, winking as I tuck the Bible into my pocket. "See you later."

"Work hard, honey!" she yells as I run out the door, not even having the time to close it behind me.

However, I still make time to turn around halfway down the path and blow her a kiss, which she catches and holds close to her heart.

Just the sight of her warms mine.

It reminds me of the day we met. One year after I left behind the gang life and vowed to take care of the church, I went to buy flowers for Margaret. When I entered the shop and saw a girl ... *my wife* ... behind the cash register, I instantly fell in love with her welcoming smile.

I asked her out on a date, took her to a fancy restaurant, and the rest is history.

She knows about my past. About all the messed up things I did. And she accepts me anyway. Even knowing that someone's going to come for me one day didn't stop her from loving me, and I can't help but love her madly for it.

It's true what they say. Love knows no bounds.

With a stupid smile on my face, I make my way to the church, enjoying the nice weather outside. "Morning, Frank!" Margaret walks out to greet me as I come in, and I say hi to her too.

"Hope you're having a great day," I say.

"Sure thing. Can't wait for today's sermon," she says, smiling as I place my Bible on the pulpit and pull out my notes for today.

"I've prepared a great speech. You'll be amazed." I wink at her, and her smile widens because of it.

She quickly steps toward me and pinches my cheeks like she did when I was still young. "I'm so proud of you."

"Thanks," I reply. Even though I hate it when she squeezes my cheeks, I still love her. "I mean it. I'm eternally grateful you let me be here."

"Aww ... Frank ... you don't have to say it." She cocks her head as she places a hand on my arm. "You know I'll always accept you, no matter your past."

I nod, and after a short hug, we part because the church bells are ringing and people are pouring in.

Soon, believers fill the whole church, waiting for me to talk to them about their faith and give them encouragement in their daily lives. Just like I've been doing for the past few years.

I've come such a long way. From barely being able to form the words to performing complete speeches in front of entire crowds. All with Margaret's help. I couldn't have done it without her.

It's because of her that I'm here today.

Back where I belong. Back in the church. Doing good instead of evil.

Margaret made me swear that I would devote my life to God, so that's what I did. I turned my back on the gang life and focused on being a new me. A different me. A man worthy of the unconditional love she gave me.

She is the reason I've come so far. The only person who's supported me through hardship. Who held out her hand when no one else would.

She helped me become the person I was meant to be. It was a long road, but I fought hard, and look at me now.

A full-fledged preacher.

I sigh and stare at the note in front of me. While the crowd grows quiet, I look around, trying to find that spark to start my sermon.

Except what I find today isn't hope.

It's judgment.

The hairs on the back of my neck stand straight as I lay my eyes on the devil himself.

Time seems to come to a stop the moment I'm confronted with my past.

Or rather ... the one whose life I've ruined.

A top dog in a drug empire not far from here.

The rival drug empire of the gang I was a part of during my darker days.

The same gang that asked me to prove my worth to them ... and pay a visit to that rival to teach him a lesson and show him who's boss around this neighborhood.

That man is sitting right in front of me.

My throat clamps up as he eyes me down, and my fingers tremble with fear. I'm suffocating in my own memories, wanting to erase them from the planet, but I know I can never take back what I did. I wish apologizing was enough, but I know he'll never accept it.

He wants blood.

He licks his lips, tilting his head as he sees my slow demise. And right then, he gets up and walks toward the exit silently.

I can't help but stare at the door even though all these people are waiting for me to continue my sermon.

How did he find me?

Why is he here?

Before he opens the doors and leaves, the man briefly holds up what looks like pieces of flesh ... a piece of an ear and part of a nose.

I gape in shock and horror, unable to utter a word.

Flashes of memories pass through my mind of Mother telling me Carl didn't show up for work yesterday ... and it all suddenly clicks.

If he has Carl, then he knows ... I took something away from him.

And now, he's going to take what's mine.

My notes blow off the pulpit as I take off as fast as I can after him. I rush through the church, past the people waiting in the pews, who look at me like I've seen a ghost. I don't care what they think, and I don't even care about Margaret screaming my name as I sprint for the door.

When I'm outside, the man is already gone.

As fast as I can, I make my way to my house. Faster, faster, faster, as fast as my legs can take me. The pain tears away at me, but not as much as the pain in my heart as I realize what's about to happen.

The ultimate revenge.

When I arrive at my door, almost tumbling over a toy on the driveway, I scream at the top of my lungs, but no one screams back. My hands shake as I search for my keys, my heart racing as I stuff it into the lock and turn it, slamming open the door.

The house is completely silent.

Unlike anything I've heard in ages.

But then a door bangs in the back, and I rush toward it.

I'm too late.

What I see rips a hole in my soul.

My wife being dragged away by two men toward a car with her hands tied behind her back. A piece of black tape slapped across her face. Her eyes filled with a terror that will haunt me forever.

She's pulled feet first into the car by another man who was already inside, along with a little boy.

My baby boy.

I howl like a dog losing its owner when the tires screech as the car pulls away ... as I know that the look of pure horror on their faces will be the last thing I'll ever see of them.

* * *

Now

"Oh ... God." Laura covers her mouth with her hand in shock.

But then she does the most unexpected thing.

She pulls me in for the tightest hug I've had in years. Literally squeezes the life out of me while wrapping her arms around me like a warm cocoon. At first, it feels weird, but after a while, I just accept it and relax, letting her take me over.

Now that I've finally told someone of the horrors I've faced, it feels like a weight has lifted off my shoulders. Like I can finally breathe a little again.

"God, no wonder ... I'm so sorry ..." she whispers. "I don't know what to say."

"You don't have to say anything." I clear my throat to prevent more tears from falling. I've cried enough now. "It was a long time ago."

"Yeah, but you're still ... you're still ..."

Still messed up?

Still a drunk?

Yeah, whatever it is, it's not okay, and she's right. What happened to my wife and son does still affect me.

"I can't get that image from my mind," I say. "Her face."

"It must've been horrible," Laura says. "And it was the last time you saw them?"

I nod, but then I shake my head. "Alive, yes. I saw my wife after she died. They eventually found her body not far from this neighborhood. I had to identify her at the morgue, but what I saw wasn't my wife. It was a body, cut up in pieces."

"Oh, God ..." She shudders, but her hands remain steady on my back. "What about your son?"

"I never saw him again. The police assumed him to be dead too, but they never found his body. I even searched ... day and night for a whole damn year, but it was useless." I close my eyes and try to imagine his face, but no

matter how hard I try, I can never get it right. “He was so young. Just a few months old. How could they do that to a kid?”

Laura hugs me even tighter. She’s unrelenting in her support like she’s willing to take up the world and more. A fighter, just like me … or at least, what I used to be.

“I’m here,” Laura whispers, holding me close. “I’m not going anywhere.”

Her support means the world to me. I never thought I’d be able to lean on someone else like this, but it feels good. I’m relieved I can finally tell someone my story without feeling guilty.

Even though I am.

I couldn’t even go back to the same house where I once lived. Not after they were gone. It was too empty and loaded at the same time. So I went back to the church, and that’s where I’ve been ever since.

Still, the shame never stopped.

“My wife died because of me. My son is gone because of *me*.”

“You didn’t kill them,” she says.

“No, they died because I took something from *him*.”

She puts her hand on my arm. “He chose to retaliate. That was not your choice.”

“Revenge,” I say through gritted teeth. “That’s what it’s all about, right?”

“It doesn’t have to be.” She grabs my shoulders. “Look at me. You are better than this.”

“They took everything from me.” I grab my bottle, but when I attempt to drink, she snatches it away.

“No. Alcohol is *not* the answer, and you know it.”

“Maybe not the answer but definitely a great distraction,” I muse, chuckling like an idiot.

She shakes her head. “Look at you. Getting drunk at your wife’s grave.”

“Pathetic, right?” I fill it in for her.

“No.” She sounds upset, and then she shoves me. “Get up.”

“Why?”

“Get up and walk, goddammit,” she snaps, slapping my chest. “Get up and go on with your life.”

“What’s the point?”

“There’s more to it than sulking and staying in the past,” she growls, grabbing my arm to try to lift me up. “C’mon.”

I sigh, looking at my wife’s grave one last time.

“She would’ve wanted you to go on even though it’s without her.”

I frown. “How do you know?”

“Every woman wants her man to be happy even if she’s not there,” she replies.

That actually makes a lot of sense.

I close my eyes, take a deep breath, and then let her help me up.

“Steady,” she says as she supports me.

I’m so drunk I can’t even walk straight.

“I’m sorry I put this on you. But you didn’t have to come, you know.”

“And leave you here in the dirt?” she scoffs. “Not a chance.”

At first, I’m still holding the bottle of liquor in my hand, but then I mumble, “Ah, fuck it,” and I drop it on the ground, letting the alcohol spill out onto the soil.

“Good,” Laura says. “It’s time you said no to yourself.”

“Someone’s gotta do it,” I jest, laughing a little even though it’s not funny.

However, my smile dissipates the moment I see an old Chevy with darkened windows slowly driving along the cemetery. I stop walking. Goose bumps scatter on my skin. I can barely make out the two figures in the front, but I feel their intense stares as they drive by and disappear from view.

“What were you looking at?” Laura asks.

With furrowed brows, I look at her and then back at the empty road. It must’ve been my imagination. “Nothing.”

Chapter 15

We go back to the church even though I’m drunk as fuck and shouted at Margaret. I don’t want to be an even worse person by not fixing it even if I’m only partially capable. Besides, the cold air of the night has done me good. My vision is much less hazy than it was at the cemetery, and since I left the bottle of liquor, my head feels much clearer. Although I am expecting a raging headache any moment now.

Laura smiles at me as she helps me up the steps of the church and I open the door. However, what I see inside is not what I expected.

The altar is completely clean again with everything back where it’s supposed to be. Not an item misplaced. It’s like we were never there.

Confused, I stumble inside and gawk at the scene in front of me.

Mother appears from behind a column, and when her eyes slowly fall onto mine, this innate sense of guilt and humility wash over me.

I fall to my knees and face the floor, unable to look at her.

“I’ll … let you two talk,” Laura mumbles, and she quickly scurries toward the chapel.

I hear Mother’s footsteps approach me, but I’m frozen to the floor, bowing my head as low as I can.

“I … cannot apologize enough,” I say softly, hoping she can hear.

“Look at me.” Her stern voice can pretty much make me do anything even when I know she’s upset.

However, I never expected to see the calm in her eyes. It makes the tears well up again.

“I’m sorry …” I mutter. “For all the things I put you through since … since …”

Margaret goes to her knees and wraps her arms around me, pulling me into her embrace.

“What did I do to deserve you?” I murmur, hugging her tight.

“You don’t have to do anything, Frank. I’ll always be here. I’ll always forgive you,” she whispers, kissing the top of my head.

“I know I’ve been an incredible burden. Especially with the drinking,” I say.

“You have to stop destroying yourself, Frank. It’s the only way,” she says, making me look at her. “You have to stop and love yourself.”

I nod.

“I know you’ve been dying inside,” she mutters. “I can feel your pain every day.”

I sigh out loud as I realize what I’ve been doing to myself.

“But you have to stop now. You have to be better. And you have to love God. Trust in him to guide you even in the most difficult times,” she says, turning her head to look at the statue of Jesus. “Go pray with him.”

Inside me, a powerful current of energy directs me and forces my limbs into action, commanding me to get up and walk. And I do. I let go of Mother and let my body be drawn to the cross, an immense need to repent and do good being the driving force behind me.

It’s like I’ve suddenly seen the light.

Felt the vindication falling in my lap.

The shroud of anguish lifting to reveal a new man.

I stand tall and look up, making the sign of the cross on myself. “God, I’ve mistrusted you. I’ve blamed you for everything that happened to me. I hated you for so long. But enough is enough. I won’t live this life any longer. I won’t continue to hurt those around me for the sake of hurting myself. I’ve been punished enough. No one but You can judge me now. God, please forgive me my sins. I put my life in Your hands once again.” I draw another cross on my chest. “Amen.”

Suddenly, someone rams on the big front door and smashes it open without regard to its value. It almost comes unhinged. I turn to see what the ruckus is. Two tattooed guys wearing dirty jeans and white shirts saunter in. It’s the same guys from the bar who were looking for a fight not too long ago. One of them, the bald one, is holding a bat … the other pimply one, a gun.

“Well, hello there!” the one with the bat yells, and he smashes the pew to his left. “Long time, no see!”

Mother slaps her hand in front of her mouth, shocked and completely frozen to the floor.

“Nice church you have here,” the one with the gun says, swaying it around. “Be too bad if something were to happen to it, don’t you think?”

The more I look at them, the more I’m starting to realize they were the guys in the car at the cemetery.

Did they follow me here?

“Back for a rematch?” I ask, cocking my head.

“Oh, yeah.” One of them swings his bat again, ramming it into a pillar, and some stone flies across the room.

Grinding my teeth, I ball my fist and narrow my eyes at them. “Leave this church alone. Your fight is with me.”

“Or what?” the one with the gun asks. “You gonna slap us with your Bible?” He laughs as he approaches Mother. “Or is she gonna?”

“Stay away from her,” I growl, and I march to her, blocking her with my body to prevent them from hurting her.

The one with the gun cocks his head at me from afar, but he doesn’t move an inch.

“Go,” I whisper over my shoulder at Margaret. “Lock yourself in your room and don’t come out until I say so.”

“Yeah, go on, Granny,” the one with the bat jests, and he smashes a vase in the corner of the church to smithereens.

“Come with me. I don’t want you to get hurt,” Mother murmurs, grabbing my hand.

All this time and she’s still trying to protect me.

Now, it’s my turn.

I let go of her hand. “I won’t. I promise.” I straighten my collar and crack my neck. Behind me, Margaret slowly slips away into the back of the church, and when I hear the door lock click, I know it’s game on.

“You ready for a second round, pretty boy?” the one with the gun threatens, and he spits on the marble floor. “We’ve come prepared.”

“Do you even know where you are?” I ask, tilting my head as I roll up my sleeves.

“Fucking churches.” The one with the bat smashes another bench, breaking the wood in two.

“You’ll pay for that, you know,” I say.

He laughs. “Yeah, with what?”

The one with the gun grins and quips, “Yeah, tell us how we’re gonna pay because as far as I know … we just came to smash shit up.”

“You came to smash shit up,” I repeat, nodding a little as I casually saunter toward them. “And you chose a church. Of all places to do it.”

“You were here,” Batboy says.

“Oh, so it *is* me you’re after,” I retort, narrowing my eyes. “You know, we could’ve taken this outside so the church would remain intact, and done it the easy way. No one would get hurt.”

“No one?” Batboy laughs.

“Except you,” Gunboy says, laughing too.

I smile at them. “Keep saying that to yourself, and you might start to believe it. After I kick your asses into next week.”

“Ha … funny you’d say that,” Gunboy says, pointing his gun at me. “Too bad only one of us is carrying a gun.”

“Is that supposed to compensate for something smaller?” I jest, looking up and down his small frame. When I see his face contort, I grin, and he comes at me.

Guess I’ve gone and done it now.

They picked the wrong preacher to mess with, though.

Right when he’s in front of me and his gun is in reach, I push his arm aside with a flat hand. The gun goes off, and a bullet ricochets off the wall before landing on the floor. I quickly grasp his wrist and force him to drop it.

He squeals in pain, and then his buddy rushes at me with his bat out like it’s some kind of giant meat-stick.

Kicking Gunboy in his balls and then smashing his face against my knee, I push him aside and grasp the bat before it hits my face, holding him back with sheer will. I might be a little bit drunk, but that doesn’t make me weak … It only makes me more of an asshole.

I push it back so hard it smashes into his forehead, leaving him dazed.

Meanwhile, Gunboy gets up without his gun and starts punching the air, trying to hit me. I’m avoiding both easily, and I laugh while I do it.

“Too slow!” I joke, getting on their nerves.

I can tell. Their faces are bloating and turning red like a hot air balloon. Looks great.

Batboy tries again, and this time, I manage to snatch it away from him. I smack it right into his ankles, breaking one of them. He whimpers and falls to the ground, crying like a little bitch, while his tiny-dicked friend is still trying to punch me. This time, he even throws in some kicks, trying to hit me with all four limbs like he's some kind of martial arts expert. It looks silly, to be honest.

Like they saw some shit on TV and decided they could do it themselves.

No.

Real fighting happens on the streets. You don't learn it from a one-day course, and you certainly don't fucking learn it from watching it on TV.

You learn it by fighting.

Day in and day out.

We don't fight fair here. Rules don't apply to criminals. We fight while carrying our life on our sleeves. We fight with our heart out and with death breathing down our necks.

Just like I'm doing right now.

I throw away the bat because I hate using weapons. I'd much rather use my own fists.

With one quick punch to the gut and another one between his eyes, I manage to knock him to the floor. He tries to get up again, but I know he's dizzy because that's exactly what that move is for. So I stomp on his belly so hard he almost throws up.

Meanwhile, Batboy's crawling out on one leg, still whimpering like a little baby.

"Where you going?" I growl, marching toward him. I lean over and grasp him by his hair, pulling his head up. "Think you can run away?" I burst out into laughter. "Oh, wait ... can't run when your bones are crushed, can you?"

I stomp on his broken ankle, and he cries out in pain.

“Hurts, doesn’t it? You know what else hurts? Breaking shit in my damn church!” I smack his face down against the floor, hoping he bleeds.

Then I turn my attention toward his buddy, who’s attempting to flee by running past the left side of the pews. “Yeah, you run to whoever sent you. Tell him I’ll be waiting right here. And I expect payment for the destruction of property!”

“Don’t leave me!” Batboy yells at his buddy, but he ignores him.

“Aww … there goes your boyfriend,” I muse. “Must be tough seeing him give no fucks about your life.”

“Shut up!” he yells. He turns around to face me while still crawling away on his two hands like that will work.

I grab his throat with both hands, and he claws at my wrists to try to breathe properly. “Listen, you little shit, who are you and your buddy and what are you doing here?”

“Can’t breathe …” he chokes out.

“Then try harder!” I growl, getting up close with him as I sit down on top of him.

“We’re no one …”

“Of course, you’re no one, but *someone* sent you,” I say, squeezing harder.

He whispers, “Julio …”

The mere mention of his name makes the hairs on the back of my neck stand.

Julio. ‘El Campeón.’ The brawler. Rumor had it he killed a thousand men with his bare hands, hundreds of those with just two fingers. Of course, those are rumors … but terrifying nonetheless.

He’s also the man who killed my wife.

“Why?” I hiss back. “After everything he took from me, he’s still not done?”

He still struggles under my grasp. “Because he wants you gone.”

“Why? He would’ve done it sooner if he just wanted me gone!” I smack him harder to the floor. “Didn’t he want me to suffer? Huh? Tell me!”

He softly hisses, “You’re hanging out with his daughter.”

My eyes widen, and my gaze instantly darts to Laura, who comes out of her hiding spot behind the chapel wall. Her eyes bore into me. If only she could hear his words.

Or maybe it’s better that she doesn’t.

Laura Espino … Julio Espino’s daughter.

I can barely believe it, yet it all makes sense.

She said she was on the run. Maybe he’s tracking her. It would explain why she doesn’t want to discuss her family. And then his lackeys saw me with her, and now, he wants me dead.

Of course … because I could use her against him.

As the realization dawns, I loosen my grip on my victim, and he immediately pushes me off him, scrambling away on one foot. But I don’t care anymore. I know he won’t show up here again. He’s learned his lesson the hard way. Working for Julio and fighting me will give you broken bones, that’s what.

He scrambles while my attention focuses on Laura.

I’ve been staring at a ghost of my past this entire time, dancing with fate itself.

She’s his daughter. A girl he loves most dearly.

And it would be the world’s worst pain to him if she died.

If…

Would I ever be able to?

Am I that person? The one who wants vengeance so badly he'd even kill the only girl who gave him his spirit back?

Slowly, but surely, Laura comes walking toward me, but I'm not sure I'm prepared. The choice between good and evil is currently dividing me into pieces. I don't want to lose her ... but to see that motherfucker's tears is my dying wish.

How do I look at her the same way without feeling that pain?

"Those guys ... What did they want? Why did they trash this place?" she inquires.

Grinding my teeth, I hiss, "Please don't ..."

"Don't what?"

"Don't come closer."

She frowns in confusion. "Why?"

"They were after me," I say.

"So?" She still tries to come closer, but I take a step back. "Why are you acting this way? Just because you hurt them? I don't care about any of that."

"It's not that," I growl, taking a deep breath.

She stares at me, the flame in her eyes growing weaker. "Those guys ... I knew I recognized them from somewhere." She grabs herself like she wants to hug herself instead of me. "They work for him ... but you already know that, don't you? That's why they were after you."

She's so smart. Too smart for her own good.

"My father wants you."

"It's complicated," I say, swallowing away the lump in my throat.

"He must've found out about us." She rubs her lips together. "He always hated seeing me with a man. And I hated his controlling urges." She sighs.

“But that doesn’t have to come between us. He can’t decide who I’m with. That’s not up to him.”

I don’t reply. I don’t know how or what I should say. She doesn’t even know the full story. The real reason for our mutual hatred.

“Can’t we—”

“Please … just leave,” I say, looking away.

“Frank …”

“I can’t,” I say. “You don’t know what you’re asking of me.”

“I know my father is an asshole, but that doesn’t mean you have to let him win and—”

“That’s not why I’m asking you to leave,” I interject, staring straight at her. Her teary eyes make me weak. Malleable. And it crushes me.

If anything could break me, she could.

“Tell me why?” she asks. “At least give me a reason.”

“You’re better off not knowing some things,” I mutter. “But right now, I really wanna be left alone.”

She grimaces. “If that’s what you want.”

It pains me to see her turn her back to me and walk out.

Not soon after, Mother approaches me from behind and places a hand on my shoulder. “She’ll be back.”

“I don’t know if I want her to come back.”

“Yes, you do. I know what you feel. I’ve seen the way you look at her.”

I glance at her over my shoulder. “She’s *his* daughter.”

Her lips quirk up into a soft smile. “Love knows no bounds.”

And just like that, she’s managed to completely unhinge me.

Her wise words always manage to dig deep into my skin and make me rethink my resolve.

Even if I wanted to, just to see the look on his face, I could never kill her.

Even if it means he and his men will kill me first.

But if she only knew the truth ... she'd kill me herself.

Chapter 16

Nine years ago

I'm the bad guy.

I knew that when I began dealing, and I know it now.

I know full well what I chose when I signed up for it. When I decided to shake people down and beat them up just for a bit of money. When I began to kill.

I knew every step of the way that I was as bad as could be, but I didn't care. Never do.

All I wanted was recognition. Someone to tell me that I finally made it. That I was the guy who they all wanted.

Except it's never enough.

Nothing I do will ever make this gang happy.

They'll always want more, more, more. To the point of making me do the impossible. Something unspeakable. Something that creates a point of no return.

That one night ... when I broke my own rules ... that was when I turned my back on the gang.

The moment a woman crossed my path. A woman who didn't know any better. A woman who wasn't supposed to be there.

Yet she was.

And the moment I pulled the trigger, I already knew I made the biggest mistake of my life.

I didn't want her to die. It was never part of the plan.

But I was always taught to protect myself at all cost. To shoot before you look. To eliminate the threat before it even exists.

But she was never a threat.

She was simply ... there.

An unlucky chance of fate.

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It was her house I was robbing, but I was told no one would be home. And when I found out I wasn't, I fired a shot without even looking to see who it was.

A fatal mistake.

It was a woman.

And she was pregnant.

In my shame, I ran to her body and began to pump her chest in the hopes of bringing her back to life, but it was to no avail. She never even breathed. Not a single whimper. Except the one coming from me.

I tucked my gun back into its holster and grabbed her arms, dragging her out of the room. I hauled her all the way back to my car and shoved her inside. In the dead of night, I drove with tears streaming down my face.

There were two golden rules. Never kill a woman and never hurt a child. And I did both.

My mistake will haunt me for the rest of my life.

Ten minutes.

That's how much time has passed between then and now as I park my car in an alley and pull the body out. A trail of blood flows on the ground as I haul her body across the road. I don't know what to do. Where to go.

I can't go back to the gang. It's done. It's over.

I've hurt enough people and caused enough pain.

This is where I crossed the line, and I refuse to go back.

But I have no friends. No family. No one to go to for help.

Except for one place.

The church where I grew up. The same place I'm hauling a dead body to right now.

But the closer I get, the more my guilt weighs down on my soul, and dragging her feels more difficult with every step I take. How can I ever make this right?

In these past few years, I've lost touch with myself. With the church and Margaret. And with God.

How can I ever face Him now?

And still, somehow, for some reason, I find the will to persist as I haul the dead pregnant woman up the slippery stairs of the church.

Rain falls down on my face as I fight to get her to the top, but I don't give up. Not until I'm right in front of the door where I collapse in agony over what I've done. My breathing is ragged and my muscles hurt, but it's nothing compared to my heart.

At least I can be sure the rain will wash away any trail of the blood.

I bang on the wooden door as hard as I can, like a final cry for help, and within minutes, my prayer is answered.

As the door opens and light pours out, inviting me in like the end of a tunnel leading to heaven, I stare up into the face of judgment.

"Help me ... please ..." I mutter, tears and rain streaming down my face.

At first, Margaret's silent as she eyeballs the woman in my arms.

But then she closes her eyes, sighs, and holds out her hand.

I gratefully take it, and she helps me up from the ground. Together, we drag the body into the church, and she slams the doors shut. When she turns, she takes a deep breath and asks, "What did you do?"

I shake my head and whisper, "I'm so sorry, Mother. I didn't know where else to go."

"Is she alive?" she asks, approaching me and the body.

"No."

She sighs again, looking back and forth between me and the body.

“It must be kept a secret. Someone will come looking for her.”

“I know,” she says, and she passes me. “Come.”

I quickly grasp the body by the arms and drag it all the way with me as I follow her to the back of the church and then outside. I place the body on the frigid ground and let out a few breaths.

Suddenly, Carl appears in the doorway, staring at us and the body.

A moment of silence passes, and I wonder if he’s going to run and call the cops.

“Help us ...” I mutter.

He licks his lips, glances over his shoulder, and then rushes toward me.

I breathe a sigh of relief as Mother grabs two shovels from a shed in the far end of the yard and hands one to each of us.

“Dig.” Her voice stern, as I remember it to be.

Without question, I take it and start digging a hole together with Carl.

I don’t complain.

I ignore the pain.

I refuse to cry or get mad.

After all, I did this. I should be the one to carry the burden.

Under Mother’s watch, we dig a hole deep enough to bury the body and cover it with earth. The same place where I’ll bury my sins and keep them hidden forever.

Right before her hand disappears into the ground, I quickly grasp the ring that was on her finger, and I put it on my own finger. I need to wear this as a reminder of what I’ve done. So I’ll never forget this body lying here in the ground.

When it’s done, I place the shovel in the dirt and stare at the soil in front of us. The woman is gone, but this night will always remain.

I gaze at Mother and then at Carl.

“This will be our secret,” I say. “You know that, right?”

Carl nods.

“If you go to the police now, you’re an accomplice. You helped me bury her.”

“I know,” he says. “But I’ll always help you.”

I nod. Even after all these years, he’s still fiercely loyal. The little boy who grew up to be quite the reliable kid. Surprising, to say the least. And now we’re bound to each other.

“You will *never* go back to those people,” Margaret suddenly snaps, her arms folded. “Understood?”

I nod, looking her straight in the eyes. I don’t want to insult her by looking away even though I fear her judgment more than anything in this entire world.

“You belong to this church. Agreed?”

“Yes, Mother.”

“Good. Because this is one debt you won’t easily fulfill. But you can begin by cleaning up the blood.” She points at the trail behind me, leading all the way back into the church.

I lick my lips and nod again. I’m not going to go against her wishes. I fucked up, and she saved me yet again.

After all this time, all these fuck-ups, the betrayal … and she still helped me.

There’s no way I can ever repay her for that.

But I will try.

I will try with every last breath in my lungs and beating of my heart.

I will work toward gaining her trust.

I will learn to love this church and God once more.

After forsaking this church for so long only for a bit of recognition, I owe that to her. To myself. To God.

I will repent.

* * *

Now

My eyes open and I'm instantly awake. God, what an awful nightmare.

Sighing, I look at the clock. No use in going back to sleep because it will be time to wake up soon. Besides, I hate to bring up more memories, and they always come when I go to sleep sober.

I stare at the ceiling, wondering what the hell I'm doing with my life. I can't help but think about Laura and everything that happened. After I had found out she was *his* daughter, I felt the rage flowing through my veins.

Was I wrong to send her away?

It was ruthless, yes, but I did it for the right reasons.

At least, that's what I keep telling myself.

A knock on my door pulls me from my thoughts, and I sit up straight to see who it is. Mother peeks around the corner and asks, "Can I come in?"

I nod, and she pushes the door open further.

"I just wanted to ... talk." She seems hesitant as she approaches me, and I wonder what's bothering her.

"Is it the mess in the hall? I'll clean it up."

"No, it's not that." She frowns.

"The broken benches? I'll ask Carl to buy new ones."

“No, it’s not about the mess those two boys made,” she says, and she sits down on the edge of my bed.

I sigh. “This isn’t about Laura, right?”

“Are you sure you want her gone?”

“No, but it’s for the best.” With furrowed brows, I look away, not feeling up to this conversation. “Please don’t try to change my mind.”

“If I showed you something, would you be willing to fight?”

“Why? Does it matter?” I bark.

“Yes. Because, despite those filthy things you did on the altar, I still care about you. I care about your well-being. Don’t you know that? I want you to be happy.”

I chew on my lip. “Of course, I do ...”

“Then you know I only want what’s best for you. And that girl clearly makes you happy. You’ve been drinking much less since you met her, and you’ve finally started smiling again.” She grabs my chin and makes me look at her. “Frank, this is important.”

I don’t know what to say, but then she opens her mouth again. “I wasn’t sure if I should show this to you, but I decided your heart was more important than the hope you might be at peace again.”

She rummages in her pocket and pulls out something that looks like a card. “One of the guys who came in and ruined the church dropped this on the floor.”

She holds it up. It’s a photograph.

Showing the image of my little boy way back when.

And my world feels like it’s come to a stop.

I snatch it from her hand and gawk at his picture. I haven’t seen this in ages. Actually, the last time was in my old home, which I haven’t been to since I left it all those years ago. I couldn’t stomach going back to that place with my whole family gone.

But how the fuck did those assholes get their hands on this?

Mother places her hand on top of mine and says, “If you want to go, I won’t stop you.”

I nod. “I need to find out more ...”

“I know,” she says, smiling softly.

I smile back. “Thank you. You don’t know what this means to me.” I stare at the picture in my hand, and I can feel the anger flowing through my body.

This isn’t just an old picture of my son.

It’s a call to action, and it ignites a fire in me that I’m not willing to put out.

It makes me wanna go after those fuckers and finally get my revenge.

“This is what you need,” she says. “I tried to ignore it for so long, but now I finally understand,” she says, still holding my hand. “But you have to promise me you’ll come back.”

“I will,” I reply.

She leans in and presses a kiss to my cheeks. “Good luck.”

Then she turns and leaves again. When the door closes, I jump out of bed and grab some clothes I haven’t worn in ages and put them on. I straighten my cuffs, position the collar and tie exactly right, and put the cross around my neck. Along the very bottom of the wall, I pull out a loose brick and remove the knife I’d hidden there long ago, tucking it into my pocket.

From the corner of my eye, I spot the bottles of liquor right below my bed. A nuisance, and not what I want to remember. I’m a different person now. I can feel it in my veins.

So I grab the bottles and pour them out in the sink then discard the empty bottles. It feels good to finally get rid of it. A new start with a clean slate is exactly what I needed. And now that I’ve finally got a goal in life again, I’m not going to let anything get in my way.

Right before I go out, I take one last look at myself in the mirror while holding up the picture of my son.

I pick up the Bible on my nightstand and open the pages until I find the verse I'm looking for.

2 Samuel 22:38 – “I pursued my enemies and destroyed them, And I did not turn back until they were consumed.”

Dear God, give me strength in this time of need. Because now, more than ever, I'll need you by my side.

Chapter 17

Chewing on a piece of straw, I've been sitting on this bench a few feet away from Chuck's Bar for a few good hours now. It's not without reason. I'm waiting for a particularly stinky guy by the name of Gunboy or Pimpled Little Shit. I've beaten his ass twice now, and I think it's time for a third.

Maybe this time, he'll learn his lesson.

With a smug grin on my face, I keep a watchful eye, waiting for the little turd to arrive. I know it's the middle of the day, but that never stopped the assholes from showing up uninvited. They did it before; they'll certainly try again.

I just hope Chuck will let me have them.

I mean they've fucked up his place and scared away his customers, so I doubt he'll be happy to see them. Not that it'll stop them from messing shit up again, which is where I come in to play.

And the moment I see a familiar car roll up and a certain Pizzaface come out, I murmur, "Gotcha."

Whistling, I get up from the bench and stroll to the bar, precisely the place he's heading. I'm only five minutes behind, which is the perfect amount of time for an ambush that'll make the pimples drop from his face. Maybe he'll be a prettier boy when I'm done with him. I'll smack those pimples right off.

Spitting out the straw, I look at the picture of my son one last time before I cross the street.

Once again, a preacher and a criminal walk into a bar. My life is just one giant joke.

Especially when I see Gunboy turn his head toward me and watch as his eyes almost pop out at the sight of me standing in the doorway.

Chuck frowns as he glares at both of us and growls, "Nuh-uh, no sir, not today." He snatches away the glass he just put down for Pimpleface and barks, "Get out."

"Fuck," the shithead says.

"Yeah, fuck's about right." I cross my arms. "If you don't come with me now, I'm gonna fuck your life up so badly that you won't be able to shit for weeks."

He jumps off his seat and scrambles away, trying to hide in a corner, but that ain't going to save his ass. No way. He's mine.

"Frank!" Chuck yells as I approach the boy. "Not again."

"Sorry, Chuck, but I got a bit of a thing going on with this one."

Right as I grab his collar, Chuck roars, "Take it outside, for crying out loud."

I roll my eyes and sigh, still holding Gunboy who's whimpering with his eyes closed. "C'mon, fuckwad," I growl, dragging him with me. "See ya, Chuck," I say, as I walk past him.

"Rather not," he muses, making me chuckle as I haul the boy outside.

"Let me go!" he cries out as I pull him along to an alley not far ahead.

“Shut your trap,” I bark, glancing over my shoulder. “You and I have business.”

“I didn’t do fuck nothing,” he says.

“Who are you trying to fool? The Queen of England?” I spit, as I throw him into the dead-end alley. “Do I look like an old turd to you?”

He scowls. “I should’ve killed you when I had the chance.”

I raise a brow. “Oh, please, like you *ever* had a chance.”

When he tries to run, I shove him right back into his corner and growl, “Sit.” Because he’s a fucking dog, and he needs to listen.

“You think you could get away with firing a gun in my fucking church?”

“Look, I’m sorry, okay? It was just a job.”

“A job? To scare the living shit out of my mother?”

“Your mother?” He frowns. “That old hag?”

I pick up a rock and throw it at his face, making him yowl in pain. It leaves a big red mark, and a bloody streak across his forehead. “Learn some fucking manners, will ya?”

“Jesus Christ! What is wrong with you?” he screams.

“What’s wrong with *me*?” I point at myself and snort. “I wasn’t the one pointing a gun at a preacher.”

“I already told you it was a job!”

I come closer and corner him. “Who gave it to you?”

He crawls back against the wall. “Some dude in the gang. I don’t know his name.”

“Lie.” I pick him up by his collar and hold out my fist. “See this pretty here?” I glance at my knuckles. “They’re eager to say hi to your face.”

“No, no, please.”

“Then talk,” I growl, and I pull the picture of my son from my pocket. “You asshats dropped this in my church. How did you get this?”

He looks at it in confusion. “I don’t know.”

I shake him. “I’m not playing games. Tell me. Now!”

“All right, all right, I got it from the same guy who gave me the job. Told me to go find you and give you a good scare.”

“You mean beat the shit out of me.”

He shrugs. “Whatever.”

“What about the picture?”

“I dunno; they just wanted me to drop it so you’d see it. They didn’t tell me why.”

“Who? Give me a name.”

“Sergio from the butcher’s shop in the next town. You know.”

Yeah, I know the place.

Grinding my teeth, I mull it over for a second. “Is he there right now?”

“I dunno; I’m only a gang member. I don’t know nothing,” he says.

His innocent act gets me so worked up that I shove him back against the wall. “Listen up, fuckface. You’re going to stop doing work for those gangs right now.”

“What?” His jaw drops. “What the fuck? You’ve gotta be joking, right?”

“I’m not messing around. I’m done with you and your pal shitting on my neighborhood. You want money? Go find some honest work like the rest of us.”

“Fuck you,” he spits. “I need this.”

“No. You need the money, but you’re just not willing to work for it,” I snarl.

“What a lazy piece of shit you are.”

“Lazy? Fuck you; I’m not lazy,” he growls, pushing me away. “Who are you anyway? Some goddamn preacher doesn’t know shit about the street.”

I grasp his collar and shove him right back against the wall. “I’ve been in your position. I *was* a gang member before you could even piss straight. Don’t think you know everything, you little shithead. Have some respect for your elders.”

He laughs. “Elders. Right.”

“Shut up,” I growl. “You don’t get to laugh. I’m sick of your shit. You’d better not show your face in Chuck’s bar or my church ever again.”

“Or what?” He raises a brow, challenging me.

Since he’s asking for it, I might as well show him.

So I make a fist and pummel him right in the balls.

He squeals like a girl, grabbing his nuts. When I move away, he falls to his knees, rolling onto his side as he grimaces.

“Or that,” I reply, enjoying the sight of seeing him roll around in the dirt. “That’s only the warning shot. I’ve got plenty more up my sleeve. Wanna try me?”

“No ...” he hisses. His throat’s still clamped shut, probably from the pain surging through his body.

“You sure?” I smile. “I’m never opposed to a bit of kinky fisticuffs when the occasion arises. Maybe you could invite your buddy too; that way we can see if you actually have any balls underneath all that bullshit.”

“Fuck you!” he curses as I turn around.

I wave and laugh as I walk away. “Yeah, good luck with that!”

Time to go to my next victim.

However, right as I pass by Chuck’s Bar, I hear a familiar voice call out for me.

“Frank?”

I stop and turn to see Laura standing in Chuck's doorway. It looks like she came running out after she saw me.

"What are you doing?" she asks.

"I could ask you the same," I reply, pointing at the building behind her. "Drinking in the middle of the day? That's unlike you."

She puts her hand on her side. "I wasn't. I work here now. My shift starts in a couple of minutes."

"Oh ..." Well, that's a new one. Never expected Chuck to hire girls. Then again ... it sounds just like something that old dirtbag would love.

I shrug. "Well, good luck." I turn and start walking again, but she follows me and grabs my arm, making me stop again.

"Wait. Tell me what you're doing."

"Why?"

She makes a face. "I know you're doing something stupid."

"Stupid? Who, me?" I raise a brow.

"Stop joking." She playfully slaps my arm. "You've been acting weird since those two dudes showed up at the church."

I swallow, being reminded of what they said in church ... and that she's Julio's daughter.

"It's not something that concerns you." I try to shake her off, but she won't let go.

"Yes, it does. I'm worried about you."

"Don't be," I reply. "I'll be fine."

"So you admit it ..."

"Admit what?"

She narrows her eyes. "You're up to something."

I snort. “It’s nothing good, so don’t ask.”

“Are you going to hurt people?”

I nod.

“You can’t just … kill people, Frank,” she says under her breath.

“No?” I retort. “Watch me.”

“There must be another way,” she says.

“They had a picture of my son,” I say through gritted teeth. “It’s personal now.”

Again, I try to leave, and she clings to me, making me turn around and sigh. “You can’t stop me from doing this, Laura. No one can.”

“I don’t want you to get hurt.” I stand still as she wraps her arms around me and impulsively hugs me. I’m overwhelmed by her warmth even after the cold shoulder I gave her. How can I not feel guilty?

“This is crazy …” she murmurs.

I agree.

I don’t want to walk away. I don’t want her to stop.

But I know I have to do this. “Maybe crazy is the only way I can function right.”

“I don’t believe that.”

I don’t know how to respond, so I don’t. Anything I say is wrong, and we both know it. Besides, I don’t want to get into it right now. I’ve got other things on my mind, and I think she can tell.

She pulls away and says, “Give me your phone.”

I frown. “Why?”

“Just do it.”

Reluctantly, I hand it over, wondering what she wants with it. She pushes a few buttons and then hands it back to me. “You’ve got my number now, so call me if you get into trouble.”

“Okay.” Well, that was surprising.

She hugs me again, almost squeezing the air out of me. As she lets go, she rubs her lips and says, “I’ll drop by the church later. See if you’re okay.”

It’s not a question, so I guess I have no choice in the matter.

When I turn around and start walking again, she yells, “Will you get hurt?”

“I’ll try not to,” I say.

“Be careful.”

Her comment makes me smile, and I don’t fucking know why.

I shouldn’t feel this way about his fucking daughter … yet I do.

Goddamn this fucking heart of mine.

Chapter 18

I kick open the door to the butcher’s shop, not giving a shit that customers are inside. “Everybody get out!” I yell.

People seem confused at first, but when I rummage in my pocket, they scramble for the door. I’m not carrying a gun, but the mere idea that I might makes people run, which is exactly what I want. Chaos.

With furrowed brows, the shop owner barges past the cash register and toward me. “What the fuck do you think you’re doing?” he growls.

I don’t move one inch as he stands right in my face, towering above me. “I’m looking for Sergio.”

“Don’t know him,” the man growls, folding his arm.

“Of course, you don’t, but I know he’s here.”

He sneers, “What the fuck do you want?”

“I need to have a little chat with him,” I reply, narrowing my eyes.

“About what?” He squints too now.

I really don’t want to have more casualties than necessary, so I decide to take it down another route.

With a wicked grin on my face, I say, “Oh, you know … boy talk.”

“Boy talk?” He raises a brow.

“Yeah … he left his dildo at my place.”

His jaw drops, but nothing comes out except for a little gasp. He seems flabbergasted, so I grasp the opportunity to peer over his shoulder at the door in the back where I see a guy flash by.

“I also wanted to ask him if he could bring condoms next time,” I add, grinning as I watch him freeze.

“Uh …”

“You wanna hear more?” I ask.

“No, no, he’s right up there,” the guy says, pointing at the door I was looking at.

I place a hand on his shoulder, and he quickly steps aside. I pass him and say, “Thanks.”

He wipes his shirt precisely where I touched him, which makes me snort, but I have to keep my composure. Using the gay card is such a fun thing to do around homophobes.

I enter through the door and carefully look around before closing it behind me, twisting the lock to keep everyone out. I don’t want anyone to interrupt.

I knock on the door to see if he hears me, but he doesn’t. Instead, the guy actually leaves his store and walks away, just like that. Crazy, but it’s true.

Guess he doesn't wanna get involved in the dirty game he knows is about to go down. Although it's gonna be a different kind of dirty than he probably thought.

I shrug. Not my monkeys, not my circus.

I look around and take in my surroundings. From the look of this room, I'm almost certain it's soundproof. Probably because my business isn't the only dirty business going down here.

It's cool in here too, which isn't surprising, considering meat is hanging from the hooks and lying on the racks. Shivering, I wait until I hear a sound coming from the back. In a small office up ahead, a man's standing in the doorway with a cup of coffee in his hand. Rummaging in my pocket, I take out the knife and hold it tightly as I approach. He turns to look at the television hanging from the wall, and it makes me stop in my tracks.

Why?

Because I recognize his face.

He's the same man I saw six years ago ... the day they took my wife.

He hauled her away from my house.

I could crush the knife in my hand right now.

Instead, I tiptoe toward him, trying not to make a sound as I approach him from behind. The closer I get, the more rage spills into my body and makes this freezer feel like a goddamn volcano. But I'm keeping it together ... until I'm right behind him and put my knife against his throat.

"Don't. Move," I hiss in his ear.

The man is utterly quiet, his lips almost sewn together as he trembles in place.

"Put the cup down," I say.

He does what I ask, placing it on a table just inches away.

"Please don't," he pleads.

“Give me one good reason ...” I hiss.

“I’ll do whatever you want,” he says.

“I don’t want you to do anything.” My blood feels like it’s boiling right now.

“You want money?” he asks.

“Shut up,” I say, pushing the blade further into his skin until I can feel drops of warm blood spill over my hand. “You know why I’m here.”

“No, I don’t,” he says.

“Listen to my voice ... recognize it?” I murmur into his ear. “You’ve heard it before ... roaring out loud the moment you took her ... six years ago.”

Out of nowhere, he reaches for the knife and smashes my hand away from his throat, causing it to drop to the floor. He immediately turns and smacks me in the face, making me tumble backward.

“You should’ve stayed a fucking drunk,” Sergio growls, coming closer.

I adjust my jaw and wipe the blood from my lips then I retaliate with a fist to his stomach. However, he takes it like a pro, even laughing as my hand is still against his belly. “Think that’ll hurt me? I’ve felt much, much worse.”

Grunting, I swiftly elbow him in the chin, making him stumble backward.

“You took my fucking wife!” I scream, and I punch him in the nose. “You killed her!”

He laughs again as he takes a repeated beating to the face. “You think that’s all we did to her?”

“Shut up!” I scream.

We’re fighting like crazy dogs in a freezer filled with meat, and I’m a hundred percent sure one of us will end up on those racks.

Why?

Because I’m not walking away from here until he’s dead.

He punches me in the gut so hard I stumble backward.

“You should’ve heard her. ‘Frank, Frank, please help me.’” He imitates my wife’s voice in such a degrading way that I lose my shit.

I ram into him with my head and shove him all the way into the back of his office, slamming both of us into the wall. He coughs as he tumbles to the floor with me on top of him. My hands twist around his neck, and I squeeze as hard as I can.

“You took my family away from me!” I spit in his face.

When he’s almost blue, I release him and slap him hard. “Tell me where he is!”

“Who? Your son?” He laughs again, so I grab the knife lying on the floor and jam it into his cheek, piercing his mouth.

He screams as blood pours onto his tongue, and I pull out the knife and hold it to his throat again. “Tell me where Julio is,” I say. “I know he moved, so don’t give me that bullshit old address.”

He spits out the blood and smiles like an idiot. “Why did you come here, preacher?”

I pull the picture out of my pocket and show it to him. “One of your minions dropped this in my church. It wasn’t an accident.”

Sergio chuckles like a lunatic. “You should’ve stayed away from her, Jesus Boy!”

“Stayed away from Laura? No, that’s not why you and your pussy gang threatened me.” I shake my head. “This picture has nothing to do with it, and you still wanted me to see it. Why?”

“Yeah … to fuck with your head!” He spits blood in my face.

So I cut his arm and make him bleed as retribution.

“Motherfucker!” he squeals.

He tries to fight me off, but I push him down by sitting on top of him. “This is your last chance, asshole. Tell me exactly where Julio is or I’ll cut you

again and again and again until you bleed to death.”

At first, his eyes glance toward a few papers on his desk, which makes me think he’s got the address hidden here somewhere.

But then he turns his head back to me and shows me his bloody teeth.
“Fuck you!”

I shrug and sigh. “Suit yourself.”

I cut into his arms, his chest, and his legs, and then punch him in the gut so hard he gulps for air. More blood pours out from his skin, and he groans in pain. I let him loose and get up, and he vomits over the floor. Guess my punch was nauseating enough.

“Disgusting,” I murmur as I focus on the papers and search for the address.

I throw aside everything that doesn’t matter until I find what I’m looking for … Julio’s new home.

“He’ll kill you, you know,” he mutters, still coughing up blood.

I cock my head at his comment. “Not if I kill him first.”

His frown makes me smile.

But then more shit pours from his mouth. “Your kid cried so much … I wanted to strangle him in the car.”

“Keep your mouth shut, or I’ll cut out your tongue too,” I snarl, pointing the knife at him.

He laughs. “You think I’m scared of you? I live under Julio’s rule; there is *nothing* you can do to me that’ll make me fear you more than I do him.”

“Maybe you should’ve chosen a different path then,” I say. “Just like I did when you took my family away from me.”

“God won’t save us,” he spits. “You think He cares about any of us?”

“He cares enough to give me my spirit to fight you and your pussy gang,” I reply.

“Ha … he should’ve given you the spirit to run faster when your lady and your kid were being dragged away.”

“What did you say?” My eye begins to twitch, and my grip on the knife grows stronger again.

“You heard me.” He coughs. “You could’ve saved them if only you were faster. But you didn’t. And now they’re dead because of you.”

I rush to him and grab him by the collar while pointing the knife at him. “Say that again; I dare you.”

He smiles as he slyly whispers, “Did you know we made your boy listen to her scream as we took her, one by one?”

That’s it.

I roar as I shove the knife into his hand.

He squeals out loud, the sound only interrupted by choking noises as I drag him along his collar back into the freezer. While he squirms on the floor, I lift him up and push him … straight into a hook hanging from the wall.

More blood comes from his mouth, and he yowls in pain as I pull the chains so his body rises from the ground. Then I take my knife from his hand and jam it into his chest, sliding it down toward his belly, so he bleeds out completely.

It won’t kill him right away, though.

No, his death will be slow and agonizing; he’ll slowly bleed out in a cold frozen void between the pigs where no one will ever hear him scream.

Chapter 19

Covered in blood, I step out of my car in the middle of the night and stumble into the church. My limbs feel heavy, and my heart is burdened with yet another murder. But I don’t regret a thing.

That motherfucker had it coming for him.

I push the doors open and slide inside. Luckily, no one's inside. At least, not from what I can see.

Rubbing my forehead, I make my way to the altar, wiping away the blood from my face when I see the statue in front of me. There, I fall to my knees and make the sign of the cross on my chest.

"God ... please forgive me for my sins," I murmur, and I grab the cross hanging from my neck and press a kiss to it.

Blood drips down to the floor as I let out a sigh and stare up at His image, welcoming His judgment. I know full well what I did ... that I committed a heinous crime. But if God will not punish those responsible for my misery, then I will hand out the pain.

Suddenly, I feel something on my shoulder. In a moment of fear, I pull my knife and almost lash out.

I barely manage to stop myself from slicing Laura.

I stare into her eyes as the knife drops to the floor.

Oh, God. Oh, fuck.

I almost hurt her.

"I'm sorry," I mutter.

She smashes her lips together and shakes her head. I wonder if she'll run. If she's afraid of me. She should be.

I'm covered in the blood of my enemies.

I still feel like an animal after killing the gang member working for her dad.

She knows he and I have business now ... and she's in the middle of it all.

Still, she stays, unmoving, the look on her face as certain as it's always been.

But I can't look her in the eyes the same way I could before. My gaze falls to her feet as the thought crosses my mind that I could use her as leverage. But I could never risk her life.

I couldn't even touch her like that.

The moment the knife almost cut her ... I haven't experienced terror like that in ages. A feeling I haven't felt in years. The last time was when ...

I shake my head and rub my lips together. The metallic taste of blood enters my mouth, reminding me of my sins.

"I killed someone," I mutter as my eyes slowly rise until they meet hers, which shine with endless compassion, and the guilt rushes through my veins.

She swallows, visibly constrained. "I can tell."

I look at my arms and hands. I look like I've bathed in blood.

She drops to her knees right in front of me and tilts my chin up. "You don't have to tell me anything. God is the only one who can judge us."

I nod, and she puts her shoulder under my arm, helping me up.

I groan as pain shoots through my stomach, probably from my fight with Sergio.

"Are you hurt?" she asks, wrapping her hand around my waist.

"No, I'm okay," I say. "It's only a few bruises. No big deal."

She helps me to my room, but when I glance over my shoulder and see the trail of blood behind me, I say, "I'll have to clean that up."

"Don't worry about it," she says, guiding me inside. "I'll do it."

She turns on the faucet and wets two cloths, handing one to me. "Clean yourself up a little. I'll be right back." She leaves with the other wet cloth, probably to clean up the mess I made.

While she's gone, I take off the ring around my finger and place it by the sink. Then I look at myself in the mirror, disgusted with what I see. I wipe

away what I can, but the cloth is quickly drenched in blood, and adding water doesn't help one bit.

When she comes back, I glance over my shoulder right when she turns on the light.

She stops in her tracks, clearing her throat as she focuses her gaze on me. Then she closes the door. The way the left side of her lip quirks up makes me suddenly aware of the fact that we're alone. As she approaches me, I grasp the sink, worried that I might hurt her. I'm still tormented by my own need to inflict pain on those who did me wrong, and for some reason, it's hard to distinguish friend from foe.

She carefully peels my bloody fingers loose and pulls me along with her into the shower. She turns it on, and warm water pours down on my clothes and skin. Blood mixes with the water, creating an eerie color, but she doesn't seem fazed.

Instead, she only comes closer, running her fingers through my dirty hair, cupping my face. Testosterone is still raging through my body, and my hormones go on full tilt the moment she rips open my shirt and pushes it off my arms.

I love feeling her hands on my muscles. What can I say? Underneath this rugged beast is still a man made of flesh ... and his flesh is getting stiff as a board.

With a firm hand, she tugs on my belt, pulling me closer as she pulls it out of the loops. I watch her, meticulously licking my lips as she throws the belt away and unbuttons my pants. In one go, she pulls down both my pants and boxer shorts, leaving me naked and with a rock-hard dick.

One quick glance and she's grinning.

Of course, she is.

I smile, shaking my head, which is still covered in blood.

This is really fucked up.

"Why are you doing this?" I ask, unsure how to respond to her warmth.

“I’ve seen men like you before,” she says.

“What … covered in blood?” I reply. “Or with a raging hard-on?”

She smiles. “Both.”

I raise a brow. “At the same time?”

Her smile broadens. “That’s a first.”

Laughing, I close my eyes and let the water pour onto my face, washing away the blood with my hands. Her hands wrap around my neck, and her head leans on my shoulder, her tits pushing against my chest.

“I’m glad you came back,” she whispers in my ear.

Goose bumps scatter on my skin as I look down into her pristine eyes, and at that moment, I realize I’m starting to fall in love with the daughter of my enemy.

God, I’m so fucking screwed.

She leans away and grabs my hand, placing it on her soaked blouse. She guides my hand across her tit, and my cock responds with a bounce. As she bites her lip, she pushes my hand further down until it’s between her legs, where she squeezes tight.

That’s it.

I’ve tried to fight temptation, but with her standing here in my shower and her clothes completely soaked, it’s impossible.

And as I’m overtaken by lust, I grab her waist and push her against the wall, smothering her mouth with mine.

I don’t care what anyone thinks or what I should think.

She’s mine, and nobody will take her away from me.

Not even my own need for revenge.

My tongue flicks along her lips, eager to take her right here and now. Arousal courses through my veins, a remnant of the power I felt mere

minutes ago when I murdered one of my most hated enemies. And now, I'm taking it all out on her.

When she raises her hand, I grab her wrist and pin it to the wall. I nudge her legs apart and make her feel the hard-on she caused. She doesn't seem to mind as she grins against my lips.

I use the opportunity to take her mouth with my tongue, swiveling around hers. I want her so badly; I can't control my urges anymore. She tastes so damn good; it's like a drug to me.

My hands travel down to her tits, and I pinch her nipples, rolling them around between my fingers. She moans into my mouth, and my dick pulses against her pussy with greed.

I swiftly spin her around and shove my hand between her legs, lifting her skirt and claiming her.

"You're mine and no one else's ..." I growl, pulling her panties aside and rubbing her clit.

"I don't want anyone else," she murmurs, parting her legs for me.

I slide my fingers up and down her slit to enjoy the wetness, and I press a kiss to the nape of her neck. "I'm so glad we're on the same page."

She snorts and tilts her head back, allowing me to nibble on her earlobe. "I'm still mad at you, you know ..."

"I know. I chased you away. So let me make it up to you," I whisper, sucking on her skin.

She bites her lip as I bury my finger into her pussy.

"Fuck ..." she mutters.

"Oh, I'll fuck you all right," I groan. "I wanna feel you come like the good little sinful girl you are."

"Are you calling me a little girl?" she retorts.

"Would you prefer good little whore?" I muse. "Because, either way, you're fucking mine."

She grins as I circle her clit. “I’ll take either … just keep doing that.”

“Oh, I will …” I groan, licking my lips as her clit engorges from my touch. “I’ll make this pussy come so hard that you’ll beg this preacher to impale you.”

“Who’s being the whore now?” she quips.

I shove her against the wall, and she gasps from the coldness against her nipples. Then I push my hand between her thighs and prop my dick between her ass cheeks.

“You ready for me, babe?”

“Fuck, yes …” she moans at the same time I push the tip in.

In one go, I push in completely, burying my cock deep inside her. She holds her breath as I pull out, and when I thrust in again, another loud moan comes from her mouth. I cup her pussy with one hand while fucking her, and with my other hand, I form a knot in her hair and twist, pulling her head back.

“Fuck,” she hisses, almost like she can’t handle me.

“Shouldn’t have come into the shower with me,” I growl. “Now you’ll feel my rage.”

“Rage?”

“You think I come off killing people easily?” I mutter, banging her hard.
“Fuck no.”

I ram into her again, this time putting every inch of myself inside her until I hear her squeal. “Come,” I growl. “Milk me.”

I spank her ass and use her waist as handles as I thrust into her. As I flick her clit, her legs wobble, and she can barely stay upright. I hold her in place as she tiptoes around my large cock, barely able to keep up.

She lets out a big moan, and her muscles clamp around my length, wetness pouring out of her. Fuck, it feels so good that I come too.

Howling like a fucking animal, I go in balls deep and pump my seed into her, again and again. When I pull out, my dick is still hard, even though her pussy is creamed. As my jizz drips out of her, she leans her face against the wall and takes large gulps of air.

“Fuck … you’re so damn dirty,” she murmurs out of breath.

Damn right I am, and I’ll prove it to her right now.

I twist her around and put my hands on her shoulder, pushing her down to her knees. “Open your mouth,” I growl as I grab a fistful of her hair.

When her lips part, I shove my cock inside and start pumping again. She looks a little dazed, shocked even that I’m fucking her mouth, but I don’t care. I want this. I *need* this. So I’m going to take it like the greedy motherfucker I am.

With fervor, I thrust deep into her throat, making her gag. I love the sounds she makes and the way she looks up at me with those pristine blue eyes, begging me to come again. I can tell she likes it because her hand is between her legs.

Her tongue rolls around my dick as I push inside, and I tilt my head and close my eyes to enjoy the feeling. God, how I fucking love what she does with her filthy mouth, and for now, that’s enough for me.

I groan and grasp her hair tighter, using it as reins so I can fuck her even harder.

She doesn’t seem to mind.

In fact, I think she’s starting to like it, judging by her needy gaze.

“You’re so pretty when you let me fuck you,” I murmur, holding her head with both hands. “But you’re even prettier with my cum inside your mouth.”

She eagerly licks my cock, and it bounces up and down against her throat, making her gag again.

I push harder to hear that sound again, and I pinch her nose with my fingers just to feel her muscles tighten. “Take it,” I growl. “Show me how filthy

you are.”

When I let go, she gasps for air, and I pull out to let her breathe.

“Fuck …” she mutters. “You weren’t kidding.”

“This is the one time I’m not,” I reply, grabbing her chin and pulling her mouth open. “And I mean it when I say I’m going to coat your tongue with my cum.”

She smiles and bites her lip at the same time, making me even hornier.

Goddamn, this woman. She’ll be the death of me.

I push my cock back inside and go hard and fast, not giving a shit about how wrong it is. She spits on my length, and I use it as lube to slip in and out easier. When I’m in deep again, I pinch her nose again, forcing her to feel my length down her throat.

Three more thrusts and I’m done for.

“Make yourself come,” I groan as my cock explodes in her mouth.

Her pleading eyes almost roll into the back of her head as she brings herself to what looks like a delicious orgasm.

My seed jets into the back of her throat, and I hold her jaw as she struggles to keep it inside. “Swallow it all …” I mutter as she breathes raggedly through her nose.

She nods, and when her tongue rolls, I push in and out again to make sure she licks it all up. When I’m sated, I swipe my thumb along her lips. She grabs my finger and tugs it into her mouth, licking it until every bit of evidence is gone.

She’s still on her knees in front of me, and with the hot water pouring down on my skin, I finally realize what kind of a dirty angel she is.

She’s *my* dirty angel, and no amount of anger can ever replace that wantonness I feel when I’m around her.

I smile and cup her face. “Thank you,” I say.

Because she's all I needed to have right now, and I'm so damn grateful that she came.

Literally and figuratively.

Chapter 20

We lie down in my bed, and I pull the blanket over us both. I wrap my arm around her and turn off the light. I asked her to stay tonight. Not because I'm weak, but because I think we both need each other's comfort right now.

Her fingers gently play with the necklace cradled between her tits. It's a cross ... and the moment I touch her hand, she flinches.

"Sorry," she mumbles.

"Don't be. You keep touching that. I was just curious."

"Oh ... yeah, it's special. To me, anyway."

"How come?" I ask.

She blows out a short breath. "My mother gave it to me when I was young. Said that I could always find her there, tucked away between the silver."

I smile and plant a kiss between her shoulder blades. "That's a nice gesture."

"Hmm."

I stare at the sink where our clothes are drying off. She crawls closer to me, her warmth filling me with momentary happiness. Is it okay to feel this way? Am I allowed to let go of the past and enjoy what I have?

"Tell me what you're thinking," she asks.

"Nothing," I say, smelling her hair to calm myself down.

“Don’t lie. You’re tense, and you won’t stop sighing.”

I sigh again, smiling. She can read me so well it’s almost scary.

“You’re worried about those men,” she fills in for me. “If they’ll keep coming after us.”

“I’m worried about how many more I have to kill to be safe.”

She swallows. “Those men you were after … they were my father’s men, weren’t they?”

I nod against her skin, pressing a kiss between her shoulder blades.

“Do you think he wants you *dead*? ”

“He gave them a picture of my son just to make me mad. I think he means business,” I reply.

“But you don’t have to let him get to you.” She glances over her shoulder.
“You could run.”

“I’ve already run too many times.”

“What then? Are you going to kill all of them?” she asks, turning around in my arms.

“If I have to.”

“What about this church? And Margaret?” She leans on her elbow. “Will you just abandon them?”

“I can always come back …”

“How do you know?”

“Because I came back before … back when I was still in a gang myself.”

She sighs and lies back down on her pillow, her eyes boring into mine. “Tell me more about your past.”

“You don’t want to know more, trust me.”

“Yes, I do. If we’re going to be ... *something* ... I have the right to know more.”

Something.

I wonder if that means what I think it means.

“Like I said, I wasn’t just a dealer. I was a murderer too. Whatever the gang asked, it was never too much for me. I did some shit I’m not proud of, and I’d rather forget it all.”

“And this gang ... were they enemies of my dad’s?”

I nod.

She blows out another breath. “So this isn’t just about us.”

I don’t say a word. I don’t know what to tell her. And I think she already knows where this is going.

“You can’t do it.”

“He won’t leave us alone,” I say.

“But he’s my dad.”

With furrowed brows, I say, “I know that, but you hated him too, right?”

“Yes, I hate what he’s done, but ...” Her face darkens. “He’s still my dad.”

“How can you call a man like that a dad?”

“His blood runs through my veins.” She raises her hands, gazing at them like they’re not hers. “I am him as much as he is me.”

I grab her wrists and lower them. “That’s not true. You are compassionate. Loving. Good.” I entwine my fingers through hers, trying to persuade her my way. “Everything he wishes he could be. That’s who you are.”

“How do you know?”

“I just do.” I shrug.

“Hmm.” She gazes off into the distance. “Guess I’m more like my mom in that way.”

My throat clamps up, and I suddenly find it hard to breathe.

“Still,” she continues. “He is my dad. I don’t want to … lose him.” She swallows like she’s afraid I’m going to kill him.

And that feeling is correct.

“He’s everything that’s wrong with this world, Laura.”

“I know.” She rubs her forehead with her hand. “I wish I could pull my dad out of that monster. Like sometimes, I want to separate them, but I can’t. He’s one and the same. A kind daddy … and a vicious mobster.”

I rub my lips together and say, “Exactly. Someone has to stop him … and if it’s me, then so be it.”

She nods a few times and then turns around again, curling up into a ball. I wrap my arm around her and pull her closer to smell her scent again.

“Good night,” she whispers.

I’m not sure whether we’re on good terms or if she’s upset.

But what I do know is that we both need our sleep … to prepare for what’s to come.

* * *

When morning arrives, she’s gone.

Not a single hug or kiss given and not a trace left. Even her clothes are gone, and the room is exactly like it always was. As if she vanished into thin air.

Swallowing, I sit up straight and look around, sighing.

I guess she really was mad about our conversation.

I can't blame her. I would be too if someone said they were going after my father. But she also knows he deserves it, which is why it's such a difficult thing.

I don't want her to be mad at me, though. We should talk this out first before I do anything stupid. So I get dressed and make myself some breakfast. After I've finished eating some good old cereal, I straighten my jacket in the mirror and reach for my ring, but it's gone. Frowning, I stare at the sink for a while as if that's going to help. Must've fallen into some nook or cranny after we put our clothes here.

I shrug and put on my necklace, kissing the cross for good luck before I go out. I'm going to need it because I plan to do something terribly stupid. To make it up to her, I've decided I'm going to cook her dinner. You know like manly men do. With bare hands and bear love.

In my good outfit, I go to the supermarket and put some fresh veggies, cream, cheese, fettuccine, and chicken in my basket. Why? Chicken fucking alfredo, that's why. I've never met a person who doesn't like it. And if they don't ... well, then they're not human.

With my basket full of shit, I go to the cash register and stand in line when I recognize the dude standing in front of me. I cock my head and grin then tap him on the shoulder.

At first, he glances at me with a gangster look in his eyes, like he wants to straight up murder me or something, but then a relaxed smile follows.

"Ricardo," I say, "what a coincidence."

"Hey, dude," he says, giving me a bro-fist.

"How's Sofia doing?" I ask.

He scratches the back of his head. "Who?"

When I make a face, he laughs and punches my arm. "Relax, dude; I'm kidding."

"Sounds about right," I reply. "She dead yet?"

"Nah, bro, 'course not. I'm not that kind of a shitty dad."

I shrug, and now, it's his turn to make a face.

"Dude, look at my basket," he says, holding it up to show me how much he's stuffed it with food. "Does this look like something a shitty dad would do?"

"I dunno. Have you learned how to cook yet?" I raise a brow. "Or do you have some side chick cooking for you now?"

"Tsk," he retorts. "Like I got time for a bird with a baby in my home."

"Right ..."

"Hey, see this?" He points at one of the pots in his basket. "That's asparagus, yeah. High-class shit. They don't serve this to babies, do they?" He cocks his head. "Except this badass daddy."

I snort. "I've eaten those; they're not just for rich people."

"What'd you get then?" He peeks in my basket. "Chicken, huh?"

I pull my basket behind my back, annoyed by his snootiness. "You can do a lot of fancy shit with chicken."

"Oh, yeah? Like what?" he says.

"Chicken alfredo." I purse my lips. "Do you even know what that is?"

"Fuck you, course I do. I grew up eating chicken for breakfast."

I burst out into laughter. "That your momma made for you."

"What? You think I can't cook my own shit?"

I'm still laughing my ass off. "Dude, I've seen you give a baby Cheerios with milk. No way you can cook this shit."

"Bitch, please. I can cook your ass into next week. I don't care what the recipe is."

"Really?" I snort. "I'd love to see you try."

He moves closer. "Oh, you're done for now. It's on ..."

“Excuse me?” The lady behind the cash register clears her throat.

He gives me the side-eye then walks ahead and puts his items on the counter while I trail behind him. I watch him lay it all out, giving him stupid looks in between just to annoy him.

It’s only then that I notice he’s got a brand new tattoo.

It’s a barcode … Right below his nape.

I don’t know how I missed that. I must be really blind.

“So you got a new tattoo?” I ask.

Ricardo glances at me again, giving me the stink eye, but then he opens his mouth. “Got it last week. Showed a picture of a barcode to my tattoo artist, and he put it right below my hairline. Hurt like a motherfucker, but it’s totally worth it.”

“How so?”

He raises his brows. “So I can do this.”

He slams his head down on the counter, grabs the scanner from the lady’s hands, and lets it bleep near his neck. It actually registers.

“Twelve fifty,” Ricardo says as he stands up straight, gazing at me with big eyes. Then he bursts out into laughter. “That’s what I’m worth.”

I don’t know why—maybe it’s the way he’s laughing—but for some reason, I’m laughing too, and I can’t stop either. Meanwhile, the cashier looks at us like we’ve lost our damn minds. I don’t blame her. This is one fucked-up dude.

“Sorry, can’t help it,” he jests, packing up his stuff while I place mine on the counter.

I pat his back. “You always give me a good laugh when I need it.”

“Well, that’ll be twelve fifty then.”

We both burst out into laughter again.

I can barely contain myself as I pay for my stuff and Ricardo walks off with his groceries. “See ya.”

Right before he’s gone, he turns around and calls out my name. “Hey, Frank! Next week, yeah? Cookout. Me and you.” He points at me like he’s already made up his mind. No use in arguing with that. Besides, I’m too damn curious to see if he can pull it off. With his twelve fifty tattoo.

Shaking my head, I laugh it off, grab my stuff, thank the cashier, and leave the store.

* * *

A few minutes later, I knock on her door and wait. It takes a while for someone to come to the door, but it’s not Laura.

“What do you want?” It’s Bruno.

I smile. “Hey squirt, it’s me. Frank.”

“Oh, hi!” He opens the door, wearing hippo pajamas. “Sorry, Laura tells me not to open the door to strangers.”

“But I’m not a stranger anymore, now am I?” I wink.

“No,” he says, grinning. “But Laura isn’t home right now.”

“Oh … well, that’s a shame,” I reply, peering over his shoulder to see if he’s lying or not, but I don’t see anyone. “When do you think she’ll be home?”

He shrugs. “She didn’t say. I’m watching the house with my brother.”

“Can I … come inside real quick?” I ask. “It’s just that I was thinking of making you all dinner, and I brought all these delicious things.” I lower the bag to show him the goods, and his eyes glimmer with curiosity.

“That looks yummy,” he says, and he opens the door a bit more so I can step inside.

“Thanks, bro.” I rub his head, messing up his hair.

He grins and says, “Bro? No one ever calls me bro.” He seems genuinely excited as if calling him bro makes him feel older or something.

I smile back. “Well, you’re my bro now.”

“Ah, yes!” He makes a fist pump in the air, making me laugh.

“Dude, why’d you let him in?” Diego scowls at me as he switches the channel on the TV.

“Because he’s our friend,” Bruno declares.

“Says who?”

“Me.”

I grin and high-five Bruno. “Thanks, bro.”

Diego rolls his eyes. “Whatever.”

“I promise you; I won’t be an annoying shithead today,” I muse.

“Yeah, right.”

“Hey … I’m trying to do my best here, okay?” I say.

“No, you’re trying to get in my sister’s pants,” he retorts, raising a brow.

“So? Haven’t you ever liked a chick?”

“She’s my sister,” he sneers. “And ew.”

“What, don’t like girls?”

“Of course, I do,” he says. “But not in this house.”

“Well … I do, in this house. And your sister and I are *very* close.”

He blinks a couple of times and makes a face. “Please stop, I don’t wanna hear it.”

“Hear what?” Bruno asks.

“Don’t,” Diego murmurs, making me laugh.

Bruno sits down beside him, and they watch the game show together while I place the groceries on the kitchen counter and start unpacking everything. That's when my eyes slide across the kitchen and into the living room to a picture sitting on a small table. While putting the chicken in the fridge, my eyes are still completely transfixed on the image. My body moves toward it instinctively, and the closer I get, the less I can breathe.

My fingers tremble as I pick up the picture and stare.

It feels like my heart is beating out of my chest.

Like I'm frozen to the floor.

Because the image under my thumb is of the woman I killed ... and on this same table is her ring.

"What's wrong?" Bruno asks, pulling me from my thoughts.

A cold shiver runs up and down my spine as I put the picture down. Completely frazzled, I reply, "Nothing," as I make my way to the door. "I have to go."

"Why?" Bruno asks, staring at me as I open it.

But I can't answer his question.

Only Laura can.

Clutching the wood, I sigh and look out at the street, wishing I didn't see what I just saw. Wishing I could take everything back. Then I close the door behind me and run.

She knows.

I killed her mother.

Chapter 21

I close the back door and sit down on a bench behind the church. Just finished another sermon and I really tried my best this time, but it didn't feel right. Laura wasn't there, of course. Although I had hoped she might be there.

I grab a cigarette and light it, blowing out the smoke as I stare at the ground. Right there, two feet away, is where her mother's body is hidden. I shiver, not wanting to think about that night even though it instantly crosses my mind.

The worst part is that she knows.

She knows I killed her mother.

She recognized the ring, took it, and now she's gone. After all, who would want to stay with their mother's killer?

I take another drag and think about calling her. I have to explain it to her. It's the only way to see if she'll forgive me. I don't wanna lose her. Not even if she's *his* daughter.

I swallow at the thought of him, wanting to crush his skull with my thumbs.

Fuck.

Another drag.

Damn, I need this cigarette more than I needed that damn sermon. I was too distracted anyway.

The only thing that'll calm me down right now is finding out how she feels about me ... and hopefully talking it out. So I take my phone from my pocket and call her number. It rings, but no one picks up, and soon, it goes to voicemail.

Sighing, I lower my phone again. Of course, she won't pick up when she knows I'm calling.

Suddenly, a loud bang and screams have me jumping up from the bench and running back into the church. It's Carl ... and he's lying on the floor in the middle of the hall with blood all over his shirt. I immediately look around and find a guy I recognize running away with a gun in his hand.

It's one of the men who dragged my wife away.

Making a fist, I contemplate going after him, but when I hear Carl cry out in pain, I ignore the urge and go to him.

"Shit," Carl mutters. "I've been shot."

I look down at his stomach and watch as the blood soaks through his shirt. Margaret rushes out from her room in the back, yelling, "What happened?"

"It's Carl. Call an ambulance," I say.

She nods and goes back into her office to immediately dial 911.

"I'm sorry, Frank," Carl mumbles, tears welling up in his eyes. "I failed you before but not this time."

"Don't say that," I say. "You didn't fail me. Ever."

"No, I did," he says. "When they got me last time, I couldn't keep my mouth shut ... At least now I could ... but look at me, I'm still shot. Still dying on the floor."

"You're not dying, Carl. Not on my watch," I growl. I rip off a piece of my shirt, wrapping it around his wound. He groans, so I growl, "Lie still. Otherwise, you'll bleed out."

"Why aren't you mad at me?" he asks, his speech slurring from the pain and the tears.

"I'm not so get that out of your head."

"But ... all those years ago ..."

I hold his hand, and he squeezes tight. "The past is the past."

He nods and lowers his head to the floor again. "Fuck ... it hurts."

"Don't move," I tell him. "Help is on the way."

"The guy who shot me, he was looking for you. I didn't tell him. And then ..."

I nod and squeeze his hand tighter. "It's okay, Carl. You did good."

He smiles, and another tear rolls down his cheek.

It's painful to see him hurt because of me.

That bullet was meant for me, not for him. And still, he took it like a champ.

Mother comes walking out again with a first-aid kit. "How is he?"

"Not good," I say, and I look at Carl, whose eyes are barely staying open.
"Don't die on me, okay? Carl, promise me."

He doesn't respond.

"Say something, ass-face!" I yell, almost wanting to shake him, but Mother stops me. "I retract what I said. I don't forgive you. Now stay alive and make things up to me."

Mother wraps more bandages around him and says, "We have to wait until the ambulance arrives, but they said they're on their way."

"Good," I say. "Hear that, Carl? They're coming, so don't you go anywhere."

He briefly smiles again, whispering, "Not planning to ..."

I laugh a little, relieved he's not kicking the bucket this soon.

"How many more times will this happen?" Mother asks.

I look up at her and frown. "None."

Fear crosses her face. "Don't you understand? They'll just keep coming here until you make it stop."

"I will," I say, balling my fist again. "After I kill the son of a bitch who's behind it."

When the ambulance arrives and the paramedics wheel Carl into the ambulance, I swallow away the lump in my throat and wave at him. The doors close, and it drives off, leaving Mother and me standing outside with a dark, hollow feeling.

I wrap my arm around her and pull her close, hugging her from the side.

“Will he be okay?” she asks.

“We have to trust the paramedics to do their best. His family will probably be there to look after him, so it’s best we don’t get in the way.”

She nods, and it’s quiet for a few seconds before she opens her mouth again. “Frank …”

“Yeah?”

“Punish them.”

And with that, she turns around and walks right back into the church without saying another word.

* * *

With Julio’s address in my pocket and a gun in the other, I make my way to the alley beside the walled complex and scout the area. No guards are here, but some mill around the fence, so it’s better to remain unseen.

I check whether anyone notices me before I jump and grasp the ledge, pulling myself up. I quickly look around and hoist myself over, landing on my feet. Someone patrols the area a few feet away, but he’s wearing earplugs, probably listening to some music too. He’s completely oblivious as I approach him from behind. I quickly pull out the knife I carry in my inner pocket, hold it up to his throat, and put my hand over his mouth.

“Julio.”

He nods, and his eyes hone in on the door to the left of the complex, which isn’t the front entrance.

“Is he there?”

The man nods again. “Please don’t kill me,” he mumbles through my fingers. “I have kids.”

“Oh, I won’t … but you need to keep quiet,” I whisper.

“I will, I will,” he repeats.

I smack him on the back of the head, and he falls to the ground unconscious. “Good.”

I never said I wouldn’t hurt him. Besides, if you work for Julio, you’d better expect some violence. The man lives in it.

I rush to the side entrance and stand beside it, jerking on the door handle to create some ruckus. Someone immediately bursts out, looking for the culprit, but I’m behind him. Right as he turns around, I shoot him in the neck.

“Nothing personal,” I mumble as I step over his body.

With my gun aimed at whoever comes close, I check my surroundings. It’s a home and a luxurious one at that. If there’s one bodyguard, there must be another. And I’m goddamn sure one of them is the same dude who took my wife.

In fact ... I think I see him right now. Standing in the hallway, he’s adjusting his collar.

“Don’t move,” I growl.

The image shifts, and it suddenly dawns on me it was a mirror’s reflection I saw, not him. Right then, someone shoots and a bullet ricochets off the wall behind me. I duck. Another bullet shoots straight at me, scraping my leg. I hiss from the pain but remain calm as I get up and point my gun at wherever it’s coming from.

He’s in the kitchen.

I don’t go inside. I roll past the door and shoot. Straight in the legs.

He howls in pain and falls to the floor. However, he grabs a knife from the counter and throws it at me. It jams into my shoulder, making me drop the gun, which slides across the hall.

But I don’t give up.

I pull the knife out and rush at him. We struggle for power, fighting man to man over the knife in my hand and his life.

“You … you killed my wife!” I scream at him.

“I thought you were fucking dead!” he growls, rolling on top of me.

“Think you’d get away with doing that to her? To me?” His hands are around mine as we fight for control over the knife, which moves between both our throats.

“You shouldn’t have killed *his* wife to begin with!” he yells back, pushing so hard the knife is against my throat. Blood drops roll down my skin, and I swallow.

“Fuck you!” I yell. “You have no idea what I’ve been through, and it’s all because of *you*!” Somehow, I find the strength to push him off me. I kick him in the balls, and he tumbles backward, creating enough room for me to jump on him and ram the knife straight into his chest.

He howls again. “No, fuck you! We will *never* go down.”

“Remember Sergio, your buddy? He already did,” I say with a smile, pulling the knife from his flesh. “And guess what? He didn’t die a glorious death. He died alone, afraid … and it was motherfucking painful.”

I jam the knife back into his abdomen, turning and twisting it until his blood comes pouring out. “And this is for Carl …” I growl.

He chokes on his own blood. It looks magnificent, and it fills me with unmeasurable euphoria.

I want him to feel what my wife felt when he took her life, so I pull out the knife again and shove it right there … below the belt.

He groans, grimacing with more blood as I grin like a motherfucker.

“Now you know what she went through when you took her and used her,” I growl. “And like your buddy, you’ll die a painful and useless death like the useless piece of shit you are.” I spit on his face and pull out the knife again.

God, that felt good.

Making the sign of the cross on my chest, I say a prayer in my head. Then I get up, leaving his half-dead body on the kitchen floor as I make my way back to the hall.

I pick up the gun and make sure to hold on tight, despite the pain in my shoulder, as I check the entire house. No one's found on the first floor, so I move upstairs, trying not to make a sound. Each of the doors I kick open leads to an empty room, so I go up another flight of stairs. There's only one room left in the house, so I take a deep breath before I go inside.

I let the door fall open as I swallow away the lump in my throat and clench the gun.

There he is ... the man who has haunted my dreams for ages.

Julio. ‘El Campeón.’

He’s behind his laptop, and his eyes barely move away from the screen.

“Hello, Frank ... how lovely to see you here.”

“Don’t move,” I hiss.

“How did you get past the gates?”

“I didn’t.” I move in, closing the door behind us.

“Oh ... so you jumped over,” he muses, licking his lips. “Guess I should hire more guards.”

“Won’t help, I’ll kill them all,” I reply, closing in on him.

“How many?”

“Just two, I spared another.”

“How nice of you.” He gives me a wretched smile.

“Save it, fuckface,” I spit. “Like you ever gave a shit about any of your men.”

He puts his hands in the air. “I do hope you realize you won’t get away with this.”

“I didn’t plan on it,” I say, circling his desk.

“Oh, so this was a suicide mission?” He raises his brow. “Just because I tried to have you killed? You should know, hanging out with my daughter wasn’t a good idea.”

His admission is proof he’s been keeping tabs on her … or me. “I don’t give a shit about that. Your daughter isn’t why I’m here, and you know that.”

“For a man who wanted revenge so badly, you sure don’t have your priorities.”

“I don’t care if I die as long as you die with me.” I put the gun to his head.

“You don’t wanna do that, Frank,” he warns, still staring at me.

“Give me one good reason,” I say through gritted teeth.

His lips part faintly, and a brief smile appears on his face. His eyes dance with fire … a flame so bright they burn the oxygen in my lungs.

“Your son is alive …”

Chapter 22

My heart comes to a momentary stop as I freeze up completely.

My body feels numb.

My senses dull.

His words ruin me.

“What?” I mutter, barely able to pronounce the word. My fingers tremble around the trigger as I fight to keep it together. Is it true? Or is he lying to save his ass?

A sudden flurry of rage overtakes me. “Don’t lie to me!” I scream.

“It’s not a lie,” he snorts. “I wish it was.”

“How? Where?” I’m frantic now, and my heart races in my throat.

“You could see him … right now,” he rambles. “But you won’t if you kill me.”

Of course, he’s trading this for his life. Playing with my feelings to get what he wants. The ultimate failure of revenge in exchange for the life of my son.

How cruel. How vicious. And something I should’ve seen coming.

My throat feels so dry I can barely speak. “Where is he?”

“I can give you the address and send a picture to your phone if you leave the premises.”

“No, I don’t believe you,” I hiss. “If I leave here, you’ll have your guards kill me.”

“No, I won’t. Where’s the fun in that?”

I mull it over for a few seconds. “What then? A standoff?”

He shrugs. “Well, it’s only fair.”

“Fuck fair,” I growl, pushing the gun back to his forehead. “You don’t deserve anything after what you did to my wife!”

“And what do you deserve, huh, Frank?” He grinds his teeth. “You killed my wife and my unborn son.”

The mere mention of her death forces me to feel the pain again, and it hurts.

“It was an accident …” I mutter.

“Accident or not, she died, and you paid the price. An eye for an eye.” The way he says it makes me wanna throw up in my mouth.

“You bastard … I should pull the trigger.”

“You could … but then you’d never get to know your son.”

I want to.

I want to so damn badly.

I want Julio to suffer. I want him gone. Erased from this planet.

Yet ... I can't ... because my son might still be alive.

I have to know if it's true. I *have* to see him.

"Tell you what; I'll give you the address now ... and when you leave the property, I'll send you the picture. Deal?" Julio says, holding out his hand.

I make a face, thinking about it for a second. I don't wanna make a deal with him. He's the fucking devil. But if it means I'll have the slightest chance of seeing my son ... whom I thought was long dead ... then it's worth every bit of misery I'll feel.

Just that one moment with him. I'd give my life for it.

I lower the gun and say, "Deal."

I shake his filthy hand. The devious smile on his face makes me wanna rethink my decision. He grabs a notepad and writes down an address and a telephone number, ripping off the paper to hand it to me. "There. He's at school now, so you'll probably find him in the yard outside. My number's also on there, so text me when you're outside, and I'll send you the picture."

I tuck it into my pocket, still pointing the gun at him as I slowly back away. "If you don't send that picture, I will kill each one of your guards, and then I'll come back for you."

"I know how you work, Frank. Do you think I'm that stupid?" He raises a brow and taps his fingers together. "Besides, I'm a man of my word. A deal is a deal."

He's right on that part. Julio's always had a reputation for being trustworthy. Whatever that means in this underground business. Of course, once he's sent the picture ... there's no telling what he'll do now that I killed his men.

"Go on then ... What's stopping you?" Julio muses as he leans back in his chair, staring at me as I slowly inch backward, keeping my gun pointed at him.

“This isn’t over,” I say through gritted teeth, and then I storm out of his room.

I run down the stairs and go outside as quickly as I can, jumping up to the wall again. My shoulder stings from the painful jab, but I ignore it as I pull myself up and crawl over, jumping down in the alley below.

Rummaging in my pocket, I take out my phone and the note, typing in the number he gave me. I start walking as I text.

Frank: Give me the picture.

Julio: Here you go.

It takes a while to load, and the more time passes, the greater my excitement.

However, nothing can prepare me for the face appearing on my screen.

My jaw drops, and I almost walk into traffic. A loud horn makes me step back, my feet only just on the sidewalk as I stare at the phone in my shaking hand.

The boy ... *my* boy ...

It’s Bruno.

Chapter 23

From the moment I first met him, I knew he was a special kid.

I don’t know why, but I could feel it in my bones. Some sort of exceptional connection. Characteristics we shared. A certain look in his eyes. The

smirk.

It was all there, yet I never saw the truth.

Not once did it dawn on me because it seemed impossible.

Because I hadn't seen my boy since he was a baby.

Who knew boys could change so much in just a few years?

I sigh and stare ahead at the schoolyard, wondering when the appropriate time arrives. I guess it never does. When do you ever tell a boy you're his father? It's not an easy thing to do, and that's why I'm so scared.

In fact, I'm terrified.

Terrified of rejection. Terrified he might not even believe it. Terrified he won't want me.

How has he lived all these years without me? And why did they let him live?

Is it because of Laura?

Is that why she ran away from her dad?

The pieces of the puzzle are falling into place, but the more I think about it, the angrier I get.

I pick up some grass and gaze at it. Nothing makes sense. Laura knew he wasn't her family ... and she still took him in. Did she know he was mine?

I look up and observe the kids running around the schoolyard. He's out there, playing with them.

My son.

Those two words alone make me wanna take in a big gulp of air.

God, I still can't believe it.

Is it even true? It must be ... Why else would Julio give it up as a final card? He'd never tell me willingly unless his life was on the line. After all, he wanted me to suffer, and this isn't it. This is the exact opposite because

finding out my son was still alive was like picking a piece of fruit from a tree in heaven.

He'd never want me to feel this hopeful.

So it must be true. I have to believe it.

I breathe in and out again, drawing strength from up above. "God ... please be with me. I need you," I whisper into the wind. Then I grab the photo in my pocket and stare at it. When I think about it, he does have the same physical traits as Bruno. Like ... a perfect match.

I can't believe I didn't see it before. It's like I was blinded by my own ignorance.

Wiping away a tear, I pull a pen from my pocket and scribble down something on the back then tuck both back into my pocket.

Then I get up and start walking, squashing the pieces of grass I had in my hand and letting them fly away with the wind.

The closer I get, the heavier my feet feel, but I don't give up. Not until I'm near the fence, gawking at the boy running around the schoolyard with a bucket on his head and using a tiny shovel as a scepter. I smile and laugh, feeling the tears well up again as I watch him play.

Then he looks at me ... and I'm frozen in place.

"Hey, Father Frank!"

His voice cuts deep into the coils around my heart. Deeper than it ever has. And for the first time in years, I feel like I can finally see clearly.

He runs toward the fence and clutches it with his little hands, and I smile at the sight of those fingers that I've missed for so many years. If I'd only known it was him ... I would've held him from the start and never let go.

"Hey, Bruno ..." I mutter, struggling to keep the tears at bay. "How are you doing?"

"Oh, I'm great! I'm the king of all the kids right now. Look!" He points at his bucket hat.

“I see that,” I say, winking. “You’re the greatest king alive.”

“Do you think so?”

I sink to my knees so I can speak to him on his level. “Of course, and you know what else? I think you’re also one of the smartest.”

“Well, I’m not the best in class right now … especially not with math …”

I chuckle at his comment and at his attempt to calculate something on his fingers.

I grab his hand and squeeze tight. “A king doesn’t need to count. He’s got his people to do that for him.”

“Oh … right!” He smiles so brightly it makes me wanna cry.

“Hey, Bruno … do you think you could step outside the fence for just a moment?”

“I dunno. The teacher might get mad.”

“Tell her I’m Laura’s boyfriend.”

He immediately turns his head around and screams at the teacher as only a kid can. I almost have to plug my ears, so I don’t go deaf.

Grinning, he says, “Okay!” and he runs to the gate.

I stand again and look at him run on those two little legs of his, wondering how I could’ve missed all these years. God … I’ve got so much to catch up on.

I hold out my arms and wait … and when he’s finally here, in my arms, I hug him tightly. The warmest smile finds its way to my face as I hold him closely, wishing I could stay this way forever. I can’t believe he’s really here in the flesh. My son. It’s like a gift from God.

When I release him again, I have to wipe a tear away.

“Are you crying?” he asks.

I was hoping he didn’t see it, but I guess I was too late.

“Oh, no, I … had something in my eye,” I lie.

“If you’re not happy, you have to tell me, you know?”

I raise a brow. “And why’s that?”

He beckons me with his little hand, and I bend over so he can whisper in my ear, “Because Laura said we have to take care of you.”

I snort, shaking my head. “Did she now?”

He nods a few times, grinning again. “But I won’t tell her if you’re sad. I promise.”

I run my fingers through his hair and rub his little head. “Thanks, squirt.”

A car drives up to the school parking lot, and when a window is rolled down, I can clearly make out Laura’s face even though she’s wearing sunglasses to hide.

I know she can see me. I don’t care.

“I think that’s her,” I say.

“Oh?” He turns and puts his hand above his eyes to shield them from the sunlight as he looks out at the parking lot. “That’s her car, yeah.”

“She’s probably here to pick you up,” I say. “But before you go … can you do something for me?”

He turns back to face me. “What is it?” he asks, with one finger in his nose.

I pull out the picture from my pocket and hold it out to Bruno. “This is a very important secret between Laura and me. Can you promise you’ll give it to her without looking at it?”

He slams his lips together and nods vehemently.

“Promise?”

“Promise,” he says.

I hold up my pinky, and we pinky swear on it. Then I pat his back and say, “Go on. She’s waiting for you.”

As he runs off with the picture in his hand, I think of the words written on it, and how she might react when she reads them.

'I know Bruno is my son.'

She'll either have the shock of her life ... or the biggest laugh. Either way, this isn't going to go away, and I hope she knows that too.

And as I stare at the car driving off, with Bruno waving at me from the back seat, I can't help wonder what could have been ... and what will be.

Because now that I know he's mine, there's no way in hell I'm going to let him go.

Chapter 24

With deliberation, I stand in front of her home, and I pull the door handle.

Surprisingly, it opens.

I thought she'd have locked it, or at least pretended not to be home, but apparently, she was waiting for me.

I let the door fall open slowly as I gaze around the house.

There she is.

In the middle of the kitchen, preparing some tomatoes for a dish.

She doesn't even look up. Not until she's completely finished slicing them and putting them into a bowl. She places her knife on the cutting board and lifts her head. Her penetrating gaze makes me narrow my eyes.

"Diego ... take your brother outside."

“Why?” Diego’s sitting on the couch and gives her a grumpy look as he turns off the television.

“Don’t ask questions. Just do it.”

He rolls his eyes but gets up anyway, after giving her a big-ass sigh. “Fine.”

Bruno walks out of his room and asks, “What’s going on?”

Nobody answers, but seeing him makes my stomach feel like twisted knots.

Diego grabs his hand. “Let’s go.”

“Where are we going?” Bruno asks.

“Out. To play.” Diego seems annoyed. However, Bruno grins uncontrollably.

They both pass me, and I wait until they’re out of sight before I turn my attention back to Laura.

I swallow away the lump in my throat as I think about my first words. “Did you get the photo?”

She nods. Not even one word slips from her mouth. Damn her.

Grinding my teeth, I grip the doorjamb and say, “He’s my son … You knew, didn’t you?” Fury grows inside me. “Of course, you knew he wasn’t your family, and you still ran off with him and hid him. Did you ever even tell him Julio wasn’t his dad? That his dad was still out there, looking for him?” I tear up. “I told you everything … and you never even thought that *he* might be my son?”

Her face contorts. “Don’t you talk to me about lies.” She picks up the knife on the board and points it at me. “You … No wonder my dad came after you. He didn’t just want you far away from me. He wanted you dead because you killed his wife!” Her voice increases in volume as she struggles to keep it together. “All this time, I thought my dad was the bad guy, but you killed my mom!” she spits, tearing up.

She clutches the knife firmly and inches closer. “That’s why he went after your wife and son, too, didn’t he? You knew this. You always knew. And

you never told me. How could you?"

I close the door behind me and stand tall, refusing to give in. She knew her father did something horrible, and she never said a word.

"You killed my mother and her baby!" she screams, charging at me with the knife. "How dare you!"

I barely deflect her attack, but I grab her wrist and twist it to make her drop the knife.

"Fuck you!" she hisses, slapping me in the face. "You don't get to come in here and claim your son when *you* did that to us. To *me*!"

She punches me in the chest again and again, and I let her. "Like you're any better. You knew he wasn't your family, and you still kept him. All these years ... did you ever stop to think? Did you ever think for a single second that he could be mine?"

"Of course, I did!" she squeals, her face covered in tears. "But I love him like my own blood, and don't you dare claim that I don't." She slaps my face again. "Shame on you for killing an innocent woman."

I grab her wrists and hold them tight. "I didn't do that on purpose. It was an accident."

She spits in my face. "Liar!"

I wipe it off with a scowl. "It's the honest goddamn truth," I growl. "I knew I made a mistake the moment she died."

"You knew it was my mother!" she yells. "It was in the church, right? When those two fuckers came in and decided to trash the place. That's when you knew, didn't you?"

I nod.

"I knew it. That's why you wanted me out of there."

"I was contemplating whether or not I should use you to get to your father," I hiss. "Be glad I didn't do it."

"Oh, I'm so damn glad!" she scoffs. "Why did you do it, huh? Why her?"

“There was no reason. She was just there at the wrong time. Trying to protect your father’s assets or something. I don’t know. I was only there to steal his money.”

She jerks free and kicks me in the nuts, making me heave. Then she picks up the knife again, but before she can push it into my throat, I grab her arm and push her all the way through the room. Eventually, we end up against the back wall, and the hard shove makes her lose control. I snatch the knife and throw it away.

“Do you think I don’t feel guilty? Of course, I fucking do. I’ve lived with regret ever since that day.”

“Regret doesn’t bring back my mother!” she hisses.

“And it didn’t bring back my son either,” I hiss back. “But you knew he was alive.”

“I didn’t know he was your son until you told me with that photograph.”

“It didn’t even cross your mind?” I narrow my eyes at her. “Of course, it did. You just didn’t want to think about it because you might lose him.”

She makes a face and refuses to answer, which proves my point.

“Why? Why did you do it?” I growl. “Answer me!”

“I *saved* him,” she says through gritted teeth. “My father brought him home. I didn’t know who he was or where he came from, only that he would kill him. Of course, I took him! As if I could let him do that to a child.”

I swallow again as the emotions coil up in my throat. “That’s why you fled his home and came here ...”

“Yes, but what I did wasn’t malicious. I took him to keep him *safe*. But you?” She taps my chest vigorously. “You killed my mother. That was vicious and unforgivable.”

“What do you want me to say? Nothing will bring her back. I know I’m bad.”

“You could’ve told me! All along, you knew she was *my* mother, and you never thought to tell me.” She’s trembling in place. “God, I can’t believe I actually fucking wanted you so badly.” She rolls her eyes. “I’m such an idiot, always falling for the bad guys.”

“Hey, I’m not a bad guy. I’m trying to right my wrongs,” I say.

“By killing people? Yeah, right,” she sneers. “No, you know what? Fuck you. Fuck you for coming into my house like you own it. Fuck you for abusing my trust. Fuck you for screwing with my life, and fuck you for ruining my family.”

I place my hands on the walls behind her, trapping her. “No … fuck you for seducing me. Fuck you for making me think I was ever worthy of love again. And fuck you for making me see the good things in life again and for giving me hope.”

She swallows too now, and the intense, smoldering stare in her eyes doesn’t help my cause.

Goddamn, this fucking woman.

Messing with my head.

Making me confront my own demons and hers.

And making it so hard for me to let go.

“Dammit!” I ram my fist on the wall. “Why did we have to do this?”

“Ask yourself that question,” she hisses, leaning back against the wall. “If you hadn’t killed *my* mother, none of this would’ve happened. My dad wouldn’t have killed *your* wife, and I wouldn’t have had to take care of *your* son.” She taps my chest again to emphasize her words.

“I did what I had to do to survive!” I say. “And I would never have shot her if I’d known it was her.”

“But you’d have shot any other random person? Great,” she scoffs.

“I was reckless. I was young. What else do you want me to say? Sorry won’t bring her back.”

She frowns. “But it’s a start.”

I shake my head with frustration. “I can’t believe this is happening. Sometimes, you make it really hard for me; you know that?”

“Fuck you; this is all your doing,” she curses, slapping me again.

“You’re right about that,” I say.

She slaps me again. “You killed my mother. I fucking hate you!”

“I accept that.”

Another slap. “Good!”

This goes on until she gets worn out and sighs, saying, “Why aren’t you doing something?”

I shrug. “I am. I’m letting you hit me.”

“Why don’t you fight back?” Her expression hardens.

“Because you need this. And I need it too.”

She punches my chest and then hisses, “No, fuck you; you don’t get to move on so quickly.”

“Move on? I’m not moving one inch,” I reply. “I’m staying, and there’s no way in hell you can ever take me away from my kid. Let that be clear. He is mine, and I will do whatever it takes to keep him.”

She folds her arms and looks away, blowing out some air.

I mull it over for a few seconds, thinking about all the ways this could’ve gone. But it went much better than I thought it would. And to be honest, now that I’ve got it off my chest, I feel much better. The more I think about it, the less I’m starting to resent her for what she did.

I do fucking hate to feel this way, though. Ripped apart by my need for justice, and at the same time wanting her so badly. It’s driving me insane.

Mad ...

To the point of grabbing her face with both hands and claiming her mouth.

Right now.

I kiss her as hard as I can, trying to push away all the raging thoughts and focus on one thing ... healing. I refuse to lose any more people I love. I refuse to give her up.

But fuck, she fights me on every turn, biting my lip when I try to keep kissing her.

And goddamn, her hatred tastes delicious.

“Frank!” she hisses, slapping me.

I grin and lick up the blood on my lips. “Sorry ... old habits.”

“What the fuck,” she mutters, her eyes like a burning fire, so explosive.

But then she does the most peculiar thing.

She wraps her arms around my neck and kisses me back even harder than before.

Chapter 25

What the fuck?

She’s kissing me?

No matter how fucking weird this is, I can’t stop kissing her either. Her mouth tastes divine, and I want ... no, I won’t take anything less.

But when her lips momentarily unlatch from mine, she slaps me again.

And proceeds to kiss me again.

Her kisses aren’t sweet or nice.

They’re frantic. Harsh. Frenzied. Like a girl addicted to my love, desperately trying to fight withdrawal while also trying to kick the habit.

“Fuck …” she murmurs, and she bites my lip, drawing more blood. “I fucking hate you so much right now.”

“Hmm … I can tell,” I muse, licking the top of her lips and pulling her closer. “And I fucking hate that too.”

“Fuck you; you’re the cause of all this,” she whispers as I let my tongue roam free across her neck.

“You were the one who seduced me. This is what you get,” I tease, licking her skin.

She leans back and tries to smack me again, but this time I grasp both her wrists and pin them to the wall. “You wanna do this the hard way? You got it,” I growl, and I nudge her legs apart with my knee. “But I’m not going anywhere, and you know it.”

“Damn you,” she hisses, so I cover her mouth with mine to stop the complaining.

She wants this.

She clearly does, or she wouldn’t have kissed me.

She’s just mad that she does, and that’s okay. I’m pissed off too.

But that doesn’t mean we can’t fix this shit.

And what better way to make up than with a bit of hard, rough fucking? Nothing.

So I curl my fingers under her shirt and rip it off, not giving a shit that it’s tearing at the seams. And lucky me … she’s not even wearing a bra.

“Hey!” she calls out, but I smother her with more kisses and lick the seam of her mouth until she parts her lips and lets me in. My tongue always shuts her up.

Her tits are a handful and feel so nice as I rub my thumb across her nipples, hardening them.

“You know you like this,” I murmur against her lips, grinning like a motherfucker as I twist her nipple.

“Shut up,” she growls, and she rakes her fingers through my hair as she kisses me.

“We’ll see about that,” I mutter. “After I take your ass.”

Her comeback is to rip off my shirt and buttons fly everywhere.

I love it when she gets feisty.

I spin her around so she’s facing the wall. “Mine.”

“*Mine?* You wish,” she says, so I push my hard-on against her thighs.

“Oh yes, you’re mine, all right. Feel this? *That’s* what you do to me. *That’s* how crazy you make me, even when we hate each other’s guts.”

“Just fuck me. I’m done talking,” she hisses, eyeing me from over her shoulder as my hand slithers down her belly.

I rip down her zipper and pull the button loose, taking down her pants and underwear in one go.

She squeals again, but I cover her mouth with my hand and whisper, “Don’t want the kids to hear you moan ...”

She still looks furious as my hand dives between her legs. I grin when I feel her slickness, even when she tries to keep her legs together.

“See?” I muse.

“I so wanna smack that grin off your face,” she growls.

“You can try ... but nothing can beat *this*.” I rub my fingers up and down her slit, slowly easing her into it until her legs part and I can swivel across her clit. “As much as I hate to say it ... you’re mine now, and I don’t let go of what’s mine.”

I wrap my arm around her waist as I finger fuck her with my other hand, making sure she feels how serious I am. When she bites her lip, I tear down my own zipper and pull out my rock-hard cock. I spread her cheeks and ram it into her pussy, fully burying myself inside her.

“God ... that feels good,” I groan, thrusting in again.

I grab her wrists and pin them to her back as I slam into her hard and fast, not giving a shit whether this is right or wrong.

My eyes travel across her body and then end up finding a wooden cross with round edges on the wall. And I get this crazy idea. I rip it off the wall and spit on the end then I push the top into her ass.

“What the fuck—”

“You know how I like to fuck ...” I muse, pushing it in farther while I spit on it some more for easy lube. In and out the tip of the round cross goes, giving her double the pleasure... and me double the fun.

I know it’s wrong. I know it’s sacrilegious.

And I know that I don’t give a shit because I want this more than anything right now.

The more I fuck her, the easier the round cross goes inside, until it’s buried deep inside her. I twist it around until I hear her moan, and then I slap her ass for good measure. I know she can feel that, which is exactly why I do it again, only this time on the other cheek.

“You like it when I fuck you like an animal,” I growl.

“Fuck you,” she murmurs again.

“Exactly,” I muse, smiling as I thrust harder.

I wrap my arm around her waist and let my hand slide down between her legs. I grip her pussy and fondle her clit, circling it with fervor. God, I fucking love this—just getting wild after a big fight.

I speed up the pace as I bang her against the wall, making sure her senses are on overload. Her moans turn me on so much that I can barely contain myself. But first ... I wanna feel her fall apart so I know we’re still good.

After all ... I don’t think any man can give her what she needs as well as I do.

She wants me just as much as I want her. She can deny that all she wants, but she and I both know that’s a lie.

So I pump harder and give her everything I have until her knees grow weak and her body begins to buck against my hand. Her engorged nub thumps under my finger, and her muscles contract around me, sending delicious shockwaves down my length.

“Fuck …” I hiss, pulling out before I come too. I’m not done with her yet.

As she’s panting, I swiftly grab her off the floor and throw her over my shoulder with the round cross still plugging her ass.

“What are you doing?” she squeals as I walk her to the table and put her down on her back, making sure her butt sticks out. When she parts her lips again, I place a finger in her mouth and push the cross further in, making her groan.

“Enough talking … now, it’s my turn,” I say.

I quickly pull out the cross and flip it around to the clean side. Then I stuff it into her pussy.

With a firm grip, I lift her legs and prop them against my pecs. Spitting on my dick, I push it into her tiny hole, burying myself deep in her ass until I find that sweet spot again.

She licks her lips, saying, “You’re an ass man, aren’t you?”

I grin and bite my lip. “Isn’t that obvious?”

Groaning with excitement, I thrust in and out, enjoying the feel of her tightness, while I move the cross around too. She seems to like it, despite the fact I’m tainting the holy cross.

However, her hand slips out from behind her back … holding a knife.

Shit. She must’ve gotten it off the counter when I flipped her on my back. Sneaky fuck.

She puts it against my throat, but I don’t stop fucking her. If I’m going to die, this is the happiest place I could be.

“Do it,” I say, inching closer.

She grinds her teeth, the blade almost piercing my skin. “You deserve it …”

A few seconds pass by, and I stare at her, wondering if she's going to make the decision.

"What are you waiting for?" I ask.

She rubs her lips together, breathing loudly through her nose as she gazes me in the eyes. "Nothing."

I move closer, allowing a drop of blood to roll down my neck. "I'll help."

But she doesn't push. Instead, she pulls away each time I get a little closer. And the longer this moment lasts, the more agitated she seems to get. "Fuck!"

Growling, she throws the knife away and grabs my collar, kissing me so hard I swear my cock got even stiffer. I return her frenzied kisses with passionate ones, giving her all the licks and warmth she needs right now while also claiming her as mine.

She tastes so delicious; I could kiss her all day, every day. That's how addicted I am.

When our lips unlatch, she murmurs, "God, I hate you so much."

I smile. "You already said that, but you can't get enough either, can you?"

"No, so fuck me. Hard. Fast. I don't care; just do it dirty and do it good."

I lick my lips and wink as she drops back to the table. "My specialty."

My pants drop to my feet, but I don't give a shit. I'm too focused on giving her everything she needs. I push the cross in deeper and bury myself inside her too, making her feel the fullness. I don't stop until I see her mouth make an O shape, at which point I pull out and thrust back in completely again.

Her muscles clench, and I know she's coming again. Grabbing her tits, I pump her like a madman, the sound of her moans keeping me going.

"You ready for me, babe?"

"Fuck, yes," she moans, her nails digging into the wood. "Come all over me."

Her filthiness pushes me over the edge, so I pull my dick out and jerk off until I come, spurting my cum all over her tits. It even reaches as far as her mouth, and she licks up the drops like a druggie. Goddamn ... I think I'm in love with this woman.

When I'm spent and gasping for air, I lower her legs and the cross drops to the floor. She sits up straight, still leaning back on the palms of her hand as I stand between her naked thighs, wondering how we go from here.

With pursed lips, she glares at me, and I do the same. But I also grab her hand and pull it up to my mouth, kissing the top to show her it's not just about the sex.

However, there's no time for more because one second later, someone's jerking on the door handle.

"Shit!" she whispers, and she shoves me aside and jumps off the table to quickly grab her clothes and run into her bedroom.

"Fuck, where are you going?" I hiss, trying to find my shirt and all the buttons, but I'm running out of time. The door is almost open, and I'm still butt-naked, hopping around while I desperately try to pull up my pants. And right as two boys waltz inside, I manage to jump into her room and slam the door shut.

I'm pretty sure they saw my ass.

Chapter 26

I place my ear against the door and a finger on Laura's mouth when she opens it. "Shh..."

"I saw you!" Diego yells.

Laura almost bursts out into laughter. Only my hand stops the sound from coming out.

"Fuck ..." I mutter, stepping away from the door. "Guess we're screwed."

“It’s not like he hasn’t seen ass before,” she muses.

“Really? How many?” I raise a brow.

She shoves her elbow in my waist. “Stop being an asshole.”

“What? If I’m going to be your boyfriend, I’d like to know how far in line I come. It’s only fair.”

She grabs a Bible lying on her bedside stand and slaps me on the head with it. “Frank ...”

“You too?” I say, laughing a little at the fact that she punishes me exactly the same way as Margaret does.

“Like you’re so innocent. Your dick’s hanging out all the time.” She folds her arms.

“Only for you.” I smirk, and she gives me another slap with the Bible, this time on my arm.

She throws it on her bed and cleans up her tits and face before she goes to her closet to grab some clothes.

“Get dressed,” she says, as she puts on her panties and a blouse, covering her up naked skin again. Goddamn, I already miss it.

I walk up to her, wrapping my hands around her waist and propping my chin on her shoulder. “I’m sorry,” I whisper in her ear.

She pauses, her hand slowly drifting up to mine. “Thank you.”

“I really am. I wish I could undo everything I did, but I can’t. I can’t turn back time.”

“I know.” A pause follows. “Your wife died because of it ... That must be horrible.”

“It is, but I’ve come to accept that now. I had my revenge.”

“And now you have your son too ...” she murmurs, glancing over her shoulder.

I softly spin her on her heels and place my hand on the wardrobe. “I want things to be okay between us. Tell me what I have to do.”

She sighs, looking down at her feet while she fumbles with the pants in her hands. “I honestly don’t know. You took my mother away from me. And my little brother … I’ll never get to meet him.” She sniffs, tears welling up in her eyes. “And I hate it.”

I lift her chin up so I can look at the pain I’ve caused. I want to face it. I’m not running away from it anymore. “I promise I will never hurt you like that ever again.”

She nods softly, but of course, nothing I can say will help, so I pull her into my embrace and hold her tight.

“God … Laura … your mother … I can’t even tell you how messed up it is. I mean, I was sent to steal stuff from your father. But then she was there.” I sigh. “I wish I could take it back. I’ve wished it every single day of my life.”

“But you can’t,” she mutters.

“No, and because of that, I lost my wife … and years of my son’s life.”

“Guess there’s a silver lining there.”

“What do you mean?” I ask.

She looks up and smiles briefly. “You can spend the time you lost with him now.”

“Hmm … but I don’t wanna do it if it means losing you,” I reply, cocking my head. “And I don’t blame you if you say you don’t want me anymore. I just … can’t get over you that easily.”

She shakes her head, snorting. “I get what you’re saying … Heck, I even felt it.”

I lean in closer, tipping up her chin again. “Is there ever a chance you’ll forgive me?”

“I don’t … I don’t …” she mutters, and I see the agony on her face.

It's so hard for her.

Not just to forgive me.

But to forgive herself for wanting me ... despite the fact I'm her mother's killer.

I want to make it easier for her, so I press my lips to hers, kissing her gently. I don't want to overstep her boundaries, so I take it slow and easy. However, she doesn't push me away. In fact, she's kissing me back.

"It's wrong," she murmurs between our kisses.

"It doesn't matter," I say.

"It should." Her grip on my body tightens.

"If we both want it, there's no shame in it."

"I can't stop ..." Her voice sounds heady, and her lips are tantalizing, warm, and needy. Exactly the way I like them.

"Then don't stop," I say. "I need you so badly." My fingers run through her hair in a desperate attempt to get closer to her, but nothing's ever enough.

"But my mother ..." she mutters as our mouths unlatch.

I brush my thumb across her lips. "She'd want you to be happy."

She closes her eyes and nods. "You're right."

"And I prayed to her ... every day ..." I grab her hand and squeeze. "To forgive me for my sins. I never wanted her dead; you gotta believe me."

Laura places a finger on my lips and smiles softly. "I understand now."

I frown. "You do?"

"Yes and no. I understand why it happened the way it did. But ..." She taps her index finger against my chest. "Don't you think you'll get away with what you did. I won't forgive you that easily. It'll take a lot of groveling and begging."

I smirk at her comment.

“And maybe some cooking and cleaning and ass kissing,” I add.

She smiles too now. “Yeah, that *might* do the trick.”

Elated, I grab her by the waist and twirl her around in my arms, kissing her so hard I feel like I’m on cloud nine. I know it’s wrong for me to want her so badly after the history we have, but the past is the past, and I wanna move forward.

“I promise I’ll do whatever I can to make you happy,” I say, putting her down again. “And if after all that, you still wanna kill me … I’ll hand you the knife myself.”

She snorts. “You’re making this way too easy for me.”

I shrug. “I don’t care if I die. I deserve it.”

Her brows draw together. “I do.”

“Hmm …” I narrow my eyes. “I seem to recall you wanting to murder me just minutes ago.”

She makes a face. “Like you don’t know how anger feels, Mr. I-Kill-Everyone-For-Revenge.”

I wink. “Got me there.”

“Are you guys coming out yet, or do I need to call the fire department?” Diego yells. “Because that mushy shit smells.”

I laugh and so does Laura, and it’s the first time in a long time that I can genuinely say I’m happy, right where I am right now.

But then I realize … Bruno’s in there too. Right behind that door. And I can’t help but stare.

“You wanna talk to him?” Laura asks.

I nod. “I …” I turn my head to her. “What do I say?”

She shrugs. “Whatever you want. He’s *your* son.”

I lick my lips and think it over for a few seconds. Laura places her hand on my shoulder and squeezes. “You’ll do fine. You’ve already talked to him before. Nothing’s changed.”

“*Everything ... has changed.*”

She nods, finally understanding what I mean. “But ...” She swallows, staring me straight in the eye. “You can’t take him away from here.”

I frown in confusion.

“I mean ... you can’t take him away from his family,” she adds. “Diego and Bruno are the only family I’ve got. My father hates me.”

“Why?” I ask.

“Because I saved your son. He wanted to kill him, but I took him and ran, and he never forgave me. Especially because I took Diego with me too. That, and I’ve always been against all the illegal shit he’s in.”

“I see.” I rub the back of my head. I understand what she means, but I can’t stay away either. “But you have to understand ... I *want* to see my son. Even if you don’t want me here.”

“I know,” she replies. “I don’t mind.”

“Really?” I raise a brow. “Your mother’s killer in your house?”

She squints and rubs her lips together. “Stop ... saying those words.”

“Already in denial?” I muse.

“Just don’t mention it. Like, at all.”

“Right. As long as I grovel and suck up to you, right?”

She sniggers. “Exactly.”

“Well, I guess that means I’ll be hanging out here even more,” I say with a grin.

“You done yet?” Diego yells. “Bruno’s hungry.”

“Coming!” Laura replies, and I let go of her so we can put on our clothes properly.

I quickly check my hair in the mirror before she opens the door and peeks out. “How do I look?” I whisper.

She muffles a laugh. “Stop being so self-conscious; you’ll do fine. C’mon.”

She walks out the door and goes to the kitchen. The boys are already sitting on the couch, watching the television. And me? I’m stuck in the doorway, unable to move an inch the moment I see him.

“What were you doing in there?” Bruno asks.

I lick my lips, but I can’t come up with an answer. Or maybe I’m too fucking paralyzed by the thought of having to tell him I’m his dad.

“Grown-up stuff,” Laura answers, taking the pressure off for me.

“Yeah … next time, you might wanna grab the buttons scattered on the floor,” Diego says, pointing at them.

Laura cringes, visibly disturbed by the fact that Diego seems to know exactly what went down here. “Yeah, well, sometimes things just get a little rough.” She casually washes her hands and grabs a few tomatoes, dicing them up again as if nothing ever happened.

“Eww …” Diego winces. “I seriously don’t wanna know that.”

“What? Don’t you have girlfriends or something?” Laura muses.

“Of course, I do. I get pussy every day.”

Now, she gives him the look.

The same one she gave me minutes ago before we fucked like animals on the kitchen table.

“Language,” she hisses.

“Yeah, yeah.” He rolls his eyes. “What’s for dinner?”

“You if you don’t watch it.”

“What?” He makes a face and so does she.

“Lasagna.”

“I love lasagna!” Bruno suddenly shouts, almost jumping up from the couch.

“You do, huh?” She winks. Of course, she already knew. That’s why she’s making it.

I smile when I realize he’s been here all along under her perfect care ... I can see the love, and it only makes me feel more grateful than I already am.

I clutch the doorjamb and wistfully gawk at her and the boy, but then he looks me directly in the eye, grasping my full attention.

“Father Frank, do you like lasagna?”

Me? He’s talking to me.

But calling me Father suddenly sounds so different ... so earthshattering.

Lasagna. Do I like it?

“Yes ...” I clear my throat, still smiling. “I love it. Anything Laura makes must taste good, right?” I look at her. “I mean ... have you seen her cook?”

She grins. “Already starting with the groveling, I see?”

I shrug. “Better start early if I wanna pay my debts.”

“What debt?” Bruno asks, leaning up on the couch like it’s a monkey bar he can climb.

“Grown-up stuff,” Laura murmurs.

“Aww ... Why is everything grown-up stuff? I won’t get to know anything!” He gives me the cutest pout I’ve ever seen, and I’m almost tempted to tell him everything, but I suppose that wouldn’t be the smart thing to do with a young kid. He’d be scarred for life.

“You’ll know when you’re old enough,” she says.

“You don’t wanna know, trust me,” Diego interjects, pulling him down to the cushions before he falls off the couch. “Sit down.”

I go and pick up the buttons from my shirt off the floor, tucking them into my pocket.

“So is he staying for dinner?” Bruno asks.

“Well …” I look at Laura who gives me this weird look, so I guess it’s fine.

“Can he? Please?” Bruno begs her, making her laugh.

“All right, all right. But only because you’ve been doing so well in school.”

“Yay!” he cheers, and I can’t stop smiling or ogling.

Jesus, I’m so fucking weird.

“It’ll take a while before the lasagna is finished, so you two go watch some cartoons, okay? And no buts.” Laura points at Diego.

“Fine.” Diego sighs. “But I’m picking the channel tonight.”

Laura smirks. “Grab a cloth and clean the table, would you? It looks filthy.”

I grin as I walk over to her. “I think I know why.”

When I’m near the faucet, she whispers, “Are you afraid of him?”

As I grab a cloth and hold it under the water, I glance over my shoulder and whisper back, “It’s kind of weird, you know? Telling a kid you’re his father. It’s not something you just do.”

“Why not? What are you waiting for? Some kind of sign from God?”

I shrug. “Maybe. It would be welcome right about now.”

She shakes her head and laughs as she continues to dice mushrooms and onions.

I go to the table and wash it with the warm cloth, making sure to go over it with a disinfectant too. Then I set the table and make sure everything’s perfect. I’m not doing it because I want to avoid talking to the kid.

Of course not.

I mean ... he's just a kid. What's there to be nervous about?

But when I'm done with all the chores I could possibly do, I'm stuck twiddling my thumbs, waiting for this moment. This one moment when I'll know exactly what to do and what to say.

However, a sudden idea isn't what distracts me, but my phone buzzing in my pants.

I take it from my pocket and open the app. My heart comes to a stop when I see the message on the screen.

Coming out to play?

It's from Julio ... and he just sent me a picture of Margaret.

Chapter 27

“Fuck,” I hiss, and I immediately rush to the door.

“What’s wrong?” Laura asks, running after me.

“They’ve got Mother!”

I don’t even take the time to properly say goodbye to Laura or the boys. I have to get to Mother in time before ... fuck!

If he hurts her, I’m going to fucking murder him.

I’ll give him the slow, painful death he’s deserved all along.

Fuck!

I knew I should’ve killed him when I had the chance.

In my car, I speed through the streets to get to the church as fast as I can, not giving a shit about the fact that I'm running stop signs. I have to get there before he does something irreversible. Before I lose another person I love so deeply.

It'd kill me too.

My wheels screech as I jump corners and skid to a stop right in front of the church.

I jump out and run through the doors ... only to find Mother standing there in front of the cross, gazing at me with a confused look on her face.

With a pounding heart, I gape, completely fazed. "What ..."

"What's wrong?" she asks.

"You're alone ..." I approach her.

"Of course, I am," she replies. "Who were you expecting?"

"No one came here?" I ask.

She places a hand on my arm. "No ... Are you okay? You're sweating."

I wipe my forehead with my sleeve and say, "No. Absolutely not."

"Tell me what's happening."

"Julio had a picture of you ..." Now that I think about it, she looked way too relaxed in the picture. It's like it was taken from afar. So that means ...

"Shit!"

I should've known it was a distraction.

I turn around and start running.

"What's happening?"

"Lock the church down!" I yell over my shoulder. "Julio's going after Laura and the kids."

She puts her hand in front of her mouth in shock as I rush out the doors and jump back into my car.

I don't think I've ever hit the gas this hard in my life—that's how fast I'm going. Rage fills me up inside, and when I'm stuck behind another car, I swear out loud and smash the horn.

"Fuck. Goddammit. FUCK!"

It doesn't release the pressure building inside.

The innate fear that I'm not just about to lose the one girl I love ... but my long-lost son as well.

I can't let it happen. I won't. I'll do anything to prevent them from dying. If I have to, I'll sacrifice myself for them. If that's what it takes to keep them safe, I'll do it.

"Faster, faster, faster," I mutter to myself as I race through the streets, trying to get back to her house in time.

However ... the moment I get there, I already know I'm too late.

What I see is like a vision from a nightmare.

The same scene unfolding as that day I vowed never to forget.

Laura, Diego, and my son being dragged to a car by a few of Julio's men.

And *he* is sitting in the front seat ...

Right before I get there, I can still hear Bruno's cries as he calls out my name, his eyes solely focused on me as the car drives off.

Fuck.

I can't let them get away.

I *won't* let it happen ... not again.

So I hit the gas as hard as I can.

* * *

I've been following them for fifteen minutes now, and we're driving all the way into the middle of fucking nowhere. It's not looking good. When they finally stop, I'm still a long ways behind. Too far because the three are kicked out of the car, and Laura scrambles to protect both Diego and Bruno.

"C'mon, c'mon, c'mon!" I shout at my car, trying to push it to its limits.

Julio steps out too now, and he's wearing a rotten smile I wanna wipe off his face. He pulls a gun from his pocket while the two sons of bitches point theirs at them too. Bruno begins to cry, and Diego's screaming for help while Laura is trying to negotiate with her dad. I can't hear what they're saying; all I can see is a bit of their movement, and it scares the shit out of me.

"I'm coming," I growl, trying to get there before he pulls the trigger.

The closer I get, the more the frightened looks on their faces burn into my brain. I have to get them outta there, no matter the cost.

So when I'm finally there, I park my car right next to theirs, drawing their attention away from Laura and the boys.

I tuck my phone far into my pocket and grab my gun before I step out.

Three guns are now pointed at my face as I point mine at Julio.

"You son of a bitch ..." I mutter.

He laughs. "Frank, how nice of you to join us."

"You couldn't just go after me, could you?"

"I'm surprised you actually took the bait," he muses, cocking his head. "How is Margaret? It must be hard on her to see her boy losing his mind."

"Shut up!" I spit.

The two men raise their guns at me, but Julio waves them off. "Wait."

I look at him and then at the scared little face of Bruno. Then at Laura, who immediately grabs Bruno and pulls him toward her, hugging him tightly. I know what she's thinking. If they wanna kill them ... she'll die protecting them.

With a foul taste in my mouth, I glare at Julio and hiss, “Let them go.”

“No.” He laughs again. “Why the fuck would I do that?”

“They’re innocent.”

“No, they’re not.”

“They’re your kids, for fuck’s sake,” I spit, still keeping my gun aimed at him.

“Dad? Why are you doing this,” Diego mutters, but Laura slaps her hand in front of his mouth to shush him.

“Shut your mouth,” Julio spits at him. “You shouldn’t have run away with your sister, Diego. You know, I thought I was a good dad. Apparently not good enough, it seems.” He glares at Laura now. “When you all ran, you thought I didn’t know where you were? Wrong. But I gave you your space; I let you live on your own. And then you go around and betray me like that? With that bastard?” He points at me.

“It’s none of your business,” Laura replies.

“Yes, it is. You were my daughter,” he growls. “But not anymore. None of you are my children, you fucking pussies.”

Diego’s eyes tear up too now as he’s coming face to face with the fact that his dad literally abandoned him after his sister took him in.

“How dare you? They’re your goddamn kids,” I hiss.

“So? They should’ve stayed by my side. This is the lesson they learn.”

Julio walks to Laura and snatches Bruno away from her.

“NO!” Laura screams. The men have to physically hold her back, and the altercation causes her necklace to break and scatter.

Bruno’s shrieks go through bone and marrow as I struggle not to pull the trigger on Julio right there and then.

“Do it,” Julio barks, looking me straight in the eye. “I dare you.”

“If you don’t let them go, I will,” I say.

“I’ll kill your son before it happens,” he growls, pointing the gun straight at Bruno’s temple.

“And then you’re next,” I reply. “I won’t let you get away with it. Not a chance.”

“If you shoot me, you die next,” he says. “My boys won’t let you run.”

“I don’t fucking care.”

He smirks and then bursts out into laughter. “You know, I admire your tenacity. It’s not every day that I find a man willing to sacrifice himself for his family, even though it’s futile.”

The barrel is pressed harder against Bruno’s head.

I hold up my hand. “Wait!”

He narrows his eyes. “Why should I? You know how it works. The death of this kid for the death of my men. An eye for an eye.”

“No,” I say. “You’ll hurt your daughter too.”

“I don’t care about that little bitch, just as I don’t care about that other little bitch. The moment they ran away from me was the moment they stopped having the right to call me father.”

“Kill me, Dad,” Laura begs. “Kill me but leave Diego and Bruno alone.” She gets up from the ground and begs. “Please.”

“As far as I see it, we’ll both be dead when this ends,” I interject, and Julio sets his sight on me instead.

“What did you say?”

“You heard me. If you touch any of them, I’ll kill you personally.”

“And then what?”

“Nothing, but at least you’ll be dead.”

He frowns, but then he starts laughing again. “You’re serious.”

“Dead serious.”

“You want to die?”

“If that means stopping you, then yes.”

My determination makes him lash out as he tightens his grip on Bruno’s arm, who cries even louder.

Laura goes to her knees and begins to pray to God. Grinding my teeth, I contemplate my options and even ponder whether I should throw myself in front of Bruno to serve as his shield. But I know that’s futile. Sacrificing myself won’t save them.

I have to give him something he wants most of all.

Something he can’t say no to.

“Take me instead.”

He frowns, and a pause follows, but then he parts his lips. “Go on.”

“You can do whatever you want. I’ll give you my gun, and I won’t fight back.”

“No, don’t do this,” Laura begs.

I ignore her plea.

Not because I don’t wanna hear it or because it pains me, but because it’s the only right thing to do. For once in my life, I have to pick the good instead of the evil.

Julio scratches his stubble. “If?”

I take a deep breath.

“If you let them take my car and spare their lives.”

“Frank, no!” Laura yells.

“It’s the only way,” I say.

“No, that’s not a solution,” she says. “It’s suicide.”

“But at least you and the boys will be safe.” We stare at each other for a moment as she finally comes to the realization there is no other way out of this mess.

“So … this is what you choose?” Julio sniggers. “You know, I never pegged you to be the hero type.”

“You don’t know me at all,” I retort. “So we got a deal?”

He gives me an arrogant smirk and nods a few times. “All right, preacher … we’ve got a deal.” He steps closer, releasing Bruno from his grip, who immediately runs back into Laura’s arms. Julio extends his hand, and after careful deliberation, I take it with my left hand.

Laura closes her eyes, a tear rolling down her cheek as she grips the boys tight.

“You will leave them alone and let them live. Got it?” I say, still pointing my gun at him with my right hand to make sure I get my end of the deal.

“Of course … I never go back on an agreement.” Another rotten smile. God, how I wish I could rip it off.

I pull my hand away and turn toward Laura. “Go. Take my car. Take them home safely and stay there.”

She nods with tears in her eyes. “Thank you,” she mutters softly.

Then she quickly grabs the boys and rushes to my car. She locks the doors and, after a thoughtful look, drives off. The last thing I see is Bruno’s sad face as he waves goodbye a final time.

God, I’ll miss that boy.

But I can live with it now that I know he’s alive.

Or rather … I can die in peace.

He’ll be okay without me; I’m sure he will.

Julio whistles at the two men still standing there, and they come to snatch my gun and frisk me, taking my cell phone too. I knew it was coming. I just didn’t know they’d grab my arms too and hold me down like some prisoner.

One fast punch to the gut and I'm bucked over, heaving.

"That's for fucking with my daughter."

Julio kicks me in the chin, causing one of my teeth to lodge itself into my lip, making me groan in pain. "And that's for breaking into my home and killing my men."

He spits on the ground in front of me then directs his attention toward one of his men. "Grab the shovels and the rope." The guy walks off and returns moments later.

The two men pull my wrists to my back and tie me up until the rope burns into my skin. Julio walks off, beckoning the guys to follow him. They drag me along like a rag doll, but I don't know where we're going, and I can't see. I'm way too fucking dizzy from the pain and just struggling not to fall. We stop somewhere farther up ahead, where Julio points at a spot on the ground and flicks his fingers.

The guys begin to dig.

Long and deep.

Like ... coffin deep.

And all I can do is stare and wait until they deliver my fate.

"So you thought it was a smart idea coming here, did you?" Julio jests. "Wrong." He bursts out into laughter again as he circles me like a vulture. "And then you made a deal with the devil. Oh, oh, oh ... preacher. Do you know what I'm going to do to you after all the shit you pulled?"

I shrug. "I don't care."

He stops in his tracks and frowns at me, cocking his head. "Are you sure about that?"

I glare ahead, not even giving a shit whether he's looking at me or not. It's a lost cause. I can't change anything about my fate anymore. He can't do anything more to me to hurt me. He made the deal. Gave me my dying wish. And now I've surrendered to God.

I'm untouchable.

"Aren't you even a little bit scared?"

"No."

At first, he seems confused, but then he laughs again. "You motherfucker." He spits on my face, but I keep on staring ahead. I will not lose my dignity to this man. I will go down like a soldier. Like I should've done all along. All those years wasted on liquor and sorrow. No more.

"Can you believe this shithead?" Julio jests, looking at his men.

They gaze up and momentarily stop digging. "No," one of them replies. "He's crazy."

A pause, followed by Julio frowning and yelling, "What the fuck are you doing? Get back to work!"

"Uh, yes, boss," the other one says, sweating like crazy as they both continue to dig without speaking another word.

"Now, where were we? Oh ... that's right. I was going to tell you how you're going to die." He grabs a cigar from his pocket, taking his sweet time to put it in his mouth and light it. "At first, I thought maybe I should just shoot the motherfucker and get over it. But then I realized that's too easy. It's too nice. And the man who killed my wife and took my daughter doesn't deserve nice. So now you know ... I'm not going to shoot you. No, your death will be much, much worse."

He takes a drag and blows the smoke in my face. "You know what's going to happen to you?"

A drop of rain falls on my face, and I look up at the sky to see a string of ducks fly by. Julio looks up too, and at this moment, I find my peace with whatever may come next.

"Ducks ... hmm ..." he murmurs, taking another drag as he lowers his head to look at me again. "Strange animals, they are. Have you ever seen a duck being chased by a dog?"

I don't respond. I don't even nod or shake my head. I've stopped caring.

“Well, since you’re so interested, I’ll tell you anyway. You’d think the duck would fly away, right? But because of its panic, it will run across the street like an idiot.” He makes flapping motions with his hand, pretending to be the duck. “Until … the dog comes close enough, at which point …” Julio stiffens like a board. “The duck falls and plays dead in the hopes of being left as spoiled meat. A last ditch effort.” He smiles. “And you know what happens next?”

Again, I don’t reply. I just stare at the men who seem to be done digging their hole as they stick their shovels in the dirt, panting out loud.

“The duck still gets eaten,” Julio continues.

I cock my head, giving him an annoyed look while he takes another drag and blows more smoke into my face. “The duck could’ve flown away, but it didn’t. Instead, it fluttered and crashed, running from its predator, until it died anyway. A futile death if you ask me,” he muses, sniggering like a crazy son of a bitch again.

“It’s done,” one of the guys says, and Julio turns around to look at the hole.

“Perfect. Put him in.”

They grab my arms and drag me closer then shove me forward, so I land in the hole. I only manage to twist myself around before they start throwing dirt on my body.

“Spare his face for last. I wanna hear his dying words. Maybe I can savor them like I did with his wife.”

That familiar fire burns inside me again, but it’s too late to do anything right now.

As he walks off, I yell, “You’ll meet your end, Julio.” He glances over his shoulder, waiting until I open my mouth again, which I do. “One way or another … you will die a lonely, horrible death, and no one will mourn over your corpse.”

He narrows his eyes and his brows furrows, after which he laughs like a lunatic again. “Good joke.” He waves it off. “Go on, boys. Cover him up.”

* * *

When the grave is filled with dirt all the way up to my neck, the guys stop shoveling and signal Julio. He waltzes back from his car with a brand new cigar stuffed in his mouth. He grins as he sees my uncovered face, blurting, “You almost look decapitated.”

“Hmm … a talking head,” I murmur, spitting out some dirt that got into my mouth.

“Now that would’ve been a sight to see,” he says, laughing, but then it grows eerily quiet. “Well, got any last words?”

“I currently lack the ability to give a shit,” I reply, trying to move, but my body feels stuck as a rock. “But please have my imaginary finger.”

He shakes his head, blowing out more smoke. “Such a shame. If only you’d been more remorseful, maybe I would’ve been more kind.” He takes his cigar from his mouth and signals his boys to throw more dirt on my face.

“Too bad, preacher. See you in the next life. But first … I’ve got a certain old lady to take care of.”

My eyes widen, and I shout, “What? No, you fucking wouldn’t. You took the deal. You swore you wouldn’t touch my family!”

He shrugs and holds up his hands with a disgusting smile as he walks off. “I never said anything about *her*. Better say some prayers for your church, preacher,” he muses.

“You can’t do this! She’s innocent!” I sputter as they throw more dirt on my head, but he doesn’t even turn around. “Don’t you fucking touch my mother! I swear to God, I’ll haunt you for the rest of your short, shitty life!” I roar.

But no matter how hard I scream, he doesn’t come back.

And the more steps he takes, the further my face is covered in dirt until I’m no longer able to speak.

Fuck.

Within a few seconds, the earth has covered me to the nose. I hold my breath.

Three more shovels of dirt and I'm under.

I hear their laughter as they walk away, and I'm praying to God to give me the strength to outlast my fear. I thought I was prepared. All these years I begged for the end. But now that the moment has finally arrived, I know for sure ... I am not ready to die.

Chapter 28

Ezekiel 37:13 – And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and raise you from your graves, O my people.

One. Two. Three. Four.

Breathe out.

One. Two. Three. Four.

One more breath leaves my mouth.

I have little more to give, and the urge to gasp is almost taking over.

But I refuse to swallow dirt. I'd rather suffocate than feel sand going down my throat.

In silence, I pray to God to help me get through this. And for some reason, I can feel him with me. Right here, underneath the ground, close to me.

One. Two. Three. Four.

I count down the seconds, but each time, it's getting worse.

God, the pressure is so high.

When I'm finally out of breath, I squeeze my lungs together, refusing to give in. A bright light shines through a tiny hole, and for a second there, I

believe I've actually died and gone to heaven. God is coming to pick me up in true God-like style. I could almost hear the trumpets blare in my ear.

Except when I open my eyes, it's just a pair of lips screaming at me.

That doesn't look like God at all.

That looks like ...

"Frank! Fuck, Frank." Hands pull my head up from the dirt, and the moment my lips meet sweet air, I take a gulp and let the oxygen flow into my lungs.

"Ric-card-do," I stutter, sucking in air like an addict.

"Fuck, dude, are you okay?" he asks, pulling my head out further.

"Do I look like I'm okay?" I sneer. "Jesus, dude."

"Sorry, man, I'm just ... not used to this type of shit." He swallows.

"Yeah, well, that's what happens when you mess with the wrong people," I say. "Help me out, will ya?"

"What the fuck did you do to this guy to get him so pissed off?" he asks.

"I killed his wife."

"Jesus, Frank! You could've told me," Rick says. "What if he was still here? He could've killed me too!"

"He's gone. Stop complaining and get me out of here." I look down at my nonexistent body, which gives me the creeps.

"Yeah, yeah, leave it to Rick to get your ass outta trouble. But you have to agree that my debt is paid then. Yes?"

I roll my eyes. "Yes, fine, I already told you. Just get me out."

"All right," he says, and he starts digging with his hand. "When you sent me that voicemail, I sure as hell thought you were playing a prank on me. You're lucky my girl was there and told me you weren't."

"Your girl?" I raise a brow.

“Yeah, we’re kinda doing it you know ... but we’re not back together or anything.”

“Right ...” I nod, frowning.

“Hey, a man has needs. Like you don’t know that,” he retorts.

“Rick, what you do in your own time is none of my damn business,” I reply.

“Exactly,” he says.

“But I am curious, though ... you didn’t believe me, but she did?”

“Yeah ...” He shrugs. “Women, they can feel things, you know? Got this ... fifth sense or something.”

I chuckle. “Sixth sense.”

“The movie?”

“No.” I roll my eyes again. “Just keep digging.”

“Yeah, but this ain’t getting me anywhere. Be right back. I think I got a shovel in the back of my car.” He gets up and starts running.

“You’re saying that now?” I yell, but he doesn’t hear it.

Goddamn, how I wish I had a megaphone right now.

Being buried neck-deep in dirt is really shitty if you wanna talk to people and they keep running away from you. But I can’t complain. I’m already dead-happy he came for me.

It was a crapshoot to leave him a voicemail from my car on the way here, but I knew it was the only thing I could do to make sure I’d come outta this alive. Call it a fail-safe.

After I helped him take care of his child, Rick still owed me, so I told him the location and to bring a few guns as well as some water. I didn’t know what to expect. Julio’s known for his outlandish punishments to crime, so I had to be prepared. And phoning while driving ain’t easy or smart, I’ll tell you that. Almost hit a tree.

Still, made it here ... and I'm alive.

Whether I'm also 'well' has yet to be seen, though. If this fucker can finally dig me up from the ground so I can save my mother before Julio kills her.

When Ricardo's back with the shovel, I tell him to do my feet first so he can drag my body out. It's much quicker that way, and there's no time to waste. He digs as fast as he can, sweat drops falling down his face as he toils. I know it's hard in the burning sun, but we've got to be fast.

"Put your whole body into it," I bark, watching him struggle.

"I know how to dig a damn hole, Frank," he replies, still shoveling away.

"He's going to hurt Margaret," I say. "We have to be fast."

"I'm going as fast as I can!" he shouts between digging.

When my shoes finally emerge, I say, "There! Grab my feet and drag me out."

"But won't that pull your head under?"

"Yes, but if you pull hard enough, it'll do the trick. I can hold my breath."

"But—"

"Just do it," I spit.

He nods and grabs my feet. "One, two ..."

On three, I take in a load of air and slam my lips shut. He pulls me under, dragging me through the dirt. It's agonizingly slow, and for a few seconds there, I worry he might not be able to pull it off. I can hear him groan as he puts all his weight into it, pulling as hard as he can, and slowly but surely, my head comes up again.

I take a big gasp as he tugs me all the way out and rolls me onto my belly. "Untie my hands," I say.

He takes a knife from his pocket and slices through the rope, setting me free.

I get off the ground and pat down my clothes then rub my wrists. “Goddamn, that feels good,” I say. “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome,” he replies, tucking the knife back into his pocket. “So what now?”

“Take me to the church,” I say, running toward his car.

He grabs the shovel and runs after me.

Ricardo throws the shovel in the trunk, and we hop into the car, chasing off.

With haste, we make our way back to town. In the rearview mirror, I look at myself and brush the dirt out of my hair and straighten my jacket too. I look like a walking zombie, but at least I’m a zombie with flair.

Still, as more minutes pass, the more anxious I get. We should’ve been there already. Every second wasted is another one I can’t afford. So I look at Rick, and ask, “Can I borrow your phone for a sec?”

“Why?” He frowns.

“They took mine,” I say. “I have to warn them.”

“Oh … right.” He rummages in his pocket and throws it at me. “Here.”

“Thanks.” I quickly type in Margaret’s cell phone number and call, but she doesn’t pick up. Damn. She always hated that damn phone. I resort to texting her, saying that she needs to get outta there, hoping she might read it in time. Then I text Laura and tell her I’m still alive and on my way, and that she needs to stay put.

Right as we’re nearing the church, I throw Rick’s phone back at him and say, “Drop me off here. You go to Laura’s house and make sure she’s safe. I put her address in your phone.”

“Why? You don’t want me going with you? What if that dude’s in there with a bunch of his guys? He’ll kill you for real this time.”

“I’ll handle myself,” I say, jumping out. “Take care of Laura and the kids. They’re more important than I am.”

“All right … if you say so.”

“Thanks, dude.” I slam the door shut, and he drives off.

When my feet hit the steps, I rethink my plan of attack. They’ll be expecting people to come through the front door, but I doubt they know about the back door. So I stop and turn back, running around the back while holding my head down. Don’t want any of those fuckers to see me coming. I climb up the steel fence and jump over into the garden, and when I softly pull the door handle, it opens. Lucky for me, Mother forgot to lock it this time.

I slip inside as quietly as possible and look around. Three men, including Julio, are sitting in the back with Mother between them. The other two motherfuckers are the same ones who buried me in the ground. They’re talking to her … or rather, laughing at her, while they make stupid jokes and scare her. Having fun with my fucking mother. My fist balls. I’m going to fucking kill them.

But first, a weapon.

I sneak along the back part of the church, using the statues and pillars to hide when they glance my way. Luckily, they’re facing away from the altar, so that gives me the opportunity to slide alongside it. I carefully make my way back to my room and quickly lock the door from the inside in case they did notice me.

I swiftly open the closet and push back a board, pulling out a miniature gun that I hid there just in case shit went down. Well, shit’s definitely going down right about now. This beauty doesn’t hold a lot of bullets, but it’s fast and does the trick.

I also grab a knife from my drawer and tuck it under my belt before I open the door again.

Slowly but steadily, I walk out, aiming my gun at the men sitting in the back of the church. Mother’s terrified eyes are the first that look my way, her tears setting a fire ablaze inside me.

And as the guy to the left notices the startled look on her face and turns his head, I shoot.

The bullet hits him right between the eyes.

“What the—” Julio’s voice rumbles.

One down, two more to go. However, Julio jumps up now, grabbing Mother. Meanwhile, as the other dude searches for his gun, I quickly shoot at him. One goes in his shoulder. He attempts to shoot. A bullet ricochets off the wall near me. I shoot again. This time, I hit him in the chest. He falls down to the bench.

I move away from the pillar and find Julio dragging Mother along with him, grasping her tight. He’s using her as a shield as he moves closer to me and then he reaches into his pocket and takes out a gun, putting it to her temple.

“Don’t you fucking do it,” he hisses. “I’ll kill her.”

“Let her go, fuckhead,” I growl, aiming for his head.

But I don’t pull the trigger. I’m terrified I’ll hit Mother instead.

“How the fuck did you get out of that fucking hole?” he hisses.

I narrow my eyes, making sure to keep them on him as he approaches me.
“Magic.”

“Don’t take me for a goddamn fool,” he spits, pushing the gun even harder against her temple.

She whimpers and quivers with fear as he uses his filthy hands to pull her near the altar. I don’t stop him because I want him to get closer … it’s the only way I can get her out of his grasp safely.

However, it also means he could shoot me easier. But I won’t let that happen.

“You’ll never get rid of me, Julio,” I hiss.

“No, you’re like a fucking disease,” he replies.

We’re dangerously close to each other now. “Just so you know, I take offense to that.”

“You should’ve died in the ground,” he spits. “Now, you’ll get to witness me murdering your little old granny, and after that, I’ll nail you to the fucking cross.”

“Over my dead body,” I snarl, trying to take better aim to see if I can take the shot. He’s keeping her so damn close to his body, constantly swaying around to make it harder. Goddammit.

Suddenly, the front doors to the church open and the people running in distract us both.

It’s Laura, Diego … and Bruno.

Chapter 29

Laura, Diego, and Bruno appear right in the middle of a fight.

What are they doing here?

The should be safe at home.

Why?

“Fuck!” I hiss as Julio’s seen them too.

But instead of shooting at them, he fires at me.

I duck, hiding behind the altar as he shoots again.

He pushes Mother aside so hard she falls to the ground, but he doesn’t even care. All he’s focused on is shooting at me and everything surrounding me.

When he momentarily stops, I shoot back, hitting the wall.

I duck again before he has the chance to blow my brains out. From the corner of my eye, I watch the kids huddle close behind a bench while Laura’s holding her phone against her ear, probably to call the police.

She must’ve been worried about me or Mother, and that’s why she came here. But I wish they hadn’t. They’re a liability. I *have* to keep them safe.

After Julio fires another shot, I take aim at his gun and shoot. It bounces away from his hand, and he growls from both pain and shock as it tumbles

to the floor.

His eyes widen when I crawl out and get up, pointing my gun straight at him. Not once do I think before I pull the trigger.

And then I realize I'm shooting blanks.

The look on his face changes from raw fear to rage as he charges at me in full force, ramming me like a bull.

He slams me to the ground, and a fist lands on my face. My vision gets blurry, but Laura's scream keeps me wide awake. I hit back, punching him in the gut, but it doesn't get him off me. He lands another punch on my shoulder, and I howl in pain.

"I'll show you why they call me El Campeón," he growls, hitting me again.

Each fist hits like a truck, forcing the air out of my lungs. I can barely breathe.

Another fist to the mouth and blood flies around.

But the fearful faces of Bruno and Diego give me strength, and I fight back, kicking him in the balls. If I have to play dirty to win, so be it, but I'm not going to lose to this son of a bitch. No fucking way.

"Stop!" Laura yells, her voice sounding more like a cry than anger.

We roll around the floor, punching each other, kicking and throwing fists wherever we can. However, when his hands wrap around my neck, I know I'm done for.

"Dad, don't!" Diego yells. Even he's on my side now. But it's no point if I'm choked to death.

Then I remember the knife I had in my pocket, and I swiftly pull it out to try to stab him. He pushes me back and gets up from the floor. I do too, and I swing at him with the knife, making him walk backward. He slips on the carpet and falls. Perfect.

I jump on him and try to shove the knife down his throat, but his hands are in the way. He props himself up and punches me so hard in the gut, I heave

and feel the bile rise. He grabs my wrist and twists. The knife falls from my hand as I groan in pain. Then he kicks me so hard I literally fly across the hall.

Fuck.

Landing against a wall with your back is painful. So painful, I can barely breathe.

God, everything hurts, and it's so damn hard to focus. I feel around the floor to get a grip of where I am, at which point my hands reach for something odd.

Something metallic.

Julio's gun.

But then, from the corner of my eye, I spot Bruno pushing Laura away, freeing himself from her grasp.

“Bruno, no!” she calls out to him, but it’s too late.

He’s running … to me.

“No, stay away,” I mutter, but I can barely pronounce the words. My throat is clamped, and he can’t hear me from afar.

Too late. Everything’s going so quick. It’s like time has sped up and now he’s already at my side. “You gotta get up and fight,” he pleads, hugging me tightly. “I believe in you.” He pushes me with his little hands like a child trying to wake his parents.

It unravels me.

Until I see Julio appear behind him with my goddamn knife … and he grabs him.

“No!” I scream, immediately crawling up.

But it’s too late … Julio has Bruno in a tight grasp, holding the knife dangerously close to his neck.

“Let him go; he’s innocent!” I yell.

Laura approaches us with Diego, but Julio's roar stops them in their tracks.
“Don’t come closer!”

“Dad, no! Don’t do it!” Laura screams with tears running down her cheeks.
“Why? He’s just a little kid.”

“This is it, Frank,” he murmurs, looking directly at me. “Say goodbye to your goddamn son.”

“No,” I hiss, and I grab the gun from the floor, aiming it at him. “You can kill me for all I care, but you *will* let him live.”

Bruno’s eyes grow big as he struggles in Julio’s arms, muttering, “Son …?”
I swallow away the lump in my throat.

Never in a million years did I imagine he’d find out this way.

If it were up to me, it’d be different, but I was too careless. Too distracted from what really mattered. And now I’ll pay the price.

“I’ll kill him faster than you can shoot, Frank,” Julio barks, pushing the knife even further into the boy’s skin. “Don’t even think about it.”

“No … Please …” Laura falls to her knees in front of us, tears streaming down her face. “Please, don’t do this.”

I don’t know whether she’s talking to him or me, but I respond anyway. “I have to shoot him,” I say. “It’s the only way to save Bruno.”

“Don’t let him make you a killer again, Frank,” Laura says through gritted teeth. “It’s not worth it. There’s gotta be a way out.”

“There isn’t,” Julio hisses. “He has to die.”

“No!” she yells.

“I have to take the shot,” I hiss.

“You can’t! You’ll hit Bruno,” she shouts, angrier than I’ve ever seen her.

Still, I try to perfect my aim. “It’s the only way …”

“Stop! Just fucking stop!” Laura screams.

Suddenly, Julio's eyes roll into the back of his head, and he falls down to the ground, releasing Bruno with it, who runs off to Laura's arms.

Only when Julio's body hits the ground do I realize what happened.

Mother smacked the back of his head with a giant cross she pulled off the wall.

"I thought he'd never shut up." She spits on his body. "Shame on you! No one will forgive you for your sins, not even God himself," she growls.

I gape with my jaw unhinged, wondering if what I'm seeing is a figment of my imagination, but it doesn't appear to be.

Not when I see Diego's wide-open mouth and Laura's wide-eyed glare.

We're all stunned.

Completely and utterly stunned by this old woman beating the crap out of Julio, the brawler. El Campeón.

Who'd have thought Margaret would save the day?

No one.

Chapter 30

A few minutes later, the cops have arrived.

I put some rope around Julio's hands and tied him to one of the pillars, so he wouldn't try to escape. I'm still not sure whether I should be glad I didn't kill him, but at least Laura's content. It'd be hard on her to watch her daddy die. I just couldn't do it to her, and luckily, Mother took the choice away from me.

I'm still a bit mad over it.

Hell, I would've loved to shoot him instead.

But this ... this is better.

This doesn't make me a monster again.

We tell the cops exactly what happened: Three armed men tried to rob the church, one of whom was Laura's father, which is the reason she came. She knew he would do it, so she tried to warn the people inside the church. And I tried to stop it, using any weapon I legally had in my possession, and they were eventually overpowered.

The cops actually believe us.

Of course, it's a bit skewed from the full truth, but they *did* come in uninvited and threaten to kill an old lady in a church. No one, and I mean no one, likes that. It's like some unwritten rule that you never attack a granny.

Who does that anyway?

Julio motherfucking Espino, that's who.

And I'm so damn happy they're dragging him away in cuffs.

"When I get out, you're gonna pay!" he yells at me.

"By the time you get out, we'll both be dead." I snort as they pull him through the church doors and shove him into their car.

More men come in to assess the remaining bodies and bag them up while medics come in to tend to our wounds. I'm poked with needles and stuffed with medicine, which I fucking hate, but at least it numbs the pain a bit.

"Thanks," I say with a gritty voice as they tend to me.

"I'm sorry, but we're going to have to take you to the hospital."

"Aw, c'mon ..." I sigh, looking at Laura and the kids. "Really?"

"Yes, we need to check for internal damage."

"Right." I nod. "But can I at least say bye to them first?"

“Sure. Why not,” the medic says, and he and his buddy go check on Mother first.

I look at Laura and the kids who all go down on their knees beside me so they can get on my level. I’m still lying against one of the pillars for support, too fatigued to get up. Besides, the medics don’t want me to move. Probably afraid I have a fracture or something, but if that was the case, I’d probably feel it, and I don’t.

Still, to say I feel like shit is to put it lightly.

“How are you feeling?” Laura asks, grabbing my hand.

I chuckle. “I’ve been better.” I squeeze her hand and look her in the eyes. “But at least you’re all alive.”

She immediately wraps her arms around me and hugs me tightly, unable to keep her emotions at bay. “Fuck, I was so worried, Frank. I thought you died. I really thought you … and then Ricardo showed up at our doorstep, telling us you sent him to take care of us. Of course, I asked him if you were still alive, and when he told us where you were, so I immediately came here.”

“Of course, you did.” I snort. “You left him there, didn’t you?”

“Well, I told him to watch our fish,” she muses, making me laugh.

“Since when do you have a fish?”

She shrugs. “I don’t, but at least it’ll keep him busy looking for it. Sorry.”

I roll my eyes. “I should’ve expected as much.”

“What? Of course, I came here as soon as I heard.” She smacks me. “You terrified the shit out of me, Frank! God, I almost thought you died.”

“So you admit you don’t want me dead?” I muse, raising a brow.

She gives me another smack on the leg. “You asshole! Of course, I don’t want you dead! Who gave you that idea?”

“Maybe that knife you tried to pry out my guts with?” I say, hinting at our furiously sexy battle in her kitchen.

“I was upset, and you know damn well why.” She puts her hands on her side like it makes her murder story more understandable. “And by the way, you could’ve at least let us know you were alive. Or, you know, that you were planning to escape.” She scrunches up her face. “You kept us out of the loop on purpose.”

“What else was I supposed to do? Tell you all my secret plans right in front of Julio so he could sabotage them?”

She raises a brow. “No, but you could’ve called.”

“I was a little busy if you hadn’t noticed.” I look around us at the mess the three men caused.

“Yeah … well … you’re lucky you survived.” She playfully punches me again, right on that painful spot.

I cringe, and she immediately softens her look and her touch. “Oh, shit, I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay,” I mutter, smiling. “I’m just glad we’re all alive.” I reach for her face and caress her cheeks softly. “I don’t know what I would’ve done if you’d … if you’d …”

“Jesus Christ, can you *please* stop the lovebird act? It’s driving me insane,” Diego grumbles as he gets up from the floor.

We both laugh about it. “I’m happy you’re alive too, Diego,” I say.

“Thanks.” He shrugs. “For saving us, I suppose.”

“It’s the only thing I could do after causing all this trouble.”

“Damn right.” Laura puts her hands against her waist. “I should scold you some more, but I’m too happy that we’re all still in one piece.”

“Hey, your dad’s the asshole here, okay? He tried to murder Bruno, and he even kidnapped his own children. If that isn’t the next *American Psycho*, I don’t know what is.”

She sighs and shakes her head. “Oh, Frank … when will you ever learn that nothing will ever come between family?”

“Does that mean you still care about your father? After everything he did?” I ask.

“Well … he is my father …” She looks away, tentatively biting her lip before glancing at me. “But I’m glad he’s in jail. He should pay for all the things he’s done.”

“Good.”

“What about you?”

“How I feel about it?” I point at myself, and she nods. “Well … I suppose I’m happy. I mean he can’t hurt anyone where he’s going, so that’s good.”

“Still looking for revenge? Even when your son is alive?” She looks at Bruno, and when I follow her gaze and find his sheepish eyes gawking at me, I melt into a puddle.

“No.” I reach for him, grabbing his tiny hand to hold him tight. “I’m okay now. It’s over. It’s done now.”

Tears well up in my eyes, but I push them away, smiling brightly.

I’m done crying. I’ve shed enough tears. It’s about time I let them go.

“Hey, buddy.”

“Hey,” he says, a little awkward.

“Thank you,” I mutter.

“For what?” he asks.

“For being here.” I don’t mean literally here … more like … alive. But I don’t want to scare him, so I don’t say it out loud.

My finger brushes along his cheek as I try to memorize what he feels like. If it’s the same as I remember … back when I first held him as a baby. And as I stare into those beautiful eyes, I finally see him for who he really is.

Mine.

“Sorry.” The paramedic coughs. “I don’t mean to interrupt, but we really have to go now.”

I look up to see they’re wheeling Mother out on a stretcher, and the medics place one beside me too.

“Oh, right …” I clear my throat as I look up at Laura and Bruno. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay.” She smiles. “Let them fix you. You’re no use to anyone if you can’t even walk,” she jokes, making me laugh but even that hurts.

The medics push the stretcher underneath me and roll me over it, strapping me to it and putting a nice warm blanket on top.

“Well … see you all later then, I guess,” I say, as they lift it up.

“We’ll come visit you in the hospital.” Laura picks Bruno up. “Say bye,” she tells him.

I grab his hand and squeeze tight. “Will I see you later, bud?”

He nods, probably still shy about the whole situation. I don’t blame him. I mean coming face to face with the fact you have a completely different father can be quite the shock … if he even remembers. He’s such a young kid. Gosh, we’ll have to explain that all to him.

But now is not the time.

Now is the time for mending and for making peace with our mistakes.

And as I’m rolled out on the stretcher and placed in the ambulance, all I can do is smile. Not because it’s painless because it’s not. But because I’m finally free of the burden I carried all this time. Free from the coils entangled around my heart.

Chapter 31

Hospitals are so damn boring.

Really, you just sit around and do nothing all day while you stare at a television and drink some juice. If I was still drinking alcohol, this would be amazing, but unfortunately, doing literally nothing is not that big of a deal when you're sober.

Shame.

Lucky for me, they put me in the same room as Carl. He looks a lot better now that he isn't lying in a pool of his own blood. He already showed me his scar from where they took out the bullet. Like he's proud of it or something. Oh well, you know what they say about scars ... wear them like a war medal.

He can't seem to shut up about my epic battle with Julio, though. I regretted telling him the whole story the moment I finished. This dude is like the ultimate fan. Well, except for the fact that I'm not a fucking celebrity, and I don't wanna be. But I get it. He needs a role model, and I'm pretty much the best he can find.

That either says a lot about his life ... or about me.

Take your pick.

Either way, he seems pretty impressed with my escape stunt.

"I can't believe you actually held your breath for that long. Two minutes? Man, I can't even keep my head underwater for more than a minute."

"Well, it's not like I had a choice now, did I?" I say.

"Yeah, but that's so cool!" He gives me this huge smile, which inflates my ego, big time.

"Learned from the best," I muse, taking a sip of my drink.

"Who?"

"Myself." I grin, and he laughs at my reply.

"So you told Ricardo where to dig you up?"

"Well, I didn't know what they were going to do to me, but I had an idea. So I gave him a list of things, including finding a mound that had fresh

digging marks.”

“Wow …” He nods like he’s trying to picture it.

“Yep.” A pause follows, and I take another loud sip of my juice, which goes through a straw, by the way. I specifically requested one.

“Jesus, Frank … why do you keep doing that?” Carl asks, hinting at my straw.

I take another sip and say, “I love it when everyone can hear the annoying sounds I make. It’s another battle strategy. Did I mention I want to get out of here as soon as possible?”

He laughs, shaking his head. “You’re one weird motherfucker.” He holds up his hands. “I mean that in a good way.”

“Thanks.”

“Besides. Who wouldn’t want to get out of a hospital as quickly as they can?” He twines his hands behind his head as he relaxes on his pillow.

“Exactly. Especially when all you’ve got is a few bruised ribs, a slash in your lip, and a black eye.” The hospital staff wanted to keep me for a night, just to make sure my organs weren’t damaged from the hits I received.

“Pfft … that’s easy,” Carl huffs, showing me his scar again. “See this? This is a battle scar.”

I roll my eyes. “Yeah, yeah, we get it. You fought off the baddies at church.”

“Hey, at least I kept Margaret safe. Can’t say the same for you.” That smug bastard actually raises a brow at me.

“How many people have you actually killed?” I ask, but when he doesn’t respond and just opens his mouth without a sound coming out, I say, “Exactly.”

“Hey, that’s not fair. I’m not a criminal.”

“Yet.”

“I don’t plan to become one.”

“Oh, really?” I narrow my eyes. “Last time I checked, you asked me for my contacts.”

He sighs, looking away. “That was before … you know.”

I nod. I understand. He’s changed his mind, and that’s nothing to make fun of. It’s a decision he should be proud of, and I am.

“I’m proud of you,” I say.

His face lights up. “You mean that?”

“Of course. As long as you keep taking the good jobs. Not the bad ones.” I eye him down. “Got it?”

“Got it.” He smiles.

Suddenly, there’s a knock on the door, and we both look up to see who it is.

My face lights up when I realize it’s Laura, Diego, and Bruno. “Hi!” She waves while walking in with the boys.

“Oh, you’ve got visitors … lucky you,” Carl muses, winking at me. “And a beautiful lady too, might I add.”

“Thanks.” Laura shakes her head as she turns a bit red.

“He’s right, though. You do look beautiful.” I smirk like a motherfucker when her face turns even more red.

“Stop,” she murmurs, grinning.

“Never.”

“Oh, please,” Diego grumbles, rolling his eyes. “Not this again.”

“Great to see you too, Diego,” I say. “Been taking good care of your brother and sister?”

“Of course.” He folds his arms.

Laura pokes him with her elbow. “Didn’t you have something you wanted to say?” she whispers in his ear, but I can hear loud and clear.

He looks a bit uncomfortable as he rubs his lips together and stumbles through his sentences. “I wanted to … say thank you. For you know … rescuing us and shit.”

“And shit,” I repeat, chuckling a bit.

“Yeah, you know.”

“Well, it was my pleasure.” I grab his hand and give it a good shake. “You’re a good guy, Diego.”

“Thanks. And … I’m sorry for being shitty to you.”

“It’s okay. Comes with the territory of being your sister’s boyfriend.” I wink, which makes Laura’s eyes almost bulge out of her face.

Bruno giggles. “Boyfriend?”

“We’ll explain it all later,” Laura quickly says, clearing her throat.

“Okay … I’ll give you four some space.” Carl grabs his crutches to get off the bed. “Don’t break down the whole place while I’m gone.”

“I promise I won’t touch your stack of magazines, I mean porn,” I yell as he goes through the door, and he sticks up his middle finger at me, making me laugh.

Laura sits down on my bed and grabs my hand. “It’s so good to see you well.”

“Yeah, I just have a couple of bruises and tiny slash in my lip. No big deal.”

“You could’ve died, Frank. It was a big deal.”

“So? I’m alive, and you are too. That’s all that matters,” I say with a smile, and I let my hand roam free across her face, caressing her cheeks and lips. I don’t know why. I just have this tendency whenever I’m close to her … I wanna touch her … memorize every inch of her skin.

“So … what about me?” Bruno suddenly says with a high-pitched voice.

We all look at him, and Laura says, “Oh, right ... I promised you something, didn’t I?”

She lifts him up from the ground and sets him on the bed beside me. “Frank ... I think you want to tell him something, don’t you?”

“Right ...” I nod, licking my lip. I grab his arms and rub his back. “Bruno ... I just wanted to say—”

“You’re my dad,” he interrupts.

Confused, I frown and smile at the same time. “Did you ...?”

“I heard it with my own ears,” he states. “Is it true?”

I nod.

And then the most unexpected thing happens.

He just falls into my arms and hugs me.

Like a real, genuine, soul-crushing hug.

I wrap my arm around him and hold him tight, finally feeling his heartbeat against mine.

“My son,” I mutter, tears welling up in my eyes.

Bruno looks up and asks, “But if you’re my daddy ... does that mean I have two daddies?”

“No.” I chuckle. “Julio is Laura and Diego’s daddy. But I’m the only daddy you’ve got.”

“Oh.” He shrugs. “Well, I like you a lot, so this is better.” He returns to hugging me, making me wanna cry and laugh at the same time.

“Aww ... I like you a lot too, Bruno,” I say.

Laura also seems to be unable to hold back the tears as she puts her hand in front of her mouth and struts around uneasily. Meanwhile, Diego’s looking out the window, clearing his throat and pretending he doesn’t care, but I still notice the glistening in his eyes.

Bruno pushes himself up from me and looks me dead in the eyes. “If you’re my daddy … then who’s my mommy?” he asks with furrowed brows.

“Well, it’s not Laura and Diego’s mom,” I answer, brushing his tiny cheeks. “Your mommy … isn’t here anymore. But she loved you so very much.”

“Why did she go? And where?”

“To heaven, Bruno,” Laura answers. “We already talked about that, remember?”

“Oh … so she died?”

I nod, feeling bittersweet.

“But it’s okay … Mommy is where she’s supposed to be, looking down on us and watching over you.” I poke his chest with my index finger. “And she knows you’re finally where you’re supposed to be.”

“Where’s that?”

“With me.” I grin, grabbing him to tickle him hard.

His giggles fill the room with laughter and smiles, and I can’t stop … I don’t wanna stop feeling this way.

Happy.

For the first time in years, I feel happy.

“Stop, stop!” Bruno says, giggling like crazy.

“All right … but only if you promise to always listen to Laura, understand?”

“But if you’re my daddy and her mommy isn’t my mommy … then she’s not my sister either, right?”

“She is …” I raise a brow at his smart comment. God, how do I explain this? “Your sister… is still your sister in here.” I point at his heart. “You don’t have to be related to be family.”

“Oh …” he hums and then smiles. Guess it’s that easy with kids.

“So you’re part of my family too now,” he says.

“Yup,” I reply.

“Does that mean you’re staying with us now?”

“Oh, well … we’ll have to see about that. Have to ask your sister what she thinks.” I look at Laura, whose jaw is wide open, and her cheeks have the same color as a strawberry.

“Well …” She folds her arms. “Your dad and I will have to discuss that. In private.”

“Aw …” Bruno scrunches up his face, so I kiss him on the forehead.

“It’s okay, kid; it’ll only take a while. Besides … you’ll see me again in no time.”

His face brightens up. “Really? When?”

“When I get outta here … First thing.” I wink.

Diego approaches us and helps Bruno off the bed. “C’mon. Let’s find a vending machine. Maybe we can get you some Skittles.”

“Skittles? Yes!” Suddenly, he’s happy again. God, it’s so easy with kids. They change moods in less than a second. I wish I could do that.

When the two are gone, Laura sits down on my bed again and puts her hand on my arm. “How are you really feeling?”

“Better, now that I’m alone with you.”

Oh … so smooth.

I can’t help but grin from my own comment, but she rolls her eyes.

“I’m glad you’re feeling like your old self again.”

“Oh, no, I’m not going back to being a drunk-ass bitch again. No way.”

She hides a laugh behind her hand. “Good. Your talents are wasted with all that alcohol.”

“What talents? Or do you mean my tongue?” I dip it out and roll it around my lips, making her groan and smack my arm.

“Frank!”

“Sorry, sorry,” I joke.

“So ... are you okay with the fact that my dad’s not dead? Despite everything he did to you?”

“To us, you mean,” I say. “He hurt you too.”

She nods, looking down at the sheets.

Maybe that was a bit insensitive of me. “I’m sorry about your dad,” I say.

“Oh, no, you don’t have to be sorry. He deserves to go to jail for the rest of his life. I mean I’m glad he’s there. At least he won’t be able to cause any more pain.” She smiles softly. “I just wanted to say thank you for saving us.”

“Like I had any other choice. I’d much rather die than see you, Bruno, or even Diego hurt by his hands.”

She smiles again and bites her lip, looking at me with those dreamy eyes. Gosh, I wanna kiss her so badly. And then I figure ... why not?

So I grab her face and pull her close until our lips touch and our mouths lock. I can’t help but smile as I kiss her because every second I taste her on my lips is another win.

She’s everything I ever wanted, and I think I’m only just beginning to understand what this means for me. For us. For the future.

When our lips unlatch, her face still hovers so close to mine. I can feel her hot breath on my skin, and it makes me wanna do all the dirty stuff I promised the nurses I wouldn’t. The question is: Would anyone notice if we did?

“I know what you’re thinking, and the answer is no,” she quips, putting up a finger.

“Aw ... c’mon.” I sigh.

“No! This is a hospital, for crying out loud.” She snorts. “But I’m glad your dick still works perfectly fine.”

“You can break my bones and shoot me down, but nothing will ever stop this monster dick from getting stiff as a rod, trust me.”

She snorts, and I kiss her again for good measure, tasting the sweetness that is her mouth so I can remember it while I’m stuck in this stupid hospital bed and she’s gone home.

“Ugh … I wish I could stay,” she murmurs against my lips.

“Can’t you?”

“I’m not a patient, remember?”

“You could be. There’s an empty bed. I’ll kick Carl out.”

She sniggers from my comment. “You’ll be out in no time.”

“And what then?” I ask. “Are you coming to live with me in the church or …?”

“No, thanks. I don’t wanna get killed by Margaret. Or worse … give her a heart attack.”

“Heart attack?” I frown.

“She’d die of one if she caught us having sex one more time.”

I laugh. “Well, she’ll just have to deal with that then. I mean, c’mon, a man’s got his needs, right? She knows that.”

“Does she even like me?” she asks, toying with my hair.

“Of course, she does.” I grab her hand and kiss the back. “You like me … so she likes you too. The two go hand in hand.”

“Really?” She raises a brow. “Because I know what we did last time we were there, and it wasn’t pretty.”

“We’ll be more … secretive from now on,” I muse, biting my lip. “And I can’t wait to defile the church all over again.” I grunt and pull her onto the

bed with me, smashing my lips to hers, fiercely taking her.

I can't help myself. It's just the way I am. A needy asshole who can't get enough of her.

"Stop," she murmurs, grinning. "We have to behave."

"For now. But wait until I'm outta here. Then we'll see how bad I can get."

"Who says I wanna?"

"Don't lie to yourself," I tease, poking her in the belly. "You and I both know you want me."

"Fine." She rolls her eyes. "I'll take you back, but ..." She pushes me back with a flat hand. "You still have some making up and groveling to do, Mister."

With a lopsided smile, I say, "Call me Father Frank ... and I'll make you confess all your sins."

She giggles and grins as I grab her and force my mouth on hers again, finally claiming what's always belonged to me.

She even kisses me back with the same amount of greediness, never taking her lips off mine. I literally have to grab her arms and push her away so I can ask the question that's been on my tongue since forever.

"So ... we good then?" I ask.

"Yeah, I guess," she says with furrowed brows. "What do you mean?"

"Well, Bruno asked if I was part of the family now, so I guess I had to ask." I shrug.

She playfully slaps me. "Of course, you are, silly."

"So does that mean I get to move in with you guys then?"

She rolls her eyes, and her jaw drops. "You did not just ask that."

"Oh, yes, I did. I'm tired of living with old Granny Margaret. Got a spare room? No, no, wait. I can sleep in your bed ..." I wiggle my eyebrows, and

she makes a funny face.

“You … I’ll make you regret the day you begged me to come stay at our house.”

I smile and so does she, and I reply, “Oh, I’ll definitely take you up on that challenge. Starting tomorrow.”

Chapter 32

We’re finally going back home today, and as Ricardo had something to make up for, he came to pick us all up. His face immediately turns sour the moment we step out of the door and into the parking lot.

“Hey, Ricardo,” I say, and both Carl and Margaret greet him too.

“Hey, guys … look, I’m sorry,” he immediately begins.

“Too late, bro,” I muse, laughing. “It’s already done and over.”

He rubs the back of his head. “I hope it wasn’t too painful. Fuck. This is all my fault.”

“Why? Laura and the boys didn’t do this to me,” I say. “It was Julio.”

“No, but if they’d stayed at the house, maybe they wouldn’t have distracted you. I mean you could’ve died,” he says.

“I’m alive,” I reply. “That’s all that matters.”

I try to act cool because that’s just how we roll. I’m done feeling guilty, and he should be too.

“How do you feel?” he asks.

I shrug. “As good as I look.”

He rubs his lips together. “I’m really, really sorry. I really am. I just couldn’t stop them from coming to the church.”

“Dude, it’s not your fault,” I say. “She was determined to come rescue me or something. I dunno.”

“She even stole my damn car,” he growls, pushing Carl’s wheelchair.

“She did?” I raise a brow, impressed with her skills. Ricardo isn’t easy to bypass. He’s a big guy.

“Yeah, well, after she locked me in the house, they all jumped into my car and raced off. Even left skid marks on the street. So damn lucky my car wasn’t damaged. I would’ve been pissed.”

Guess I was wrong about the fool part.

I look at him. “Fish, huh?”

He raises his brows. “What? She was very … convincing.”

I narrow my eyes as I help Carl into the back of the car. “Just admit that you’re thick.”

With a straight face, he says, “Fuck you, Frank. You’re just as thick. Who the fuck goes into a shootout without a gun? Like, who does that?”

I laugh. He’s right; it was stupid, but he didn’t know I had one hidden in my room. “I did get a gun, though.”

“Where?”

“In my room.” I shrug.

“You keep a gun in your room?” Margaret suddenly asks as she sits down in the passenger’s seat.

“Well, I did. Not anymore, of course.” I smile. “It was only to protect us.”

“I guess it served its purpose well then,” she answers, taking a deep breath.

“Exactly. I saved our asses. That’s all that matters.” I sit down beside Carl and close the door.

Meanwhile, Ricardo gets behind the wheel and glances at me over his shoulder. “You’re one lucky son of a bitch; you know that, right?”

I grin, feeling even more lucky as we drive away from this damned hospital.
“You betcha.”

* * *

When we get to the church, I hop out of the car and help Mother out too. We dropped Carl off at his home where he’ll be taken good care of by his family. Ricardo helps Mother back inside the church while I grab the bags from the trunk.

“Thanks, dude,” I say as I walk in after him and drop them on the floor.

“Don’t mention it.” We give each other a bro-hug. “But … I consider the debt fully paid now,” he adds with a wink. “More like overpaid.”

I nod. “Got it.”

He turns around, but before he leaves, he asks, “We still on for that cookout next week?”

I grin. “Oh, yeah … it’s on.”

He smiles and waves as he leaves.

I bring my bag to my room. Meanwhile, Mother’s already waddled back to her room in the back. I bring her bag to her. “Here you go, Margaret.”

“Margaret?” She looks up at me with big eyes. “You never call me that.”

I frown as she approaches me and puts her hands on my shoulder. “You don’t like it?” I ask.

She straightens my jacket for me like she always does when she’s worried. “I like it when you call me Mother. It makes me feel useful.”

The warm smile on her face makes me happy, and I place my hand on top of hers and squeeze. “You’ll always be my mother.”

“Are you sure? Because it looks like you gained another one on the way.” She chuckles, and then eyes the door like I’m supposed to look. When I do, I notice Laura’s peeking through it all the way from the hallway.

“She’s quite the girl,” Mother whispers. “Feisty to the bone and sassy as can be.” She gently pats my cheeks. “Exactly my boy’s type.”

I snort. “She sure is … and quite the mother too.”

“I think you two will do well with Bruno …”

“You do?” I do value her opinion. A lot, actually.

“He’s just as spirited and courageous as you were when you were young,” she muses.

“Really?” A lopsided grin appears on my face.

“Of course, and you know what? I think they’re waiting for you.”

“But …” I grab her hand. “I can’t leave you alone in this huge place.”

She snorts. “Course you can. You did it before.”

I scratch the back of my neck. “True …”

“But those boys and that girl are actually a good reason.” She pats me on my cheeks again, this time even harder, making it feel like she’s trying to teach me a lesson.

“So you’re okay with …?”

“Course I am! Just go.” She twists me around and pushes me. “Be where you’re supposed to be.”

“But I’ll still come do the sermons …” I mutter.

“Yes, yes. But not today.” She gives me a surprising slap on the butt that stings a little. “Now go.”

“All right, all right,” I say, laughing a little.

Warmth fills my chest the moment I see Laura’s glinting smile as she greets me. “Hey.”

“Hi, yourself,” I muse, rolling my eyebrows until she laughs. “One sec, I have to grab my bag.”

“Okay,” she replies as I quickly run into my room and back to her again with my bags in hand. “Ready when you are.”

She playfully slaps my chest and says, “C’mon. They’re waiting.”

“They being ‘the boys,’ I assume?”

She folds her arms. “Who else? Besides, they asked why you weren’t at home.”

I put my arm around her shoulder as we turn and walk toward the exit. “You do realize you basically gave me the go-ahead to move in with you, right?”

She chuckles. “Like that was even up for debate.”

I pull her closer. “Now you’re getting it.”

I can’t stop grinning. The whole way we drive back to her place, I’m just goddamn happy. And that says something.

When I jump out of the car, Bruno’s peeking through the window with a big, fat smile on his face, shouting at his brother. He runs off and opens the door for us.

“Daddy!”

His face and the smile that follows as he runs out into the yard and into my arms are all I need.

I’m here.

I’m exactly where I belong.

Epilogue

Holding Bruno’s hand, I walk into Chuck’s Bar and sit down on a stool with him. He claps his hand with excitement, looking up as Chuck walks in from the back.

“Well, well, if it isn’t Frank Romero.” He puts down a few new boxes of liquor on the floor and shoves them under the bar. “I didn’t expect to see you back here.”

“Yeah. For a minute, I didn’t either,” I jest, snorting.

“What happened? Got in a bar fight again?”

“Eh, something like that,” I answer, winking at Bruno who I know has many questions he can’t wait to ask.

“And who’s this young fella?” Chuck asks him.

“I’m Bruno.” He holds out his little hand, and when Chuck grabs it, he dramatically shakes it.

“Well, it’s nice to meet you, Bruno.” Chuck’s rumbling laugh fills the bar.

He puts down a glass in front of me. “The usual?”

“What’s the usual?” Bruno asks, curiously looking at the glass.

“It’s something for grown-ups,” I say. “You’ll get to try it out too, one day. But ...” I clear my throat. “Let’s have a drink together.”

“Oh, yes! Something fizzy.” He grins. “Laura doesn’t let me have fizzy drinks.”

“Well, you can have them here,” Chuck says.

“Coke,” I say. “Two.”

“Two?” Chuck raises a brow.

I shrug. “No more alcohol for me.”

“Really?” He frowns, surprised.

“Yup.” I feel kind of proud about it, if I do say so myself.

Just as proud as I am of my son.

I pat him on the back and ask, “You like that, kid?”

"I don't know. I've never had Coke, but I can't wait to try it!" he says, a little too over the top, like kids always do.

I smile. "But you gotta promise me you'll drink it fast. We have to be at the church soon."

He nods, but his eyes are immediately distracted by Chuck pouring Coke into the glasses. It's as if he can already imagine what it tastes like. His innocent excitement really makes it that much more fun.

Chuck dunks a decorated straw into Bruno's drink and pushes it toward him. "There you go, kiddo."

"Oh, look at all the bubbles!" Bruno squeals, leaning over to hear them burst in his ear.

I lean in and whisper, "If you blow into your Coke, you can make even more."

He forms an O shape with his mouth and then immediately puts the straw against his lips, blowing hard. Half the Coke spills over his glass, but the giant bubbles that form make him giggle hard.

Chuck shakes his head and laughs as he gets a small towel and wipes off the bar. "You're teaching him all the wrong things. Guess no one could expect anything less from you."

"Damn right, he's gotta be just as bold and brass as his dad."

Chuck smacks down the bottle he was unpacking onto the counter, his jaw wide open. "Dad ... wait, what?" His eyes flash back and forth between me and Bruno, and the more he seems flabbergasted, the more I'm starting to grin.

"He's ... *your* son?"

I take a big gulp of my Coke before I answer. "Yep." I wrap my arm around Bruno's shoulder, who's happily slurping down his Coke.

"But I thought he was ..."

"Lost," I say, winking. "It's a long story."

“My God …” Chuck shakes his head like he still can’t believe it, and he leans over the counter. “Let me take a good look at you.” He eyeballs Bruno like he can’t believe what I’m saying, but the longer he stares, the more I see a smile. “He does look a little bit like you. Damn.”

Bruno sticks his finger into the air and yells out, “Damn!” Making us both laugh.

“He’s got your vocabulary all right.”

With a smug face, I lean back on my stool. “Told you. My son.”

“God … I still can’t believe it.” He shakes his head in disbelief.

“Well, it was a surprise, to say the least. I guess God really does care about me after all,” I joke.

“Maybe he saw how much of an ass you were making of yourself and decided enough was enough,” Chuck retorts, and I nod, smiling like an idiot.

“Damn straight, and we both deserved it, didn’t we?” I hug Bruno and rub his head, messing up his hair.

“My previous daddy wasn’t nice at all, but Frank is. He makes a lot of jokes and takes us out to the park and the zoo. Sometimes, he farts too, and they’re just as smelly as mine are.”

Chuck and I snigger.

“And he even cooks spaghetti!” Bruno adds cheerfully, sipping his Coke.

“Previous daddy?” Chuck raises his brow. “Do I even wanna know?”

“No chance.” I chuckle. “Maybe another time, but not today. We’ve got somewhere to be.” I drink the whole glass and put it down then climb off the stool. “Ready, Bruno?”

He makes a few last bubble sounds with his straw before finishing up.

“Done!” he boasts, handing the glass back to Chuck with flair.

“See you next time, kid.” Chuck winks. “Pleasure to meet ya.”

“It was nice to meet you too, sir!”

“Such a gentleman, hmm.” Chuck nods, clearly impressed. “Must’ve gotten that from your mom because he sure as hell didn’t get it from his dad.”

I laugh as I help Bruno off the stool and grab his hand. “We’ll see you soon, okay?”

“Sure,” Chuck says as we turn around and walk for the door. “Oh, and tell Laura to buy some lights for tonight before she comes to work. I need to get them fixed, but I keep forgetting.”

I stick my hand in the air, yelling back, “Will do!”

* * *

An hour later, I’ve finished my sermon about hardships and how God will always help you find your way back to happiness.

For the first time in ages, people are smiling at me.

For the first time in forever, Mother didn’t interrupt my speech halfway through and demand I stop.

It went so well that even Laura came up to kiss me, embarrassing the boys to the point of them blushing and telling us to go find a room.

I’m still reeling with excitement as the people leave the church, thanking me for my help. It seems like ages ago that I last acted like a total douche even though it was only a few weeks. So much has changed between then and now. Looking back, I can only say ... I’m so damn glad I went through everything I did.

Why?

Because it meant meeting my son again.

Because it meant falling in love all over again.

It’s not easy starting over.

But the people who love me definitely make it worth it.

Laura walks up to me and smacks me on the butt. “Well done, dude.”

“Thanks.” I grin. “You already said that.”

“I know,” she says with a mischievous grin. “But I want you to remember that.”

“Is that some kind of hint?” I muse, pulling her toward me and grabbing her butt.

“Maybe ...”

“Eww,” Diego mutters.

“Guys, why don’t you go back home?” Laura tells the boys. “You can play the new game we bought ...”

“Really?” Bruno’s eyes light up like there’s a fire behind us.

“Yes. But only if you and your brother behave.” She holds up a finger. “No fighting.”

“Yeah, yeah. I still need to write my résumé, so I don’t have much time anyway,” Diego says, grabbing Bruno’s hand. “C’mon.”

“Does that mean I go first?” Bruno asks as they walk to the door.

“Sure, why not,” Diego says casually, waving at us as they walk out.

“Résumé?” I mutter.

“Yeah, Diego’s looking for a job.” Laura winks. “Finally.”

“Good. I’m proud of him. He’s come far,” I say.

“Yeah ...” she agrees.

Mother has already left to go get some groceries for the small refrigerator she has in her room, so now Laura and I are all alone in this big, empty church.

I wonder what will happen.

“So ...” Laura fiddles with my shirt. “I’ve been thinking ... It’s been too long since I last did a confession.”

“Oh, really now? Is there anything you need to tell me?” I ask, grabbing her fingers to kiss, one by one. “Anything ... filthy? Raunchy? Wrong?”

She bites her lip. “All of it ... and I think we should go discuss it in the confessional.”

“Hmm ...” I nod, raising a brow while a devious smile appears on her face.

“One on one, you know ... to get down to the core.” Her hands are all over my crotch, making my dick hard and my grin even bigger.

“I may have a little bit of time for that ... After all, you never know when Margaret will come back,” I say, grabbing her ass and squeezing tight.

“It’ll only take a few minutes ... Not a lot is going to come out of my mouth. Just in.” She grins.

I grab her chin, and our lips graze before I give her soft kisses, which quickly turn into rabid ones. We slowly stumble backward until we hit the confessional, and she squeals when we fall inside.

I sit down on the bench and pull her on my lap, rubbing my hard-on against her underwear. She’s only wearing a skirt, so I can easily slip my fingers underneath and touch her.

“Forgive me, God, for I’m about to sin like fuck,” Laura murmurs as she kisses me and rubs her tits all over my chest.

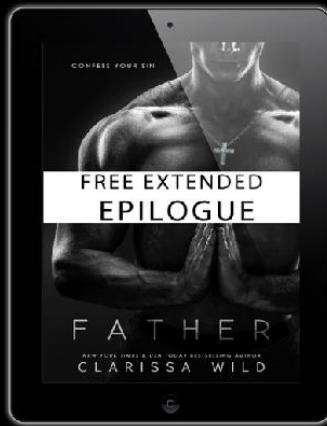
“Oh, yes ...” I whisper, smiling as I brush my lips against hers. “Let’s sin like fuck together.”

* * *

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EXCERPT OF CHASED

Accompanying Song: “Bottom Of The Deep Blue Sea” by Missio (Acoustic).

Chase

From my comfy seat, I glare at the squabbling men across the room, waiting until the light above the door switches on. The wait is starting to unnerve me.

I rummage through my pocket and take out a note and a pen, and I start outlining their faces, depicting what they look like, noting each minute detail. Everything important, I write down. From greasy hair, to curly mustaches, to eye color, to fat bellies, and pockets stuffed with checks.

Some of them aren’t even wearing masks.

Stupid fucks.

When I’m done, I tuck away the notebook, grab my whiskey on the rocks, and take a sip.

Am I really going to do this?

Yes, yes, I am.

My hand almost smashes the glass, so I put it down before I hurt myself. I get up and march straight to the bathroom, where I turn on the faucet and let the water cascade down my hands.

I stare down at the water and at my hands.

Soon, they'll probably be drenched in blood.

I close my eyes and take a deep breath.

This is it, Chase.

This is the moment you've waited for your entire life.

You're going to do this, whether you like it or not. End of story.

I look up at the man staring back at me in the mirror. Or rather ... the shiny, plastic, metal-looking mask covering my face.

It's a stark reminder of who I really am.

I'm not the man hiding behind the mask.

The mask *is* me.

The man behind it just a mere figment of my imagination.

The man who has it all ... and it still isn't enough.

This mask brings out the animal in me, the one hiding in plain sight.

And no one will ever know it was me.

I smile to myself, thinking about what's to come. Whatever choice I make, it's going to be a spectacle, for sure. One I won't forget anytime soon.

As I open the door to step back into the room again, the light above the door turns on, and the men stop talking. They briefly glance at me as I march toward them and wait for the door to open. When it does, they direct their attention to the room beyond.

We all sit on small black chairs lining the red walls. In the back are three metal cages, each containing a person. Two women, one man.

They're trembling, huddled in a corner, clutching their bodies.

All wearing the same red-colored underwear that barely covers any skin, save for the sensitive parts.

They whimper and cower away from the lights aimed at them. But I can't help stare at just one of them ... a girl to my right with the most beautiful, dark curly hair I've seen in a long while.

The cages are behind thick, impenetrable glass, with only one door leading inside.

I doubt they can see us ... but all the men can definitely see them.

"Welcome, gentlemen. I hope you all enjoyed the whiskey while waiting," a voice in the corner says as he approaches.

Graham. I've only talked to him via encrypted email and short telephone calls, but I know it's him. It's the same slimy voice.

My fists ball as he talks.

"Take a good look. All three of them are available. If you win, the prize will be delivered via the back door after bidding ends with an added fifteen to twenty minutes to account for transportation. Same door you came in through. Now, I'll begin with number one on the left shortly. Any questions?"

He gazes around the room, but no one responds.

It's not like they haven't done this before.

Many ... many times.

Grinding my teeth, I sit back in the chair and continue staring at the girl with the dark complexion. It's going to be her.

I've already decided.

“Okay …” Graham clears his throat. “The first one’s a little stubborn, but he responds well to punishment. He’s deaf on one side, but the other ear works perfectly. No other defects. He’s virile and young, perfect for working with his hands, such as personal grooming, housekeeping, or general entertainment. Whatever you want.” The smirk on his face is murderous.

It’s making *me* feel murderous.

I can’t help it. I’m a savage in a suit who enjoys dishing out pain.

But now is not the right time.

Graham pushes a button, and the male to the left is buzzed so hard he rolls around across the floor of his cage, his face contorted and gasping for air. I look away.

“Up!” Graham yells through an intercom.

The kid struggles to stand, but does it anyway. Then he bangs his head against the bars until Graham releases the button, after which he just stands there, motionless … staring right at the glass separating us.

“Bidding starts at twenty thousand.”

The men raise their fingers as Graham announces increasing numbers. I ignore their voices and focus solely on the girl on the right. For some reason, she’s gotten up from her corner and walked all the way up to the front. Graham didn’t even have to buzz her to get her to move.

She tightly clutches the bars surrounding her. She’s not looking at us … yet I still feel watched. As if she can hear us. Or like she’s trying to.

“Fifty thousand, going once, going twice. Sold!” The bidder on the far right hands a check to Graham who inspects it before shaking his hand. “Thank you.”

He walks back to the center and says, “Okay … next one is a female. She’s ripe, of age, and perfect for any party or gathering. She’s very sociable and listens to commands well. Also has an implant for ultimate pleasure.”

Graham presses another button on the wall, making her squirm in her cage. She quickly comes to her feet, without him having to say a word. The buzzing stops ... but he reaches into his pocket and takes out a device, clicking it on.

She clenches her legs and her cheeks flush. A slight mewl leaves her mouth. The men laugh among themselves, throwing glances at each other, gloating like crazy.

I swallow and loosen my collar, then stare at my hands. They're covered in marks from my nails digging into my skin.

“Bidding begins at thirty thousand.”

The men bid again, but I can only focus on one thing.

The girl on the right ... Her eyes and how they rise to meet mine, only for just a second.

They’re so ... clear. And beautiful.

In her cage, she sinks to the floor and lowers her head, hiding her face among her curly hair.

I have to focus on her and only her.

If not, I’d probably outbid every man in this room until I won all three.

But that will only make things harder for me.

I have to be patient. Have to be wary. Have to fit in.

So I wait and wait until the bidding finishes at seventy thousand, after which another check is exchanged.

Finally, it’s time.

“Lastly ... we have a short but spicy female. This one particularly gave me a lot of trouble.”

The men in the room snigger.

I don’t find it funny. Not one bit.

“She’s spunky, but with a bit of training, she’ll make a wonderful pet. However, there is a small defect … she is blind.”

Blind? No wonder her eyes were so … pretty.

A grin spreads across my lips.

This can’t be any more perfect.

Graham presses another button. She’s crippled with fear and pain, crawling in her cage, but she doesn’t give up. Doesn’t stop clutching the bars, doesn’t get up.

“Up!” Graham yells.

I clench my fists, watching her struggle. She refuses to give up the fight even though she’s already lost by a long shot. She’s in a cage, yet her spirit never fails her.

I admire her.

But I also wish she’d just surrender.

“Please …” I mutter to myself, biting my lip.

Only after a grueling minute has passed does she finally relent.

She’s light on her feet, but oh so unsteady.

“Bidding starts at fifteen thousand.”

I run my fingers along my jaw, staring at the girl, while the men start to bid.

For a moment, I stop breathing and focus entirely on her feeble body, which seems to be able to withstand so much pain. It’s incredible.

When the men stop muttering their bids, I raise my hand.

“One million.”

Everyone looks at me with gaping mouths. Like I’ve lost my mind.

But they don’t know what she’s worth. They can’t see it … but I do.

To me, she is *everything*.

Her existence will be my downfall or my only salvation.

I have to know which one it's going to be.

I have to have her.

“Any other bids?” Graham asks, hoping someone will bid more.

Of course, not. They don't want her. They don't see the use in a blind, defiant girl.

But I do.

“Okay … going once. Going twice. Sold!” Graham says, and he approaches me.

I narrow my eyes at him and cock my head while I take my sweet time to rummage in my pocket and conjure up a checkbook. With quick scribbles, I write everything he needs. I don't look twice before tearing it off and handing it to him.

“Thank you,” he says, greedily snatching it away from me. Then he directs his attention toward the rest. “Well, that was all. I'll have more for you next time.”

Everyone gets up and leaves, but not me.

With careful steps, I approach the glass and place my hand on top of it, wishing I could already touch her. I wonder what I'll feel. What I'll want. What she smells like. How she'll taste.

I close my eyes and imagine all those things.

Riveting.

“I'll bring her to you in a moment,” Graham says. “You bid quite a lot.”

I smile and look his way. “I know what I want. And I always get what I want.”

He smiles back awkwardly and then clears his throat. “All right. Well, if you will please wait in the other room like the others, I'll get to work.”

I nod and take my hand off the glass, saying a mental goodbye before turning around and walking back outside.

* * *

Accompanying Song: “The Dog Is Black” by UNKLE (Dial: Molotov Remix).

Syrena

In a wheelchair, I’m wheeled out of the cage. I don’t know what’s happening, my mind is barely there. All I know is that I’ve been drugged ... heavily.

I feel numb. When I wiggle my toes, nothing happens, and my fingers don’t respond either. All I can do is wait for my fate.

Will I even get to say goodbye to Ella and Cage?

They were my cellmates, but now they already feel like distant memories.

I’m forced to close and open new chapters in my life in rapid succession, and I can’t keep up.

So much has happened these last few months that I feel like I’m beginning to lose my mind.

Captured by a monster ... stuffed in a glass prison with two other people ... and now I’m being taken from the compound I’ve been living in for months too.

Where will I go?

And more importantly ... will ever get back home again?

A tear manages to leave my eyes and roll down my cheeks as Graham sets me down and leaves.

Moments later, I can hear the groaning of two other people right beside me. No one talks. A door creaks. Then Graham pushes us forward, one by one. A man clears his throat. Someone else shuffles. I wonder how many there are.

Moments like these are when I really hate being blind.

The longer I sit in this chair, the more I begin to feel my arms and legs again, and my lips can definitely move. I don't talk, though. I don't want to give Graham more incentive to sedate me again.

"You can take the wheelchair with you. It's on the house," Graham says.

I wonder who he's talking to.

Is this person the next one to keep me as a prisoner?

Probably.

Still, it makes me shiver in place.

Suddenly, a hand on my hand makes me freeze.

"Syrena."

I look up even though I can't see. His voice centers me, forces me to find him. It's commanding but scary. Daring and completely in control.

"Graham told me that's your name. Is it correct?"

I nod slowly.

Something pushes my wheelchair along. I'm assuming it's him.

"Great. Then let's go."

I don't know what happened to the others, but I assume some of the other men are taking them with them.

The man pushes me outside, through a corridor, turns right, then another turn, and then we stop. A door squeaks, and a warm glow meets my face.

Not soon after, he pushes me outside, and I feel the heat of the sun on my skin. I bask in it. I open my mouth and let the fresh air enter my lungs. Tears run down my cheeks.

“No need to cry. I’ll take … good care of you,” he says, his voice dark and foreboding.

I don’t think I can trust anything he says.

Still, I’m happy to finally be outside the compound again.

So much time has passed since I last smelled the dry air. God, how much I’ve missed it.

He pushes me across rocky terrain until we come to a stop and I hear the beeps of a car.

A door slides open. “Hey.”

It’s a new voice.

“Get her in,” the man who pushed me says.

Suddenly, I’m lifted out of my seat and lifted into the car, landing on a soft cushion. Someone straps me in with a seat belt and closes the door. Another door on my other side opens and someone sits down beside me.

The other person throws the wheelchair in the trunk and then sits down behind the wheel.

“No need to worry …” It’s him, right beside me, whispering in my ear.

I suck in a breath.

I want to scream, but I can’t. I physically can’t. The only thing leaving my throat is a tiny squeal and some rasps. “The drugs will wear off soon.”

I hope so because I really, really want to get out of here.

Now that I’ve had a taste of freedom … it feels too good to be true.

I’m so close, I only have to move my hands to the door and open it.

But the familiar sound of the locks shutting me in makes my heart sink into my shoes.

“Let’s go,” the man besides me barks at the one behind the wheel, and the car begins to drive across the rocky terrain.

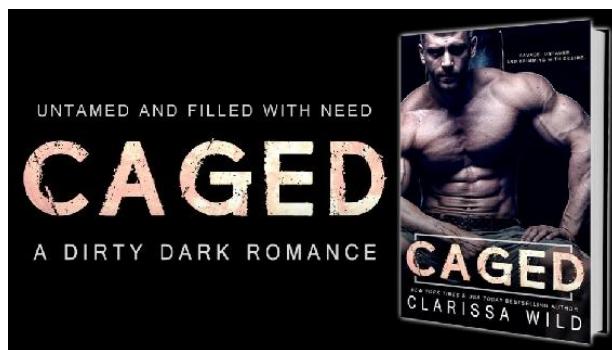
“Who ... who are you?” I ask after a while, as the drugs begin to fade around my lips and throat.

The man beside me hums and puts his hand on mine as it rests in my lap.
“Call me Chase... your new owner.”

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* * *

Make sure to read CAGED, Ella & Cage's story!



They call me savage. An untamed beast.
I was born in the cage. Born to fight. Born to carry its name.
Locked away, I've spent years waiting for my mate.
I'm pent up with need. Brimming with desire.
All I want is her... That beautiful girl from the picture on my prison wall.
Now she's finally here, sharing a cell.
So close. So hard to resist.
But one thing's for sure...

Even if she doesn't know it yet, she's already *mine*.

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ABOUT CLARISSA WILD

Clarissa Wild is a New York Times & USA Today Bestselling author, best known for the dark Romance novel Mr. X and her sexy student-teacher romance Bad Teacher. Her novels include the Fierce Series, the Delirious Series, the Indecent Games Series, the Stalker Duology, Twenty-One (21), Ultimate Sin, Viktor, RUIN, FATHER, and CAGED. She is also a writer of various erotic romances. She is an avid reader and writer of sexy stories about hot men and feisty women. Her other loves include her furry cat friend and learning about different cultures. In her free time she enjoys watching all sorts of movies, reading tons of books and cooking her favorite meals.

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