



RED AND WOLFE: PART FOUR

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*An Erotic Fairytale*

ELLA JAMES

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# PROLOGUE

*RED*

My first instinct is *fight*. I'm arching my back, butting my head into the chest behind me, screaming my head off. Then my stunned synapses start to fire again, and my clawing hands freeze.

The arms around my shoulders belong to Race. Of course they do. He's thrown a hood over my head, and now he has me locked against his chest.

Fear zips through me, followed by arousal.

It's what he intended. Surely so.

It's just a game.

A fucked up game.

I twist around, wanting to go at him. Wanting him to go at me. Because despite everything I know, I still want him.

I twist around, ready to shove him in the chest. Ready to snarl and bite and buck. Ready to fuck him like it's the last time, because maybe it is.

My hands grab at his neck.

He shoves me forward. I'm already panting. Already wet. I wait there, bent over the bathroom floor, the skin of my hips tingling in anticipation of his hands jerking my gown up. I wait for his cock to shove inside me, stretching me out, stamping me his.

I'm bowed there, docile as a child, when something hard slams into the back of my head. Static fills my body. I feel the world careen around me, like I've been tossed back by a mighty ocean wave.

"Race?" I try to whisper.

But I'm already tugged into the tide.

# CHAPTER ONE

WOLFE

*Several hours earlier*

Race.

It's my college nickname. Skull and Bones. Some summer-after-junior-year beach fuck gave me mono, so by the time I made it to my senior year at Yale, in mid-September, all the storied, hand-me-down names were already taken. One of the older guys in charge, Charles Labombo, said I "missed the race," and that was that.

No one knows the name but other Bonesmen, so Bob and I use it as a code. He gets something delivered to the island, he has them ask for Race. No one but Race.

I'm under the canopy of trees in front of my cabin, at an easel, working on another *Red on Rocks* while Red sleeps in, when I hear a motor humming on the east side of the island. Bob told me he'd have a non-disclosure agreement here by ten. It's a little shy of nine, so I figure whatever legal weasel signed on for this must be hyper vigilant. Wouldn't want to piss off a murderer, right?

After a brief hesitation, during which my paintbrush lingers over Red's pussy, I decide not to keep him or her waiting at the dock till ten. But I'm not going to hurry, either.

I step inside, pull on a shirt, and walk softly to my bedroom, where the sunlight streaming through the glass ceiling seems to get brighter the nearer I get to Red. Pleasant details of the room jump out at me, for maybe the first time ever. I notice the reed basket I wove one particularly dull day shortly after I moved here. It's well-shaped. Not bad to look at. The cedar box of paintbrushes on the table by the bed brings a lightness to my chest. A pressed tiger lily on the dresser seems to vibrate orange. I step slowly to the bedside and allow my eyes the prize of looking down on her.

She's sleeping on her right side, both arms tucked around her. This sort of mobility is a pleasure I always denied my subs, but when I tied Red, I couldn't imagine doing anything but making her comfortable. And indeed, she does look cozy curled up in my covers. One cheek is pressed against the pillow; the other one glows warm pink. Her brilliant copper hair spreads around her face, spilling over her pillow and onto mine.

"Stay here," I murmur, although of course, she can't get up with any ease. I have her tied to the bedposts—I have her *captive*.

I peel the covers off her feet and check the binds. She's got room to move around, but she can't leave the bed—not without some trouble, anyway. The thought fills me with an obscene amount of satisfaction.

As I wash my arms up to the elbows in the bathroom sink, I drag a deep breath into my chest. I hold it there, energized by the almost sting.

I clean every smear of paint from my hands and arms. I trust Bob implicitly, and I know he's sent an attorney with a record of impeccable discretion. The person will know James Wolfe is "W."—there's no way around that—but I don't want him seeing paint on me. The painting is mine. What's mine is private, because anything I value, I hold close. I've always been fanatical about my privacy, going way back. Probably my father.

I step into the bedroom, needing to lay my eyes on Red again. She's still sleeping. Still here.

What will it be like when she goes? I feel a pull behind my sternum, something dark and yawning. I'm not willing to put a name to the feeling, but my body remembers it. My mouth waters with the memory of the Scotch I drank to fight it off. I shut my eyes until the ghost passes, then walk slowly to the bed.

Red looks like a princess. Her Royal Tight Cunt. Sleeping Beauty with my handprints on her ass. How can I let her go? I peel the covers off her chest, because I need to see her breasts. They look round and soft through the fabric of her nightgown. I push the neckline down and cup one in my palm, bouncing it a little. I'm looking at her face, hungry for a peek of her eyes.

I stroke her nipple with the pad of my thumb. This woman is intoxicating. She belongs in rich oil strokes. She lives in crowded forests. Eternally nude, bathed in light—the kind of milky, flat light that comes through pale gray clouds. Why did she go swimming alone in the sea? It haunts me.

“Red,” I whisper.

I need to get to the dock, but first I want to see her eyes.

“Red?” I push her gown down a little further and close my mouth over her breast, working her nipple with my lips. Caressing it with my tongue. I'm rewarded by a soft moan that goes straight to my cock. I need to be inside her, despite knowing I don't have the time.

I pull the covers down and slide my hand up her shin, then up her thigh. She's warm from sleep. Her skin feels like burnished velvet. My fingers brush her pussy and she lifts her hips. She wants it. I love the way she always wants it.

“Race.”

I love the way she says my name: a mew.

“I'm going to fuck you with my fingers,” I say, leaning near her face. “Then you'll go to sleep again.”

A dreamy smile floats over her lips. She nods a little, pressing her head into the pillow.

I slide a finger into her. She's hot and tight, softer than silk. I can feel her clench as I pump into her. She's wet this morning. So fucking slick. I stroke in and out, painting her pussy, using my fingertip to smooth warm lines around her swollen clit.

I'm rewarded by her crying out.

“Say my name.”

I still my hand. I can hear my blood rush in my ears. *Race. Say Race.*

Her hands grab at my wrist. “Race.”

I allow myself a brief grin. It's undiluted satisfaction. She knows—or at least suspects—I'm James Wolfe, but she's still in my bed.

“Say ‘Race, please.’ I like to hear you beg.” I push another finger into her. Her body quivers.

“I like to feel you jump.”

I stretch her with a third finger and slide my thumb over her clit. I'm moving slow. So slow.

“Race, oh God—yes. *Please.*”

“That's right, sweetheart.”

I twist my wrist, so the soft side of my thumb glides over her clit. I thrust my fingers faster in and out of her. I close my eyes and feel her. Listen to her pant my name.

I'm so hard I can barely move, can barely suck in air.

I'm half an inch away from dropping my jeans and shoving my dick into her when her legs drop open, she thrusts against me one hard, final time, and her pussy spasms like a flower blooming fast.

I lean down and lap the sweetness up. She comes again, slamming bony knees against my head, and I can't help the low chuckle that spills from my throat.

"You're so fucking sexy."

I smooth her gown down, kiss the breast that's peeking out, and tuck it back into the gown's bodice.

"You're my little fuck doll. Don't forget it."

I tuck the covers up to her chin as her eyes slip shut.

I check her binds once more, ensuring they're neither too tight nor too loose on her ankles and wrists. She turns slightly over on her side, her lips parting, hair falling over her cheek and neck. Her eyes peek open, darting left and right until they settle on my face like sunlight.

"Thank you, Race."

"You're always welcome, doll."

I walk outside feeling like I could blow away with the humid breeze.

I don't hear the boat's motor anymore, but I'm still gonna take my time. I walk the shaded path to the beach on the east side of the island, where visitors dock on the rare occasion there are any. It's not the same place I anchored Red and I; it's closer to the front of the island, just a short walk from Trudie's cottage.

As I walk down the pebble path, Red owns my mind. Visions of her overlay the slender, sun-drenched pine trunks. I watch a gull glide off a maple limb and spread his wings, and I can almost feel her plump pussy against my mouth. The trees sway, and I see her head tilted, her lips parted.

Cookie flits through my mind—Cookie smiling at me from the bathroom that adjoins our rooms. I'm dressed in leather, examining a new whip, which is spread out on my black bedspread.

Her heart-shaped face curves with her friendly, indulgent smile. "*What will I do with you, my dom husband?*"

The sunlight warms my hair. I feel hands smoothing it, fingertips dragging on my temples in a way that feels amazing. In my mind's eye, I see Red's face, not Cookie's. I see her face beside me in a bed we share. Red lips. Freckles. All that hair to thread through my fingers as I fuck her from behind...

It's the first time in six years that my daydreams haven't starred a ghost.

# CHAPTER TWO

## WOLFE

The pebble path rolls on, toward Trudie's cottage, but I veer right beside a large, moss-drenched cypress. I follow the path visible only in my mind's eye as the ground grows damper, the carpet of leaves wears thinner, and my shoes stick to the black and tan sand. It's soggy around the cypresses, more marshy. One of the things I love about the island is its varied landscape.

A few steps through the bog, and I reach a small, wind-kissed ridge, dotted with boulders. The wind blows the sand into the air like dust. There are stairs a few feet to my left, but I feel like climbing, so I climb the stones in front of me, pausing for a few seconds at the top to take in the flat blue sky, the deep green sea.

Finally, my gaze stops on the dock, maybe fifty yards across the sand. On one side, where an awning stretches over the wood planks, I see a blue and white speed boat, its nose pointy, its body shallow and lined with cushioned benches.

In it are two men: a short, dark-haired one in a suit, and a taller one clad in black pants and a black t-shirt.

The boat drifts closer to the dock, and the big guy in black grabs one of the posts. He hooks a rope around it, and says something to the smaller guy. The smaller guy looks up, and I see the face behind a pair of Ray Bans.

My mouth goes hot.

*John Linn?*

I know Linn. He's an attorney out of Brooklyn—one Bob works with occasionally, when his usual, Sarah Kurtz, isn't around. The thing about Lin is he used to do a lot of business for the Smythsons. The man in black isn't the boat's driver—not just that. He's Lin's body guard. I'd bet my Swiss accounts.

Lin thinks I did it. Everybody with connections to the Smythsons thinks I did it.

I think of Red, tied to my bed, and my heart forgets its rhythm. Bob wouldn't have sent Linn if he wasn't trustworthy, but something about the way he lifts his chin to look at me makes my throat tighten.

I'm paranoid. Being over-vigilant. It's been a long time since I heard from Smythson or any of his goons. Lin was, at one time, a Smythson family friend, but Bob trusts him, so I should, too.

I suck a big breath back. Why do I feel so fucked?

*Because of Red...*

What would happen to Red if something happened to me? She doesn't even know how to start the boat.

I bite my cheek. She's not my wife. I don't even trust her—not implicitly, at least. That's why Linn is here.

I need to quit letting my emotions displace logic.

With that in mind, I cross the beach and walk onto the modest dock, where I stand with my arms crossed as the man in black climbs out of the boat. Linn follows, clutching a folder. On the dock, he adjusts his tailored suit, then looks upon me for the first time in half a decade. Sweat dots his pale skin. His lips look chapped, which, combined with his

prominent cheekbones and thin nose, make him look like some kind of dried out fish.

He steps forward and extends his hand.

I hesitate a moment before taking it, casting a glance at his companion.

“Ham,” Linn supplies.

I shake Linn’s hand, then resist an asshole impulse and stick mine out to greet the body guard. The man hesitates before taking it. Because of who I am?

I shroud myself in apathy, direct my attention toward the attorney. “How are you, Linn?”

“Doing well, Mr. Wolfe. Very well.” I swallow back the resistance in my throat, the hatred of my name. And then I realize: He didn’t call me Race!

“Mr. Wolfe,” I echo, sounding miffed. “No need to be so formal.”

I watch his face: the lips turn down, the brows go up. His mouth goes from frown to polite smile in a few slow seconds.

“Ah, so James it is. Or perhaps you prefer Jimmy.”

I feel pressure build behind my eyes.

“Friends call me Jimmy. You can, too.” I nod at the folder. “What do you have for me?” Now everything is a test.

He hesitates a second—*why*? “This is a non-disclosure agreement. Your cousin had me draw it up on your behalf.”

“Very well.” I still don’t trust the fucker. “Let’s go to my house. I’ll look over it.”

I glance from Linn to the guard.

I could take them both if I needed to. Not because I’m bigger—that guard’s got a few pounds on me—but because I taught myself tae kwon do during the long months of my house arrest. I still practice almost every day, because I love it.

I lead the two off the dock, and we start across the beach. Linn’s dress shoes kick up sand. He looks down, tugging ineffectively on his pants legs.

I can’t help noticing the guard’s boots handle the sand better than my beat-up loafers do.

I decide which maneuver I’ll use on the guard if something goes wrong, then try to focus my attention on Linn. “Have you worked with Bob a lot lately?”

He presses his fingers over his nose, like he’s just had a nosebleed. “Not so much.”

“Oh. Well how’s he doing?”

Linn cuts his eyes sideways at me. He’s still wearing his shades, but I can feel it. “Well, or rather he didn’t tell me otherwise.”

I catch the guard eyeing me and decide to go there. “You always bring a guard, or is that just for me?”

He smiles, tight and cunning. “Mr. Ham is my chauffeur.”

I twist my lips. “I’m sure.”

I nod at the sandy, faded wooden stairs that arch over the rocks. “Gentlemen first.” No way in fuck am I walking in front of them. They reach the top of the stairs and I call, “Hang a right.”

We’re not going back the way I came. There’s no way for them to know the unmarked path through the woods, so I’d have to walk in front.

As we cut around the island’s perimeter, sticking to the grassy shoreline, Lin becomes preoccupied with the hemline of his pants again. The guard walks on the inside, closer to



the trees than the sea. Because he's trying to keep Linn safe from any threat on my island?

I'm filled with the old, familiar frustration of constant misjudgment.

I would never hurt someone I asked to come here.

I notice the guard's eyes never seem to be on me, and think that strange. What are the odds he isn't actually a guard at all? What if his marching orders are to take me down?

Smythson could have sent them here.

He didn't; Bob did. Because I needed the NDA.

Still, my mind races.

I wonder if Red is still sleeping. She wouldn't attempt to untie herself, would she? I don't think so. She might not be willing to admit it, but my sweet fuck doll is a born sub.

The island curves, and we come in sight of Trudie's cottage.

"Charming," Linn says. His face is expressionless.

I lead them through the fence, into the garden. I'm sweating by the time we reach the back door, though fuck if I can say exactly why. Words pile in the back of my throat, threatening to spill. Questions to assuage my ridiculous paranoia. Confirmation that Linn really spoke with Bob.

*So what if he didn't call you 'Race'? He probably forgot.*

No one has ever forgotten, but what does that matter? Maybe Linn doesn't want to call me Race. Maybe it's important to him that I be addressed as exactly who I am. A man who very nearly got convicted of murdering his wife.

I lead them through the sitting room, past that Huxley quote about solitude Trudie had me paint on the wall, and into the kitchen.

I can feel their eyes on everything. Questioning? Scheming? This place looks like what it is: an old woman's home, but I don't give a fuck. They can think what they like.

Linn stops beside the tiled bar, and I walk to the refrigerator. I tap my knuckles on its worn, lime green surface. "Can I get you anything? Water?"

"That won't be necessary," Linn says. He more openly surveys the kitchen, where a cat lounges by the sink, where a small vase of dried flowers sits beside the Dawn dish soap. His eyes seem to rest everywhere but in line with mine. When he finally lifts his gaze, the guard has crossed his beefy arms, and I've started feeling an almost maddening urge to return to Red.

"You're involved with the woman? Sarah?" Linn asks, holding up the folder.

"Does it matter?"

He looks around, and I can almost hear him thinking *this looks like a woman's house*.

His eyes return to me. He takes his sunglasses off, revealing large brown eyes. "You have done well, man, with your art."

I grit my teeth and pull air in through my nose. What does that mean anyway? 'Well' by whose standards? His? What does a lawyer like Linn know about success in art? Or in anything? I've spent years reflecting on this and concluded it couldn't be more meaningless. I have enough money. People buy what I paint. And that's it. That's all I have. That's all I'll ever have, and while I'm fine with that, I never walk around thinking, "I do well."

I notice I'm gritting my teeth and have been staring at him—probably with some hostility. I ignore the guard's gaze, which has finally found me, and hold out my hand for the folder. "Let's see this."

Linn passes me the agreement. He swipes a hand over his coat, as if there's cat hair

there. His hairline is damp from sweat now.

I lean against the sink as I look over the NDA, finding every detail perfect, right down to Red's full, legal name. Guilt pulses through me. Why did I invite her here? Why did I think I could get involved with anyone, even on a superficial level? Why did Red have to send my photo to her friend?

*Her friend!*

Fuck! Her friend told someone at the paper. Is it possible word could have gotten back to Smythson this fast? Surely not. Cookie had a cousin at the *Times*. But Red's friend works in Boston...

"How does it look?" Linn interrupts my paranoia.

I squint down at the thin packet of papers. I'm only on page two. I look up at him with the poker face I learned in court.

"I think you have her name wrong. It's Sarah Ryder *Smith*." His brows draw together. "She married and divorced. You didn't know?"

Linn's eyes widen. "No. I didn't know."

"Pretty sure I'm correct. I need to call her and find out."

"She's not here?" he asks sharply.

I give him a warning look. "She's on her way."

The guard's mouth twists into a smug bow, and again, something in my stomach catches. I know this feeling. I used to feel it in the seconds before my father found me in the house and asked me to his 'workshop.' I felt it the night Cookie called, long before I made it to Paige's house.

Something's not right.

What's their fucking game?

"Do you share the home with her?" Linn asks. His tone is casual, but his eyes are still drinking in the mundane details of the kitchen. Cautious, or over-eager? Voyeuristic? I can't tell, but it's as if he expects Red to spring from one of the cabinets.

I notice I'm popping my jaw, something I only do when I'm really irritated.

"Wait here," I say, in an authoritative tone I haven't used since I was an entitled, younger man. They work for me. I hope that, and the fear I presume they have of me, will keep them waiting patiently. I tuck the papers under my arm and palm my cell phone for show.

I hate to leave Trudie's place open to them, but my head is buzzing with tension now. My chest feels like it might crack open. My mouth is hot and dry. I *have* to check on Red. Untie her. Maybe my sensors are faulty and there's nothing amiss, but if there is...

I decide to call Bob while I walk.

A few steps down the pebble path and I can feel someone's gaze on me. I spent a lot of time with a roomful of people at my back. I know what eyes feel like. A few more long steps, and walking's not enough. I break into a full-out run, bounding through the forest like a motherfucking cheetah. I'm so distracted by the dread in my gut that I forget to call Bob until I'm halfway there.

I slow to a lope, looking back over my shoulder a time or two. I'm so fucking paranoid, even the trembling pine needles distract my gaze.

I grit my teeth as I wait for Bob to answer. One ring, and maybe he's in the john. Two, and he's on the other line. Three, and I pick up my pace again. Four and voicemail.

FUCK!

I've never, not once in my entire life, been unable to reach Bob. Back in the early nineties, he was the first person I knew to have a bag phone. He was nine. Motherfucker pisses with his phone in hand. I've known him to answer in the shower.

I try again and again as I run, and each time the same result: *"Bob Bennett here. Leave a message."*

On my porch, I strip my shirt off. I've been in enough fights to know it's easier to win without the encumbrance of clothes. I turn a circle on the porch, trying to tell myself I'm being paranoid. Shit doesn't work. My blood is pumping so fast I can feel it burning through my veins.

I step into the kitchen as I leave a message. "I want to know about your project with the Moroccans." That's our code from back at Yale, the one that says something is very wrong.

I hustle into the bedroom. The bed is empty. I blink convulsively. My shoulders and my neck flush, then my body goes bloodless. Before I have time to breathe, I notice the door at the back of my bedroom is cracked. The next millisecond, I hear Red's voice.

Oh God!

I'm across the room in two lunges, through the door like goddamn Superman. I burst outside with my fists up—and there she is. Standing amidst the pines in her thin blue nightgown, confiscated phone pressed to her ear, head bowed as she talks about something that's got her shoulders tight.

A quick once-over shows she's truly fine. No blood. I hone in on her face and my heart beats harder as I search her features. Cookie was purple by the time I found her.

Red's not Cookie...

I take two long steps to her, and can't seem to raise my hand to touch her. I stand there, breathing hard, my shoulders moving up and down. My brain's broken. My mouth moves, and I hear myself rasp, "Who are you talking to?"

She widens her eyes at me, as if I'm being nosey. "Hang on," she mouths, her eyebrows scrunched.

Into the phone, she says, "Hey Katie, I've got to go. Tomorrow?"

Anger buzzes in my head. She escaped her binds, and now she's making appointments? This is my island. I'm in charge of her while she's here!

She cuts her eyes away from mine, looking at the ground. "Seriously, Katie. I'm okay."

I grab her arm. My free hand can't help capturing her chin. I tilt her head up to me, enjoying the perturbed look on her face until I realize what she said.

This is Katie, the friend who showed my photo to another journalist. Another journalist who could have been Cookie's cousin. Cookie's cousin who could have gone to Smythson.

My patience snaps like a worn-out rubber band.

"Doll, I thought I made myself clear. No phone calls."

I wedge my fingers between hers and the phone and press the "end call" key. She has the nerve to look up at me impertinently, the naughty little cunt. I can't believe she escaped the binds I had her in and came outside.

If she were mine officially, I'd knot her up and punish her. As it is, I tug her inside, pushing her safely in front of me before I turn around and bolt the door. Then, with my

hands around her narrow hips, I lead her into the bathroom.

Her steps slow and I see her head turn to the shower. I want nothing more than to shove her inside, strip that translucent little gown off, and let my cock show her who's in charge.

Instead, I take her by the shoulders and stand her in front of a tall bookshelf built into the wall. It's made of deep-stained cedar, sanded by my own two hands. As I reach around her to press on one of the shelves, I feel a sick swell of remorse. All it takes is one push, and the thing slides on a metal track beneath it, revealing a dark stairwell.

Red inhales sharply.

I move fast, wrapping my arms around her waist and sweeping her up against my chest. I'm trying to be gentle, but my muscles tremble with adrenaline. Like a skittish horse, she feels me.

"No! Race, no! I'm scared!" Her arms move like turbines, slapping and hitting, pulling my hair. Her belly against my chest. Her breasts bumping my shoulder. She breathes hard and fast. She's scared of me!

I glance back at the light spilling into the stairwell. For a second, I want to take her up, but then I think of Bob's voice mail. First time I've ever heard Bob's voicemail.

After what happened with Cookie, I have no choice. I go with my gut.

I lock her body against mine and press my face into her hair. "Red... Red. Shhhh. Doll," I murmur. "C'mon now. I promise not to eat you for breakfast." I press my palm against her cheek and look down at her. She's coiled tightly, her arms and legs drawn up, as if she's trying to avoid touching me.

I set her on the bottom stair more roughly than I mean to and flick on the light, revealing a room filled with canvas-stacked shelves. My vault.

"Look around. I'll be right back. I can't trust you, and I have to make another call."

Her eyes are wet and red. Her mouth is pleading. "Race—"

"Quiet, Red. Just look around." My chest feels tight from the look on her face, but I tell myself I don't care. Who gives a damn if this pushes her over the edge, if it saps her tolerance for me and my reputation? I don't need her. I hardly even know her.

Tears spill down her cheeks.

I open my mouth and am surprised by the weakness of my voice. "There's nothing to be scared of."

I wheel around and hustle up the stairs, bridging two at a time when I near the top.

I call Bob once more, slide a .38 into my pocket, lock my doors, and take off through the pines. I'm no more than a few steps from the house when something sharp hits me in the throat.

# CHAPTER THREE

*RED*

*Two hours later*

The first drop in the bucket of my empty mind is Race. I'm sleepy and cold, but around the wad of fog that's stuffed inside my skull, I feel a ping of anticipation. Naughty, naughty things and his big, hard, perfect cock.

That must be why I'm so sore. I try to press my legs together. My brain fires the order off to my muscles, and pain streaks through me, from my wrists—somewhere above my head—to my ankles. Everything in between is cold...and aching. My arms and legs, especially, scream, as if I've just run a marathon with my ten-pound weights.

I open my eyes and am confused by a sunny view of grass and trees. I can see a large, triangular shaped lawn with a cottage in the middle. The grass is framed by rock, and, beyond that, dark gray ocean.

I blink once, then cast my gaze down at myself. I'm naked, in Race's tree house, tied spread-eagle. My arms stretch toward the corners of the roof, where ropes attach me, and my legs are spread, my ankles bound by rope that's drilled into the wood floor. Behind me is just open space: the window between roof and partial wall.

Terror fills me. I try to thrash and wobble wildly in my binds. Fear escapes my throat in a soft, barked sob. I whine "Race," and a hulking man in black steps into my line of sight.

I register short, brownish hair, hazel eyes, and a thick scar near his chin before he reaches out and puts his huge, calloused hand on the outside of my thigh.

"Settle down, Sarah," He scowls, showcasing heavy brows. "You wanna fall?" His voice is deep.

He moves his damp palm off my thigh, and a shudder tears through me. "W-where is Race? Who are you?"

"I'm Dirty Santa, sweetheart." He waves his hand at himself and rolls his eyes. "Who do I look like?"

I blink my tear-damp eyelids, and he laughs, a choking kind of sound. "There's no answer to that. You never met me."

"I don't understand what's going on." My words are soft and boggy. I want to cry, but I clamp my teeth down on my lip and look at him, waiting for something that makes sense.

I'm trembling, though, vibrating in my binds like a bug in a spider's web.

I've never been a big fan of heights, starting with the time Billy Martin pushed me off the jungle gym in second grade. "I'm just...dangling!" My voice shakes as my tight muscles make the rope tremble even more. "I could fall back through the window thing!"

The man chuckles. "You could, but doubtful, babe."

Deep down in my gut, I'm terrified to know, but I can't stop my mouth. "Why are you doing this to me?"

He laughs again, a wheezing sound, and looks me over, top to bottom. It's not a leer so much as an assessment. "Got nothing to do with you. I'm here for your boyfriend, James."

"My boyfriend?"

His eyes harden. "Surname Wolfe. Tell me you know he is James Wolfe."

I nod, then shake my head as tears spill down my cheeks. I try to shift to a position

where I don't feel like I'm falling, but it doesn't work. I'm stuck here. "I don't understand! Let me down! Please, oh please!" I'm breathing fast, so fast everything is smearing. "Let me down! I'm scared of heights!"

"Get a grip on yourself, lady. I'm not gonna kill you."

Incredulity penetrates my panic. I force my arms and legs to relax, so I'm truly hanging by my arms, the way I must have been when I was out. *Knocked out.*

I gulp some air into my lungs and blink at him. *He's not my boyfriend.* I should say that, but for some reason I don't. I whisper, "What are you doing to him?"

The big man looks up at me, his eyes at my knee level, so close to my bare privates. "You know...some people call it vigilante justice." He shifts his weight, rubbing his fingers over his ear, as if he's got an itch. "I just call it justice. He deserves what he's getting."

"You mean...for his wife?" My teeth are chattering. Adrenaline, I guess.

The man nods twice, with force. "The court got it wrong." He rubs a handgun at his hip, one I haven't noticed until right now. "We know he killed them. A few of us—Robert is only one of us—we want to be sure justice gets served. We'd been out of leads for years until recently." He smirks. "Stroke of luck."

"Do you really *know*, I mean, for—"

"No, no, no, no, no." He shakes his head vigorously, as if he's trying to rattle my words right out of his mind. "You don't want to go down that road, honey. Not with Wolfe." He points his thumbs at himself. "I was her body guard, from high school and all through college. Just a kid myself when I started the job. I would have walked through fire for her. Don't go down that road."

I'm shivering so hard now, all I can do is nod.

How do I get out of this? What should I say?

"I was worried about that."

As soon as the words are out, I realize they don't make much sense.

"About what?" He eyes me suspiciously, as if my nonsensical statement makes me dangerous in some way.

"I was worried...he killed them," I chatter. "When I agreed to come here. Gertrude is my grandmother. I'm not his girlfriend."

Even in my terror-stricken state, it stings a little. I realize how ridiculous that is but don't have time to dwell on it.

The man in front of me is nodding. "Girlfriend or not, you're in a bad place. You're part of this now, babe. It's a good plan, too. We're gonna hurt you some before we make it out like he killed himself." To my horror, the man smiles. "He's mean to his women. If I didn't show you, he would do worse. Odds are, you lucked out with me."

He pulls a knife from somewhere and holds it to my thigh, just above my knee. I wobble and jerk, panting so hard I'm afraid I will pass out.

The man in black looks troubled. "I hope you know, I'm sorry for this, babe."

Then he drags the knife down my thigh.

# CHAPTER FOUR

WOLFE

I wake up hyperventilating, my mind haunted by court. The cross-examination. How am I going to keep a neutral face with Cookie's father five rows back? I'm going to fuck it up. Get life.

I think I'm hyperventilating, so my mind takes me back to that place. A few gasps later, I realize I'm not having a panic attack. I really *can't* breathe. I grasp at my throat and realize I can't use my hands.

My eyes flip open: Linn.

His sweat-streaked face is framed by trees and sky. I'm on my back, on the ground. Motherfucker is straddling my chest with his bony hand pressed against my throat. His other hand pushes the barrel of what I think is my own .38 into my forehead.

I try my hands again and realize they're bound in front of me, under Linn.

I blink a few times, because everything is so hazy. The sting in my neck...

I look into his brown eyes.

"You...drugged me?" My throat is dry. I try to swallow and end up coughing. Linn hits me with the gun. The sky above him pinwheels. "*Motherfucker!*"

"You like that sort of thing, right?" he taunts.

My stomach spasms. I turn my throbbing head, because I'm worried I'll get sick and would rather aim it at the grass. *Where's Red?* I pray she's safe in my stock room. Relief trickles through me, because I'm pretty sure she is. It would take a lot of force to break through the bookshelf.

*Stay put, Red. Stay where I put you for once.*

Linn sneers above me, and I struggle to think. My head aches, but it's a faraway sensation. My arms and legs feel heavy, and I'm aware of every breath my lungs draw in. As if it's an effort. As if whatever was in the dart was too much. I shut my eyes. *Focus, asshole.*

Did Bob betray me? I push the thought away because it's so unlikely. I pay him well to run my business, but that's not why I trust him. We were friends as children, brothers in college.

Bob didn't answer his phone. What the fuck happened to him?

I try to swallow. Choke. Linn presses harder against my throat.

"Did...Robert send you?" I rasp.

"He didn't need to. I'm here for Cookie!"

I close my eyes and grab another shallow breath. So much to say. So little energy.

"Smythson did it," I try. It's a long shot, but I've got nothing else. I hope the shock of the accusation will make him listen to me.

Instead, his eyes narrow and he snorts. "Your scum. If I had a little less self-control, you'd already have a hole in your head. I don't even want to touch you right now. You're scum."

My spinning mind struggles to keep up. Did he say Cookie's father sent him—or not?

"I'm going to hang you. Or rather, they are."

Linn jumps off me with aplomb, and I see two large men dressed in black standing a

few paces behind him. Neither is the guard I saw with Linn before.

One steps forward and smiles. Then he stomps hard on my ankle. I'm almost grateful for the pain, because it helps bring everything into focus.

"So this is the Dom Killer." He grins evilly, and I recognize the look in his eyes. Righteous rage. I saw it lots of times in court. People who thought their hatred of me made them morally superior. People who felt they'd get a star on their cape if they encountered me on a dark night and did me in.

The goon is saying something else, but I can't really hear him. I'm using all my power to roll over on my side.

Hands grab my shoulders. Someone kicks me in the back, hard enough to send a bolt of pain down both my legs.

I tug against the binds around my wrists, trying desperately to think. When the pain dies down a little, I'm able to discern that I'm still wearing my jeans. And that's a fucking miracle, because I keep a cigarette lighter in the front pocket of my jeans—always. Survivalist thing I picked up when Cookie and I did a few courses, just after we were married.

Someone flips me roughly over on my back. I use my legs to turn back on my side, but there are three of them.

No, two.

I look up at the faces of Linn and one of the two goons—red-haired, with leathery skin and thin, pale lips. Behind them is some kind of movement, but I'm still too high to pinpoint what.

"I loved her!" Linn hisses. He slaps my face, and I grit my teeth. I schooled myself years ago to smile when I was hit. It doesn't even hurt, not really. Not even when the bigger guy clocks me in the temple.

But I can tell he got a good hit in. Everything...*spins*.

He presses me to the ground, and someone is picking up my leg. Spreading my legs. A tingling sense penetrates my brain's fog just in time for me to twist my hips. The kick Linn aimed at my balls hits the inside of my thigh.

I groan, because it fucking *hurts*, then follow that up with a howl and couple of fake dry heaves. I jerk myself up with my abs, cursing and swinging with my bound hands.

If he knows he didn't get a groin shot, he'll do it again.

Linn is laughing.

"This more fun than I thought it would be."

"We're not even to the good part," one of the goons says.

The other one steps back into my frame of sight. I sag against the ground, folding my legs together and pretending to grab at my crotch. Really I'm trying to get my ring finger inside my pocket. Get the lighter. I can feel it there. I think I can.

*Please...*

"What do you say we have a little fun before the big event?" one of the muscleheads says.

"I like fun," Linn croons.

I want to scream *I didn't do it*, but there's no point. I need to focus. I've got my pinkie in my pocket. I bend my hand a little, working to get my ring finger in, Linn leans over and spits on me.



“Fuck,” I grit.

“Fuck you,” Linn sneers.

I lift my gaze to him and see, behind him, one of the muscleheads doing something in one of the trees.

Threading rope through the limbs.

Cold seeps into my bones, locks my muscles.

“See that?” The musclehead at my feet jerks his thumb at the noose. “We’re gonna hang ya. Rough up your woman just a little and hang ya. Killers like you don’t deserve to breathe, ’specially not somewhere pretty as this.”

I hear nothing but ‘your woman.’

I sit partially up, lit by rage. “My woman? What the fuck are you talking about my woman?”

Linn grins. “Red! My ‘body guard,’ Tom, found your little Red. She’s part of this plan.”

“Part of it how?” I growl.

“Oh, don’t worry,” Linn says, waving. “We won’t hurt her badly. Just enough so it looks as if you did. Before you hanged yourself.” His mouth twitches into a grin he quickly shuts down. He drops down to the grass beside me. “I’ve got a team here to help me. We will kill you, James Wolfe. And if it doesn’t look authentic, if it doesn’t look like you did it yourself.” He shrugs. “Who will care?”

Red will care.

My throat knots up, mostly because it isn’t true. I hardly know Red. I played her with my hands and mouth—even with my cock—but she’s probably afraid of me.

I drop back onto the ground and shut my eyes. It’s hard to breathe.

“What are you doing to her?” I hiss. I open my eyes.

She’ll know it isn’t me hurting her, won’t she? I feel a moment of terror, wondering if whoever has her is masked. Has her masked. I can’t stand to think she might believe it’s me.

“Just roughin’ her up a lil,” the Southern-sounding goon says.

I lunge for him with my bound hands. “Don’t touch her!”

Sweat blooms on my neck and chest. Flop sweat. I wonder how much adrenaline I would need to break the rope around my wrists. I lie back, panting like a dog. My chest aches. My eyes are closed. I can’t seem to make them open.

“Please don’t hurt her. *Please.*”

All I can think of is the softness of that pale, pale skin. The color of the freckles on her nose: fine peach.

I open my eyes and find Linn’s impassive face in front of me. He digs my gun into my temple, but I ignore that and focus on his eyes.

“Let her go. She’s just like Cookie. Innocent.”

His mouth draws to the side, and he gives me a skeptical, accusing sort of look, the kind of look that says *shame on you*.

“So you *do* have a heart. A little piece of heart.” He eases the pressure of the gun off my forehead and shakes his head, like he’s disgusted.

I remember something suddenly. Something that changes nothing, but makes me feel like shit. When I arrived at the dock, the goon with Linn was just tying the boat to the dock.

But I had heard the engine much earlier. They must have circled the island a time or two, scoping it out, dropping the others off.

“Where is Red?” I keep my voice casual, hoping that if I can get Linn talking, I can lead the conversation back to Smythson. Find out if he’s involved in this.

But Linn stands up. I feel too light without his weight to ground me. I didn’t even notice he was sitting on me again until he stood. I’m still high from whatever he used to get me here.

I watch in awful stillness as he joins the other two and grabs a thick rope hanging from one of the larger limbs. We’re on the south side of the island, I think. I shut my eyes. I know we are, because the trees are mossy like this.

I think of Red and lift my back off the ground again. Then I remember: The lighter! I work my pinkie and my ring finger into my left pocket, my eyes darting over to the tree to see if anyone’s watching.

Linn starts to whistle some song. I don’t know. Can’t seem to follow.

My heart is beating so hard. I can feel the lighter with my fingertip.

One of the goons looks over at me, and I pull my hands down toward my cock and wince.

He turns around again, and I watch the two goons string the rope around the limb. They seem to know what they’re doing. I strain into my pocket again, and this time, I bend my ring finger around the lighter. Holy shit, I draw it out.

At that second, Linn turns and starts to stride over. The air inside my lungs leaks out. No, no, no. He sits down beside me under the mossy trees, and I hold my breath, waiting to see if he’ll grab it away. Instead, he leans closer.

“I’m an honest guy,” he tells me, as I clench the lighter in my hands. “I never cheated in law school. I have a wife, you know? Where my parents are from, they arrange these things. She’s very pretty, but she nags.” His mouth twists. “Nags and nags. Nothing like Cookie.”

“How did you know her?” I rasp.

He sits up straighter, gives me a scowl that tells me he thinks I should know. “I’m the one who tried to help her avoid the marriage clause. Did she never tell you?”

I nod, making my head pound. “I remember now.”

“She didn’t want to get married. Nights and nights she was with me. In *my* office. We drank cheery soda, ate the roasted pork from the little stand just down the way, on Park. I tried my damndest to get her out of it, but the trust...it was airtight.”

“You loved her?” I ask. I’ve got the lighter hidden, I think, clutched in both my fists. I’m working on positioning it so I can open the zippo and strike the flint with my thumb. I’ll have to burn my hands to put the flame to the rope, but I don’t have a choice.

I listen as Linn drones on about his feelings for Cookie. How he cares for his wife, but she’s not what he needs. It occurs to me, ridiculously, that Linn seems about as straight-laced as they come. He thinks I murdered my wife, and still, he looks slightly uncomfortable in his work suit, sitting beside me in the grass. I watch him set my gun down as he talks, and hope fills me. He doesn’t know what he’s doing. I wonder why Smythson let him come here. If Smythson sent him here. No way Linn got here by himself—is there?

When his eyes flit over to the ropes, I can see his body tighten.

Good. I don’t know where the other two are but maybe they left. I have the lighter

well-positioned. I clench my fists around it and I work on breathing deeply, wiping my mind clean, the way I used to when my father ‘disciplined’ me with his whips and clamps and paddles.

I’m pretty sure Linn’s finished talking about Cookie, because he’s silent for a moment. I look up at him. “So Smythson sent you?”

Linn laughs. “No Smythson. I want to do you in.”

“He’s been looking for me for a long time,” I say, still not convinced Linn made it to me without some help from someone in high places.

“Not just him,” Linn says. “Everyone who loved Cookie, everyone who works for Robert—we all wanted to see you dead. *Punished*. Like you should have been.” He stands and walks quickly to the men, who have moved back into my line of sight and appear to be perfecting the knot.

I take a deep breath, spread the fingers of my left hand as far apart as I can, and wedge the tip of the zippo between my ring finger and pinkie. Memories fill my mind. Brutal details that I’ve worked to banish from my psyche. Cookie’s tights. The blood. I grit my teeth. Then, with my right thumb, I strike the flint.

The flame is *agonizing*. Sweat pops out all over my body, and my throat spasms with the urge to scream. Immediately, I can smell my flesh burning. I tug in a few huge, desperate breaths, and then look down. Beyond the haze of heat around my hand, I can see the rope turning black.

I grit my teeth so hard the world dissolves into a mess of stars.

*Breathe, asshole! Breathe deeply.*

I press my lips together to suppress a howl. It doesn’t work; I start to pant, but the rope is burning now. All three backs are still toward me.

Then one of the goons looks over his shoulder. He makes a face as if he smells my burning flesh and then his eyes widen.

I jerk my wrists against the rope. I feel it give in a burst of pain. I lunge for the gun in the grass, hefting it in my right hand. I wrap my fingers around it but the pain dazes me. Goon who saw me is charging. I’m fumbling with the gun. I expect the pain this time. Work past it. I manage to find the trigger. The bullet pops him in the gut. He goes down.

Number two whips around, gun drawn, and I get him in the chest. Linn’s face stretches. He puts his hands over his head. He’s got no weapon. Nothing. I’m up and moving through the grass as he starts pleading.

“No, please! No! No! Please, it wasn’t my idea.”

I reach him in another long stride and aim the butt of the gun at his temple. He goes down like a sack of flour, and I hit him one more time for good measure. One of the goons is silent now. The other is writhing. Crying.

I walk over to him. Roll him over. Grab a knife out of his belt.

“I got kids,” he hisses.

“Fuck your kids.”

Pain is closing in on me as I cut the rope down. My head feels too light. The fingers of my left hand roar their pain.

Tying the three men’s hands requires both of mine. My jaw locks and I start to shiver, but I get it done. I stand on shaking legs, drawing in shallow, humid breaths. The trees around me seem to move and chatter. I wonder dimly if they’re heckling—or if they’re glad

I won.

Strong hands grab me by the shoulders, and I whirl around.

# CHAPTER FIVE

## RED

He drags a paint brush down the inside of my calf. It tickles. My brain knows this, but my body doesn't move. I'm on lockdown. Gut-wrenching shivers have been reduced to a fine quiver, as if my body is on auto-pilot, just doing the bare minimum. And yet...my senses are on overdrive. The cold breeze. The sun washing out the luscious grass in Gertrude's yard. The ropes cutting my wrists. The pain of all the cuts.

My mind is a kaleidoscope of Mom and me, of Katie and me. Chinese food with Carl. Type, type, typing on my keyboard: bliss. That night at the frog pond, gliding as I apologized for not recording the James Wolfe documentary. I can smell the shampoo in Gertrude's bathroom. Feel the ache in my jaw as I take Race's cock way down my throat.

This guy told me Race is dead already, but I can't believe it.

It's impossible for me to imagine anyone getting Race. And yet...half of my body is already bathed in red paint. It stings the two slashes on the inside of my stretched out bicep. Stings the long, shallow cut from my butt cheek down the back of my thigh.

He paints over the first and deepest cut he made, the one on the front of my right thigh, and the burning sensation of paint oozing into the wound makes me lose my breath.

"You know he was a sexual killer, right? That's why I'm doing this. I wish I wasn't," he says.

I think dimly what a contrite fuckwad he is.

He drags the paint brush over my belly, toward my crotch, and a tiny little sob escapes my throat.

"You're a bastard! I bet your mother would disown you...if she knew!"

He backhands me, and I vibrate in my ropes.

"Nobody talks about my mother! Not a whore like you."

"You're gross." I can't control my mouth. "I hate you. You're disgusting and I...still think your mother would be ashamed of how you're...treating me!"

I give myself silent accolades for sounding so coherent. I'm shivering violently again, unable to hang loosely in my binds. Which sucks. I realized a long time ago that I sway less if I make my body dead weight.

"Don't talk about my mother, bitch." He waves the knife at me.

I smirk, because why not?

"Who's your boss?" It's a random question, and I ask without hesitation. What's the point of hesitating now? He rubs his gun. "We considered killing you, but instead I've got this."

From some unseen pocket, he produces a syringe. "Lots of ketamine in here. We'll bring you close as we can to an overdose and leave you like that. You try to squeal, no one will believe you, all drugged up like that."

He grins, but it's a leer this time. "I don't think you'll remember anything anyway. Ketamine compromises the memory."

He reaches up and pinches my nipple, and there's no art in his touch. The physical sensation reminds me of the time a college boyfriend groped me in my sleep. I know he's touching my breasts, but I can't really feel it.

I close my eyes and I imagine Race.

I see him smiling earlier this morning. *“You’re always welcome, doll.”*

I kind of liked the way he called me fuck doll.

# CHAPTER SIX

*WOLFE*

*Six years ago*

Bryson Paige lives in Greenwich, in a sprawling estate his parents vacated just for him. I know exactly how to get there from my place in Lenox Hill, because when Cookie doesn't tell me where she is, I track her cell phone. Yeah, I know. It's fucking nuts. But I can't stand to go to sleep unless I know she's safe, and I won't bow and just request she tell me. I won't be that guy. So I'm this one.

As I drive, I check my phone obsessively. I don't know what I think I'll find. A missed call? Voicemail?

My fingers, locked around the steering wheel, ache. My neck hurts as I whip my gaze from the rear view to the side mirrors, over my shoulder, across the bustling lanes of 278. I think I've got the fucking flu. My head throbs and my eyelids burn so hot they make my eyes feel dry.

Fucking Cookie.

I told her to calm down with Paige. That guy's a pussy. She doesn't talk about him much, but I've got a pretty good feel for him. I've been with a lot of subs, starting back before I called them that, back when I was just a horny kid. Paige sounds like one who doesn't know his limits. He's broken it off with her twice lately. Then comes crawling back, begging, the second he hears she's domming someone else.

I look at my phone, locked into its holder, on the dash of my Lambo. The screen is dark. I wish it would light up again. Her call was short, telling me nothing except she's in trouble.

"Help me, Jimmy! I'm at Paige's house in the garage!"

I change lanes and grit my teeth. There's no way that fucker hurt her, is there? Sometimes a sub will break. I've only had it happen once, and she was small. But Paige is probably twice Cookie's size. Fucker could really hurt her. I lick my dry lips. If he hurts her, I will kill him.

I try the number Cookie called me from twice more as I get on 95 and start to fly. Each time, my chest gets a little tighter, my foot a little heavier.

My head throbs. My throat is so dry, but I forgot to bring a drink. I swallow, over and over, which only makes it ache.

I'm going more than a hundred miles per hour when I exit the freeway, hit the brakes so hard the car's rear fishtails, and shoot off down a winding residential road. It's good I've got a photographic memory and a good GPS system on the computer in my study, because I can tell when the road starts to curve a certain way that I'm close. A few more miles and there it is, an overstated iron sign that says: Paige Place.

I hang a sharp right, stomp the brakes so hard the tires squeal, and blink at the keypad to my left. Fuck! I don't know the code. I glance out in front of me, and for once I catch a break. The arm is already up. I punch the pedal and take the long driveway going almost sixty.

When the driveway curves into a huge circle, I slow at the valet booth. Empty. Because it's Sunday. Sometimes help gets Sundays off. I drive up to the house, still

glancing around for a valet. When I see none, I drive over to the long, one-story stone structure on the left side of the house.

I roll right over Paige's pristine grass, yank the keys out of the ignition, and practically jump out of the Lambo. I ignore my sore, tired body as I try one door on the east side of the massive garage, followed by another.

Unlocked. Good.

Inside, the garage is divided into segments: cavernous rooms packed with import and antique cars. I walk through the first two rooms, feeling hot and slightly dizzy. I wonder what the hell I'm looking for and stop for a second, trying to listen for voices.

I don't hear any, but in the next room down, I swear I hear footsteps.

I pick up the pace a little, weaving between cars, looking up at the rafters—for what, I don't know. Lately Cookie likes to play with rope. I'm moving so fast now, I almost run right into a door that's shut between this room and the next. So far, they've all been open. I grab the handle and find it greasy. Wipe it on my slacks, keep going. I'm sprinting now. I open and close my hand as I curve around two hummers.

Fifth garage now, then sixth. I'm gasping. Could be this cold-flu bullshit. My heart's pounding so hard I feel it in my head.

I think I hear tires peel. Goosebumps crawl over my skin.

I dash through this room and into the next—the last one, surely.

*Cookie!*

My mouth itches to call her name but the unnerving silence in the garage has imposed itself on me. I run past two sports cars and what looks like a dune buggy, and before I reach the closed door out in front of me, I slow so much I'm almost stopped.

My throat feels swollen. I can't swallow at all. I listen to the air and something hums around me. Intuition. Prescience.

I push the doorway open slowly, and before I'm even in, the dim light that spills from the room shines on me, illuminating, among other things, my hands. It's not gasoline or oil on my left hand. It's blood.

Two steps in and I start to turn a circle. I see him first. How could I not? The ropes that hold Paige are strung from rafters to floor, an elaborate spider's web. And in the center, Paige, nude, dead.

I know he's dead because of how his body hangs. Ropes pinch his wrists, his ankles, and his ass cheeks. His cock is cased in a steel sleeve. His head lolls sideways, bloated red. I clutch my chest, my neck, but it's too late. I'm ralphing on the oil-stained floor. The splatter seems to echo on and on. I wipe my mouth on my fever-hot arm and search the room's corners for Cookie.

"Baby—it's okay. I'll help."

And it's horrible, or maybe wonderful, because I know I will. I'll help Cookie any way I can. It's too late for Paige, but I won't let it be too late for Cookie.

I fortify myself and complete the circle, turning toward the side of the garage encased in shadows.

*Cookie!*

My mind rebels but my eyes can see her: Cookie, dressed in black tights and a lacy bra, swaying in a noose.

Her cheeks are swollen like a hamster's. Her pretty olive skin is purple. And her eyes.



Her eyes are open. Every blood vessel is broken.

My mind is starting to churn, I'm starting to wonder how it happened, when I hear a howl. I jump back, turn around, and realize that's me.

I'm screaming. Screaming. God, it can't be.

NO NO NO. NO NO. NO NO NO NO NO NO NO NO NO.

Not Cookie.

Not Cookie.

I grab a ladder, look frenziedly around for a knife or scissors. I can't wait. I don't want to touch her but I have to get her down. She's not dead. She's just passed out. I have to get her down, it's hurting her neck!

All I have is my Zippo. I whip it out, climb higher on the ladder, and I burn the rope. I start to burn the rope, but the fire climbs quickly toward the ceiling.

I do the only thing I can: I grab the rope above her head and bat the flames with my bare hands. A minute later, it snaps. Cookie's body falls to the cement floor, and I fall off the ladder, landing hard on my ass.

The fire alarm is wailing now. Water starts spewing from the ceiling, and I look her over, head to foot. Maybe it's cold enough to wake her up!

When it doesn't, I scramble over.

"Cookie!" I take her head in my lap and then I drop it. It's so loose on her neck. I cover my mouth but I don't get sick because that's wrong. This is my wife. I'm not going to vomit at the sight of my own wife, I think irrationally.

Instead I turn her over, face down. That's when I notice: her ass looks shiny.

There's blood on Cookie's tights. There's blood on her ass.

And the water from the ceiling reminds me of rain. It rained last Tuesday—in D.C. I stood in cold rain, on the steps of the Truman Building, before I went inside to surprise Cookie's father.

*Cordial greeting, closed door, plush chair, fake smiles.*

*And then I dropped a bomb.*

*"If you don't quit calling her, if you don't quit harassing her, if you don't quit acting like a possessive, fucked up freak," I told Robert Smythson, "I'll tell the press it was me instead of her."*

*Wide, gray eyes. "What was you, Jimmy?"*

*"I'll tell the media you raped me. Every summer in the Hamptons. You stuffed your cock into my ass."*

*"This is blackmail," he said.*

*And I shrugged. "Whatever works."*

I look down at Cookie, at the blood on my hands. On my legs now. On the floor. And I know what happened. I know who, and I know why.

I start to sob. I'm so, so sorry.

Sorry doesn't stop the rain or bring her back.

# CHAPTER SEVEN

## *RED*

“Hands up! Don’t move a fucking muscle.”

My body, limp in its binds, snaps to attention at the sound of that voice. *His* voice. Relief is a drug, lighting up my insides.

The bastard in black has gone from sitting with his ankle on his knee, smoking a cigar on the bench in front of me, to sitting stick-straight. The cigar is on the floor. His jaw is tight. His eyes, turned up toward Race, are furious.

But it doesn’t matter. Not at all. Because Race’s gun is pointed at his temple.

“Race! Oh God!” I don’t plan to talk, but the words just bubble out. My arms and legs jerk against the ropes. I want to throw myself at him.

He looks up at me with wild eyes. His face is bruised and blood-caked. He pushes the gun’s nose into my captor’s head and holds my gaze.

“Did he rape you?” The words are tight and clipped, pushed from his mouth as if he can’t bear to have them in his throat.

I shake my head, and as Race says something else to the man, my eyes close without permission. It’s warm and bright here. Kind of like floating in a current. Time breaks into pieces, and I can’t keep up. I hear Race’s voice, deeper than ever, filled with rage. Then a low thud, followed by men’s shouts.

I can tell they’re fighting because I hear their bodies beat the wooden floor. Grunts and curses.

*Win, Race, win!*

I hear a gun shot and my body jerks. I wait for the swaying sensation that always follows any movement I make in these ropes, but it never comes. I peek my eyes open, startled to find I’m on the floor now, curled into a ball. My slashes sting. My body trembles.

I look for Race, slanting my gaze up, and I don’t see him at first because he’s kneeling in front of me. A gargling sound comes from somewhere behind him.

He bows down low, so his face is near mine. “Focus on me, okay. I’m here now.” He pulls me into his arms, and I wrap myself around him.

I see the man’s form on the floor and then we’re going down the stairs.

I blink a few times, looking at Race’s blood-streaked neck. It looks strong and sort of hard, for a neck. It’s nice.

Will he be mad at me? Will he be mad I let myself get caught?

The thought makes my stomach feel like a deflating balloon.

I’m aware of the gentle bouncing of him walking down the stairs. Abruptly he sinks down on one of them, hugs me tight enough to hurt, and pushes his face into my neck. I cry, and his hand crawls up my cheek, wiping the tears tenderly away.

“I’ve got you now, Red,” he whispers. “I won’t let you go again.”

\*

Time spools out ahead of us. We’re at his house in what, to me, feels like seconds, and

he's opening the back door—the one I must have been carried through after my attacker hit me in the head. I cling to Race's strong neck, feeling weak and hot, like I might get sick. My arms and legs are numb and I am only stomach.

Race stops in the doorway of the bathroom, looking down at me with soft eyes. "He really didn't...? Are you *sure*?"

I tuck my chin against my neck and nod.

I watch his gaze break away from the hot mess that is me and sweep the room: where I crashed through the shelf, where I was caught. He steps past the mess, to the tub, and tucks me against his chest while he runs the water.

As the echo of water fills the bathroom, he looks up and down my body. His face is stern, unfeeling, but his eyes pop wider as his gaze falls on my arm.

"He cut you?"

Fresh tears blur my view of him. I nod.

He rises up from his crouch, still holding me secure against his hard, bare chest. He steps into the tub and sinks down slowly. Despite how gently he is moving, his muscles are tight.

He settles me close to the faucet, leans my shoulder against the wall, and, when he's touched my shoulders and tucked my hair behind me, he steps out of the tub. Water cascades down his legs, onto the plush, brown rug. He steps out of his jeans and toward the cabinets, where he reaches inside and pulls out a First Aid kit.

He drops it on the counter, turns to look at me, and then, with his jaw locked tight, he strides to the wall and drives his fist through it.

"GODDAMNIT! Goddamnit! Goddamnit! GODDAMNIT!" Between each roar, he smashes a new hole in the wall.

I hug my knees. My pulse races. Should I give him privacy? Maybe, but I can't just sit here. I stand up, wanting—needing—to go to him. As I step out of the tub, a line of blood flies through the air, and I realize he's using his right fist. The hand he paints with.

"Race, no! STOP!" All my cuts sting from the water and the paint dripping off me, but I rush over to him anyway, twisting so he doesn't catch me with his elbow. I grab his forearm. "Stop! Stop! You're gonna hurt your hand! Stop!" I cling tighter to his arm as he drives it into the wall again, and when he pulls it back again, I throw my other arm around his waist. I press myself against his back.

"Stop it! Stop it! Please Race, stop!"

He's so big compared to me, and he's filled with such fury. Every punch jolts his body a few inches. My wet feet slide against the floor. I cling to him, saying his name over and over, pressing my forehead against his bruised back.

Finally—finally—he stops. Two deep breaths, and he pulls me around in front of him, wrapping his arms around my back so we're chest to chest, cupping his hand behind my neck.

He looks me over, eyes wide and horrified. Much of the paint has washed off me, and I'm guessing he can see the cuts more clearly now. I tense my muscles so I can grab onto him if he starts into the wall again.

Instead, his face twists. His eyes glisten, filling with moisture. And then, before he allows me to see anything more, he drops his head onto my shoulder and presses his face into the damp skin of my neck. I feel his lips move in time with his voice.

“Jesus, Red. I’m sorry. I’m so very sorry.” With his face still hidden in my hair, he runs a hand up my neck, over my cheek, and over my head, smoothing down my wild, red locks.

His arm, around my shoulders, presses me closer to him. So close I can barely breathe.

I stroke my fingers gently up his back.

I know for sure now—he didn’t kill her. He would never hurt a woman.

“It was my fault,” he whispers. “I tried to blackmail him.”

“Who?”

He tilts his face up and I watch as his eyebrows draw subtly together. His eyes search my face. He looks puzzled. Like a man waking up from a dream. He takes my face in his palms.

“Red.”

He drags his gaze down my body, flinching when he sees the deep slash on my thigh. “Jesus.” He digs his hand into his hair and turns away. When he turns back toward me, I can see him coming back into himself. “Fucking Christ,” he says, “I need to clean you up.”

He scoops me up and holds me over the water, with my feet hovering above the steamy surface. “Shit,” he says. “It’s gonna be too hot. You’re bleeding.”

With my body pressed against his chest, he leans over and adjusts the faucet. Then, in one elegant motion, he steps over the tub’s side and sinks down with me in his lap.

I close my eyes and let my mind drift. I like the feeling of him holding me. I can tell he’s trying not to jar me around, and affection for him swells inside me like a warm balloon.

“This is the second bath you’ve given me,” I murmur.

He sits down a little deeper into the water, and I feel it cascade over my feet and shins and butt. It burns, but it’s a good burn. I tell myself that it’s a cleansing burn. Dizziness spins through me.

Race smooths some water over my forehead. “This okay?”

I nod, but I can’t find the strength to open my eyes.

He angles me so the gash on my right thigh isn’t in the water. I feel him drag a wash cloth over my belly. There’s a cut there, but it isn’t deep.

He moves the wash cloth over every part of me, reaching out to re-wet it with cool water from the faucet before dabbing it on my cuts.

He saves the deep one on my thigh for last, and although I try not to flinch, I can’t seem to help myself.

He says something low and soft. Then I feel the scruff of his jaw against my cheek. He rubs his lips over my nose, and they touch down on mine for a sweet second before he pulls away.

My insides ache with needing him. Even after the last few hours. Especially after the last few hours. I peek up at him, reach out to twine an arm around his neck. “Please, Race...”

“Please what?” he whispers.

“I want you to touch me. Make me feel better.”

He leans subtly away from me, and the arm that isn’t holding me dips down into the water. His mouth tightens, and he directs his gaze somewhere over my shoulder as he

shakes his head. “No, Red. You don’t need that.”

“Don’t tell me what I need.” My voice is strong, but my body still feels weak. I fumble for his fingers, grasping his free hand and twining two of my fingers through his limp ones. “Please. I need you. I need...someone.” I can feel the tears sting my eyes now, and I’m worried I’m about to lose it.

He’s looking away from me. Like he doesn’t care, but I know he does. I wrap both arms around his shoulders. I love how hard he feels. How warm and damp his skin is. He feels so soft. And for the first time ever, I have a forbidden thought. I think: *I want him to be mine.*

In that very breath, he moves my arms off him and scoots back in the tub. I sink deeper into the water, and it burns the cut on my thigh. I wince, and Race’s eyes widen. A look of panic flits across his face.

“This is my fault, Red. My fault this happened to you. After I clean you up, you have to go.”

I start to cry, because really—after the way this day has gone, what else can I do? Emotion rises in my throat. It’s one I know well: the pain of losing someone. I cover my face with my hands, embarrassed by the force of my feelings for him. “I don’t want to go!”

“Why would you stay?” He sounds incredulous. I peek at him through my hands and find his face twisted in shock. It’s gone in a heartbeat, replaced by something flat and cold. “Do you have a death wish, Red? Is that why you want to stay?”

“Of course not!”

“Then you’re wrong,” he says grimly. “About me. You shouldn’t trust me, Red.”

My heart bumps off its rhythm, dragging out a beat. “But you didn’t do it,” I whisper. He draws his knees up and rests his arms on them. Lays his head atop his arms.

“You didn’t do it. I know you didn’t.” He *can*’t have done it. “I won’t believe it.”

He looks up. “You don’t know anything about me, Red.”

“Yes I do. I know everything I need to. I know you keep a clean house and you like the woods. You’re an amazing artist, and you’re loyal. You were loyal to Gertrude, and you didn’t have to be. You didn’t. I know you care deeply about things that matter to you, because ‘W.’ donates so much to charity. You’re good with your hands, you’re good with your mouth. I’ve never fucked someone as good as you, but that’s not why I want to stay.” My voice cracks. “I like the way you give me baths. I like the way you lie beside me.”

His face twists, and he’s out of the tub before I can draw another breath.

“You don’t know what the fuck you’re talking about,” he says as he stands there, dripping on the bathroom floor.

“So tell me.”

But he’s already gone.

# CHAPTER EIGHT

## RED

I jump out of the bath and wrap a towel around myself. The cuts sting, but I rush after him anyway.

I hurry into the bedroom, driven by the need to know what's going on. Who was that man who tied me in the tree house? He told me his partners had killed Race. Who are his partners, and how did Race escape them? Why were they so sure Race killed his wife? And are there any more bad guys wandering around the island, waiting for us?

As soon as I step into the bedroom, I hear his voice. He's standing nude in the open space between the bedroom and the kitchen. He's got his body angled sideways, so I have a left side view of his beautiful, masculine profile. I realize his right hand is raised. He's holding a phone.

"Bob?" he says.

I watch his shoulders stiffen. "Yes, I'm his brother." Whatever they're telling him isn't good. He's frozen, unmoving, unbreathing, until he growls, "He what? ...Bullshit! Bob doesn't even take goddamned Aleve!" He goes even stiffer, as if he's coiling right before punching someone in the face. "Where is he now?"

He groans a curse, then shouts, "*Goddamnit!*"

He hurls his cell phone, the movement so swift that for a second I don't see where he threw it. It bounces to the floor in pieces as he stalks into the kitchen. I find him leaning his arms against the sink, his head hanging down between them. He's breathing hard.

"Race..." I touch his arm, and he flinches.

"I'm sorry." I pull my hand back, wrap both arms around myself.

"You think I need your help?" He turns the full force of those black eyes on me, and everything inside of me goes still. "Red, you're nothing to me. Just a fuck. You need to call your friend. Have her meet you somewhere in Charleston. Tell her it's urgent. I can get you there somehow, and then you go—and don't look back."

I blink at him, feeling totally confused. In the same breath he says I'm just a fuck, he's urging me to safety. I'm not sure what to think, but my stomach hurts. I wish I'd never come here.

"I'm not just going to go." I want to understand things first. I want to feel a sense of closure.

Maybe that's stupid. It's not like I'm in love with him. I've spent very little time here, but I've lain in his arms, and I've felt safe. For the first time in years, I felt safe and sheltered here. Taken care of. I feel...something for him.

"I can't just leave you here. I'd worry, Race."

"I don't give a shit."

I remember, when we first met on the dock, how important it was to him that I give him the island. How important his privacy. I have a terrible hunch that it was me who somehow led the bad guys here—and even if I do leave in a few minutes, I want to understand what's going on first.

"Cookie's family is still after you, aren't they? They think you did it."

He shakes his head. Pinches his nose. "I'm not going to talk about this with you."

And—finally—the disdain on his face flips my anger switch. “Oh yeah? You’re not?” I drop the towel and gesture at myself. “You don’t think you kind of owe me?”

He shakes his head. “I don’t owe you anything.”

\*

## ***WOLFE***

It isn’t true. I do owe her, of course. I owe Red anything she asks of me. But the best I can do for her is get her out of here, and be sure when she leaves, she doesn’t take with her any information that could put her in danger. Already, I’m scared shitless I won’t be able to protect her. It’s unlikely, I think, that Linn and his motley crew would go after her once she gets back to her life, but I don’t know that. I know nothing.

Someone took Bob out. He’s in the hospital, in the ICU, after overdosing on cocaine. Which means someone set him up. Someone found out Bob knew where I was and monitored his phones or something. And if someone got to me through Bob, then nothing is secure.

Maybe today didn’t involve Smythson, but eventually it may. I’m a walking liability, because I know what really happened that night at Paige’s place.

I look at Red, standing nude in front of me. She’s pale and red-eyed. Her hair is matted all around her face. Her lips look chapped and raw. Because of me.

I’ve got to get her out of here.

“I don’t owe you anything,” I say again. I step over to her, clamp my hand down on her shoulder, the way my father liked to do when we were socializing. I know from experience that it doesn’t feel good to be steered around like cattle, and that’s why I’m doing it. I want to make her feel insignificant. To hurt her, so she’ll fucking go.

I steer her toward the door, tightening my fingers on her shoulder as we move. “What will it take, Red? How can I get rid of you?”

She looks up at me, and the confusion in her eyes almost breaks me. Her lips quiver, but she presses them together quickly. “I don’t know,” she whispers.

She’s looking at me in shock. Like I’ve crossed over to the dark side. It’s so preposterous. So amazing that she ever thought me anything but.

Her naiveté makes me fear for her. I curl my lip and aim all the revulsion I feel for myself at her.

“Do you want to be used? Do you want to be treated like a fuck doll? It was fun and games before, but games are over, Red. If you stay with me, I’ll fuck you hard and mean. I’ll make you regret it.”

She takes a few shallow breaths, and I can see her thinking. Finally becoming afraid of me, or feeling tempted to make another dangerous decision—one like her ill-fated ocean swim?

She looks at the door. At my phone, shattered on the hardwood. And then she looks at me.

\*

## ***RED***

I stand there with my arm wrapped around my waist, waiting to feel trepidation. Waiting to feel the urge to run. I feel neither. I look back up at him, consumed by that same feeling from the rocks yesterday. Right before I slipped into the water. Only this time, it's stronger. This time, I'm diving in.

"I want you, Race. I have no idea why. Maybe I'm crazy. But when I think of leaving right now, I feel like I'd never stop looking back. So you want to fuck me?" I step toward the bedroom and curl my finger at him. "Come fuck me."

For a bare second, his mouth softens, and my heart lifts. Then his lips flatten, and he closes the distance between us. He yanks the towel off me and shoves me against the side of the bed. He's already hard—pressing against me as he takes my face in both his hands and fits his hot mouth over mine.

"Red," he breathes. "What's wrong with you?"

I bite him, and he growls, and then it's tongues dancing. Stroking. Teeth and tongues and hands and his arms under my ass, his arms around my back. He's got me on the bed, my legs spread wide. He drapes his body in between them and kisses up my belly, to my breasts.

"I'm sorry," he murmurs into my neck. His fingers spread my pussy open, plunge inside.

"For what?" I breathe.

He's straddling my legs now, moving gently over me. He wrenches his lips off my throat and looks into my eyes. "Do you want to stop?"

His thumb rubs over my clit, while two of his fingers scissor inside of me. I clench around them.

"No," I gasp. "Don't stop!"

He drops his head back down, tracing his tongue down my throat, along my collar bone, and down to my breasts, where he sucks hard and rhythmic as his fingers plunge still deeper.

"Oh yes! Yes!"

"Fuck doll wants to be filled up?"

I bite my lip and nod. I clench around his fingers.

He grins at me as he takes himself in hand and presses his head against my entrance. His cock pushes into me and I grunt, spreading my legs wider for him. I grab at his hips—the skin so creamy smooth—and he pinches my nipple.

"Tell me you like it, Red."

I moan.

He rocks his hips back, pulling out so only the big, round head of him fills me, putting pressure at my entrance. Then he plunges in with vengeance.

"Oh!"

"My fuck doll."

He draws slowly out again, and I moan.

Another sweet punch and he's buried to the hilt. "Feel me inside you. You're mine, baby."

In and then out, slam in, inch out. And as he inches out, I lift my hips to him. My cunt is desperate for him. I want nothing more than to be filled so deep I can't walk for a week.



I lift my hips like an obedient fuck doll, and he reads my mind. He licks his finger, then spreads my cheeks apart and teases my back entrance with my slickness. He pushes his way in, and I quiver around him. He starts stroking, gliding in and out. I'm groaning loudly.

Two fingers of his left hand tug and twist my nipples.

"Race! Oh Race!"

"Come for me. Now." He pushes every inch of his cock into me. Then he grabs my elbows. Using the leverage of my body, he jerks himself out, then punches in.

I gasp, then groan, then shout my orgasm. I'm creaming all over him, wrapping one leg around his hip.

"Never...stop," I murmur, only half coherent.

He answers with a quick twist of the finger in my ass.

He angles his body so he's leaning down close to me. His hips work just as fast as before, maybe faster, pounding the breath out of me.

He stretches my ass, and a second finger slides inside.

I can feel every line of his cock inside my pussy—the plump head, the long, thick shaft. I can feel his big balls slapping my taint, and I yearn to suck them into my mouth.

"You're going to come again now," he commands.

I'm so slick; he's thrusting fast, fast, fast.

His mouth on my breast, fingers in my ass, cock in my pussy. This is everything I need. Everything my life lacked before meeting him. For the first time in years, I feel as if I'm actually alive. And I'll do anything to keep this.

As I come again, my eyes pop open—just in time to see his face go slack. He jerks out in one smooth movement and spews all over my belly.

# CHAPTER NINE

## *RED*

He returns a few minutes later with the first aid kit and a towel.

He scoops me up, tosses the towel out atop the sheets, and lays me gently down on it. He surprises me by wiping between my legs with a warm cloth.

“Thank you,” I murmur. I look up at his face, hoping to get some idea of where we stand.

He opens the kit and gets some gauze out, then some antibiotic ointment. His cock is still half-hard, and it gets all the way there again as he tends to my leg. I try to catch his eye, but he’s intentionally avoiding me.

I want to say something. Point out how that wasn’t the mean fuck he promised. Why not? And why are his hands so gentle now? I shut my eyes.

I try to keep quiet, but every time his hands brush my skin, I grow more and more aroused, until I’m hot and wet between my legs. The thought of leaving after this—of never fucking him again—makes me feel desperate.

I open my eyes and look at the top of his dark head. He’s bandaged the wound on my thigh and is wrapping one on my shin. Even as I stir, deliberately trying to draw his attention, he keeps his eyes on my leg.

“I’m still not leaving,” I say. “Not like this.”

His eyes flick up to mine, but they’re distant. Unfocused. His voice is low as he ties the gauze off. “Don’t worry, Red. You’ll get all the money I promised you and more.”

“No.” I lean up and grab his shoulder. “Look at me! I want to know why this happened. What kind of trouble are you in?”

He’s off the bed, pacing the small space between the bed and wall. Sunlight coming through the glass ceiling glints off his dark hair, then almost immediately is replaced by flickering shadows. I glance up. Dark clouds have blotted out the sun. “You’re leaving. It’s not up for debate.”

“You can’t make me go. It’s still my island.”

He steps over to the bed, looking infuriated. “I’m doing you a favor, Red. Protecting you.”

“You were hiding, weren’t you? I told Katie you were you. I let the secret out about where you live. So it’s my fault this happened.”

He shakes his head. “It’s not your fault.”

“Then whose fault is it?”

He stares at the wall in front of him, the wall where the back door is. The door that horrible man carried me through.

“Did you kill that guy?” I ask slowly. “The one in the tree house.”

He locks his jaw, and he must think he owes me an answer on this, because he looks down at me. “I don’t know. He wasn’t dead when he left. He deserved to be.”

I manage to hold his gaze for just a moment. Long enough to see it freaks him out. He doesn’t want to look me in the eye. Because he knows he’s being an asshole and he feels guilty?

He takes two steps to a wooden chair beside his desk, grabs a pair of jeans hanging

over the chair's back, and punches his legs into them. As he moves, I notice his left hand. He isn't bending several of the fingers as he pulls his jeans on. I squint, and my tired eyes notice how red it is. Dark red and very swollen.

"What happened to your hand?"

He moves it out of my sight. "Just a burn."

I slide out of the bed and step over to him. "Can I see?"

He steps away, almost a hop really, since he's still trying to fasten his jeans. He looks over his shoulder. "Get your things together. I'm taking you back to the harbor. Now."

I open my mouth, because I'm going to protest, but he cuts me off. "I don't want you here. I love your sexy little body but I don't want *you*. The way you're looking at me, Red? It's sad."

My stomach twists. "I don't believe you." But I'm whispering. Because really—I don't know. Carl left me for a guy. I can't hold a job. The few friends I have will probably move on with their lives, and on the family front—I've got nothing. "You do want me." I say it because it's the only hope I've got.

He shakes his head, standing straight now that he's got his jeans on. "You don't believe me? Try me."

I step to him, barely breathing as I reach for his chest. There's a moment where I wonder what I'll do if he doesn't respond to my touch, where some cold, executive function questions how the weak, emotional part of me will handle it if I can't even appeal to this man's ever-hungry cock. Too late to generate any useful predictions, though. I'm already in motion.

I tickle my fingers down his happy trail, and then run one finger up his belly. It's warm and tight—the muscles deliciously firm and well-defined. I look into his face. It's hard—so very hard—but I breathe deeply and keep up my onslaught, dragging my finger over his pec, where I skate my fingertip around his small, pert nipple.

I pinch it just a little, and I press my naked body closer to his. When I feel his powerful thighs, but nothing else, I look back down between his legs.

Nothing.

No bulge.

*Jesus*, how embarrassing is that? I drop my hand and dash around him, headed toward the door. I wish I could call a boat taxi! I can't stand to look at him again. And so, of course, my gaze is pulled to him.

I look back at the awful man who's somehow worked his talons into my heart.

And that's when I see: Behind his back, he's got his hands in fists. The fingers of his left hand, so burned and chapped and swollen, are pressed tightly together.

# CHAPTER TEN

## RED

The second my gaze hits his hands, he unclenches them, but it's too late.

I stalk back over to him, right into the line of his cold gaze. "Oh my God, I can't believe you. You're a coward!"

I look down to find he's already getting hard. Of course he is! I strike a pose I know will emphasize my breasts and point to the bed.

"Lie down and let me do the touching this time. If you don't want me, that should be no problem for you."

His brows draw tightly together, and he blinks at me as if he's coming out of a daze. A sex daze. Because he wants me. Of course he fucking wants me!

His face hardens, and he folds his arms in front of him, as if he needs to put a barrier between us. "Let it go, Red. Let it go, and do like I tell you for Christ's sake. Leave. You're making more of this thing between us than what's there."

I look pointedly at his cock, and he says, "Yeah. That's all. You're good, Red, and I've had a good time, but it's time for you to go. I'll find you with the NDA. I'll even pay you for your silence regarding...today...if you think that's necessary."

"Are you inviting me to bribe you?" I shut my mouth and shake my head. "No way. You might throw your money around to get what you want, but I'm not like that. Money isn't everything to me. You really want me to leave? Make me *able* to leave. Explain to me what the hell is going on." I wave at my nude body. "Why did the guy who tied me up want to kill you? Why did he do *this* to me? How many times do I have to ask before you start answering!"

He finally looks into my eyes. One of his is swollen, turning black. He sighs and rubs a hand over his face. "I don't know what to tell you."

I change gears. "How about something factual, like how many of them were here today?"

"Five as far as I know."

"Did you get all of them?"

"One got away. He jumped me from behind and..." He shakes his head. "I couldn't take him down. Which is why you need to go."

I let my breath out. "So this is the last I ever see of you, then?"

"Yes, Red." His eyes are wide—an emotional reaction to me, finally. "Turn around and don't look back. I don't need the island anymore. Our business together is over."

I grab his unhurt hand and tug. His brows draw together, but he lets me lead him to the bed.

I push him back against the side of the mattress, securing him there with my hips, just the way he had me earlier. I run my hands down his chest and look up at his face—the handsome face that sets my pulse racing. "Fine—I'll go. I'll go and sign your NDA and never talk to you again. On one condition."

His brows quirk up.

I run my gaze down his delicious chest, satisfied to find he's hard and bulging thorough his jeans. "You let me suck your cock just one more time."

He gives me a suspicious look, and I wave at the bed behind him.

“Go on. Lie down.”

“You sure about this?”

“It’s my condition, Race.” I flatten my palm against his chest and give him a light shove. “Lie back and get yourself ready for me. I want to say goodbye—my way.”

He looks wary, but he lifts himself up onto the bed and stretches out on his back, propping himself up on his elbows.

I climb up beside him and ease him down, flat on his back. “Take down your pants.”

He grits his teeth, but after a second’s stillness, he does as I ask. I scoot over a little, and I sit on something hard. Handcuffs.

I take his hand in mine, and before he realizes what’s going on, I snap one of the open cuffs around his wrist; the other one to the bottom of a bedpost. He arches up off the bed, grabs my arm. “Unlock me! I can’t protect you this way—”

“I’ll make things fast. Just trust me. Pretty please.”

He doesn’t move at first. Then he looks into my face.

“Only you,” he says softly. “Just you, Red.”

His long, well-muscled body is stretched out before me, every line on display. I want to lick him. Bite him.

He feels tense, even as I stroke his happy trail and kiss his throat.

“Have you ever been in this position, Race?”

He shuts his eyes and nods. It takes me a moment to decide if I should keep going. If he doesn’t like this sort of thing, I shouldn’t force it. But one look at his dick and I can’t not touch it. I take it in my hands and caress his warm, heavy balls. He relaxes into the mattress and lets his breath out in a soft sigh.

I lean down and take his cock into my mouth, deep-throating him until he groans and pushes against me.

I run my tongue around the smooth, hard girth of him, moving slowly at first, then faster, harder. He swells and stiffens in my mouth, even starts to taste salty as I suck him hard, but he doesn’t make a sound. Finally, he starts to thrust into me. Starts panting. But when I glance up at him, he looks tense. Miserable.

“Let me go,” he pleads. “I want to fuck you my way. You know I’ll make it good for you.”

“Okay. I’ll just try this one more thing, and then if you’re still not happy...” I reach over to the black box on the bedside table. I can feel him watching me as I reach in, take one of the little silver bullet vibrators, and spread lube over it.

I watch his face carefully as I move my hand toward his ass. His brows are clenched together, like he’s bracing himself. I’m surprised to find I kind of like the way he seems so...cautious. I’m in control now. Maybe I sort of like it.

“This won’t be so bad.” I grin and work my way between his fine, pert asscheeks. I make my mark, then push the lubbed bullet inside him.

He groans. “Jesus!”

He rolls his hips, his massive dick jutting into the air, his balls drawing up before my eyes. He digs his back into the mattress and throws his head back. “Fuck.”

I lean over and lap at his balls. Cup them in my palm and gently roll them as I suck on his huge, salty head. I bathe every crevice with my tongue, tracing the line around his head,

then gliding down his shaft. I remember the egg's controller and turn it on low. Race locks his hands around my head.

His dick is leaking everywhere. I can taste the salty pre-cum as he thrashes against my face. "Red," he pants. "Red, Red." I take him down into my throat and constrict my muscles there, so I'm hugging his length, even as my lips massage the base of his cock and my fingertips tease his balls.

His eyes are rolling back into his head. He's breathing so hard.

"I like fucking your ass," I whisper.

That's all it takes.

He shoves himself once more into my throat and comes in a mighty burst down my throat.

In a fraction of a second, he's got me by the shoulders, slamming me against the mattress, climbing on top of me. In the seconds it takes me to realize he's somehow escaped the cuffs, he's got his cock pushed firmly into me. He's got his hands around my wrists.

"You're mine, Red. I'm in charge now. You will like it."

He fucks me hard and rough, pinning me down, never loosening his grip on my wrists. His cock feels good and gets me wet and loose, but through my haze, I notice he seems frenzied. There's a desperate quality to the way he pounds into me. Like he knows this is the last time.

We come in the same breath as he thrusts into me, filling me so fully I see stars. He convulses. I moan.

When he pulls out, he leans over me. He puts his hands around my face and touches his forehead down to mine.

"Jesus, Red. You really fuck me up."

"You fuck me up, too." I grab onto his shoulder and tug him closer. Close enough that I can bury my face in the crook of his arm. "I can't imagine never fucking you again." Tears fill my throat, so sudden I don't have time to keep them out of my voice when I say, "I don't want to go."

"Oh, Red." He strokes my hair out of my face, then stretches out beside me. He puts a leg over both of mine and looks into my eyes. "I'm a goddamned liar, and I do want you. But I can never have you, baby." He brings his mouth down on mine and kisses me deep and hard. And when he pulls away, he sits up, takes my hand, and kisses it.

"I'll tell you," he says, pulling a blanket over his lap. "And you'll see that I'm weak. Why you shouldn't know. Why you're in danger now. I'm so afraid I ruined your life, baby." He drops his head into his hands and exhales roughly. Looks back up at me. "When I'm done with the story, you're going to go."

# CHAPTER TEN

## RED

“Where do you want me to start?” Race asks. “How much of this shit do you really want to hear?”

“All of it.” *Because I can’t seem to know enough about you.*

He draws his knees up and rests his muscle-corded forearms on them. He casts one brief look my way before he sets his gaze on the wall in front of the bed. Silence swells to fill the seconds, and my heart beats harder with anticipation.

“Cookie and I knew each other as children. She was a cute little black-haired girl, and I was...I don’t know, a boy six years older. We played together at the Hamptons every summer while our fathers talked business. And that was it.” He drums his knee. “Until she needed to inherit. Her grandfather had a daughter who settled down with a woman. He didn’t want that to happen again, so there was a marriage clause. The guy here today, one of them—” he slides his eyes to me— “tried to help her get out of it, apparently. He’s a married lawyer but says he was in love with her.”

I blink, already opening my mouth to fire off questions. But he goes on.

“I called Bob yesterday for the NDA. Bob’s my cousin and my manager. He said he’d have someone bring it. A lawyer, obviously. So when Linn showed up saying Bob sent him, I had no reason not to believe him.” He huffs his breath out. “He had a big guy with him. The guy...” He drops his gaze to the bed.

“The guy from the tree house,” I say softly.

He puts a hand over his face. “I thought he was Linn’s body guard. But Linn used to do a lot of business with the Smythsons, so alarm bells were ringing. I couldn’t shake the idea of...” He shakes his head. “I was worried about you, so I left them there and came to check on you. Put you in the basement. Where you would be safe. If you had stayed there...”

He exhales loudly. Shakes his head again. “On my way back, after I put you downstairs, I got shot with a sedative.” He rubs his neck. “Woke up to Linn and two others trying to kick my ass.” He looks away from me and tightens his jaw. “They were going to hang me.”

Hard eyes lift to meet my own, where they soften a fraction. “Then they told me they had you, and I got out of it.”

My eyes fly from his neck to his burned hand. “What did you do to them?”

He gives me a wry face. “What do you think?”

“Are they... Did you kill them?” I rush the question out.

“No. They’re tied up for now and probably hurting.”

“So it was the lawyer?” I ask. “This was all his plan?”

“I don’t know. Could be alone, could have been sent by Smythson.”

I nod slowly. I look down at my hands, which I’ve clenched together in anticipation of my next question. I look into his eyes and hate that I’m having to ask. Hate that the question exists at all. But it does—and it’s hung between us for long enough.

“Race,” I whisper. His name hangs in the air for a long moment before I can summon the breath to ask him, “Who killed Cookie? I know it wasn’t you. I may not be a genius like Gertrude, but I know how to read a person.”

He turns his angry eyes on me and shakes his head. "You don't need to know that, Red. It does nothing but put you in danger."

"I'm in danger already! Um, hello?" I gesture at myself.

He drops his head down on his arms. His shoulders curl over, and I hold my breath until he whispers, "I did."

"What?"

"I might as well have." He looks into my eyes and his are so sad it takes my breath away.

"What are you talking about?" I breathe.

He gets down off the bed and paces back and forth. "I've been on this island too long if I'm telling you this shit. And it's not because you're nothing to me, Red. You could never be nothing to me. It's because you don't need to know. I don't need to tell you."

The anger rolling off him cools. He steps over to the bed and pulls me into his arms. "Go now, baby. Let's just end this here. You believe I'm innocent, and that's everything to me. I'll never forget it." He presses his chin over my head. Strokes my hair off of my face and looks down at me with eyes that burn. "I'll never forget how beautiful you are. How sweet you taste." He kisses my mouth gently, lingering while our tongues caress.

When he breaks away, I look up at his face.

"Is it trust?" I murmur. "You don't trust me?"

He shakes his head.

"You want to tell me." I don't know that, of course, but I have a feeling.

He rubs his hair, looking very tired. "I want to get it out of my head," he says. His voice is soft and hoarse.

"So tell me, then." I reach for his hand. "I swear to God I'll never tell. Not Katie. Not anyone." I lace my fingers through his. "You can trust me. Send the NDA. After you figure out what's going on with Bob and everyone—"

He grits his teeth. "I know what happened to Bob. He had an 'overdose.' So someone hurt him. Because of me."

"Because they're evil losers. That's not your fault."

"But it is, Red. It *is* my fault. I'm the catalyst—just like with Cookie."

I press my lips together and arch my brows.

"I can't tell you," he whispers. "I don't want to watch your face."

I sit back on the bed. "Come here, then. Put your head in my lap."

He sighs: a deep, dry sound. "They're still out there. Two of them are bleeding. Three of them," he corrects. "They're all tied up—they seem contained—but I don't know. Someone powerful could have dispatched them."

He looks haunted when he says it—and something gels inside my head. "Her father! At one point, the jury was considering her *father*. But they found no motive."

He looks into my eyes, and his are dark and deep. "That isn't true. There was a motive. He molested her, and when she grew up, he harassed her all the time. Cookie was a dominatrix, Red. She couldn't handle being fucked without being in charge."

I frown at him, confused. "But..."

"Yeah, I know. It didn't work. I can't sub. Not until today. It brings back...unpleasant memories."

My eyes widen, as I speculate on what that means.



“No,” he corrects me. “Not like Cookie. I was just...punished.”

“With sex?”

He shakes his head. “No sex. My father was a dom. Is a dom. It made for a convenient punishment—all those whips and canes. He still thinks it was me... with Cookie. Motherfucker still feels guilty, I think, for fucking me up enough to kill the girl next door.”

“Oh, Race.”

He walks toward the kitchen, and when he’s eight or ten feet away from me, he turns slowly around and stares at me. Stares through me.

“I went to her father, told him to leave her alone. He knew she was living the lifestyle, fucking other men. He couldn’t stand it. Fucking jealous bastard. So he would call her. Fuck around with her. It was driving her mad. So I went to D.C.—to where he worked... and I threatened him. The Tuesday before...”

“That night she called, I wasn’t close enough to Greenwich. By the time I got there...” He presses his hands against his head, as if he can’t bear to have the memory there.

“He was tied into a sort of web, kind of like you were. She was in a simple noose. And...on the back of her tights...” He bites his lips. “There was so much blood, Red. So much blood. Christ, he really hurt her. When I found her, Red, her eyes were open.” His voice breaks a little, and I walk slowly to him. Wrap my arms around him.

“Oh my God, Race. I’m so sorry.”

“I wanted to kill that bastard. I tried to tell the prosecutors it was him. But I was done already. I showed up at the scene. Cookie had called me. I showed up at the scene and I had been at dom clubs, had a bunch of subs. It was always on me. No one would believe me.”

“But they did. You got off.”

He laughs. “Did I?”

I don’t know what to say, so I just hold him. He doesn’t move or even seem to breathe for a long time. Then his arms come around my back and he tucks my head against his shoulder. It’s such a gentle motion, and when he strokes my cheek, I want to cry.

“I won’t put you in danger, Red. I won’t.”

“What will you do about yourself?” I whisper.

“Keep them here.” He looks down into my eyes. “I’ll get the truth out of Linn, and then I’ll hold them here to verify. If he is working for Smythson, I’ll make someone come for them. Nice thing about an island,” he murmurs. “It’s defensible.”

“And you really think I’d be safer in Boston than here?” I ask.

“Go to the newspaper. Sleep there if you have to. Stay with a friend or at a hotel. I don’t care what you have to do. I’ll have someone tell you when it’s okay. When you’re safe again. I swear to God, Red, I’ll make sure you’re safe.”

He sounds so vehement. Like he really cares about me. Did he love Cookie? I have to think he must have. Apparently, I ask the question aloud. I know I do, because he flinches.

He takes a deep breath. Looks down at me. “I developed feelings for her. She didn’t want them. It was supposed to be an open marriage. That’s how she got me to say yes. I was a bachelor, she needed to marry to inherit her family’s fortune. Her father favored a much older man, one who later got caught man-handling a housekeeper. But Cookie chose me. It was an unfortunate thing that I fell in love with her.”

My chest aches. Oh, poor Race. “I’m sure she must have cared for you.”

He shakes his head. “She was too scared to get close to anyone. Probably for the

best.”

I frown. “Why?”

“I’m not meant for those sorts of relationships.”

“Why aren’t you?”

He releases me from his grasp, as if to prove a physical point. We’re standing in front of each other, but we’re bound by nothing. “Just not made that way,” he says flatly.

“I don’t think that’s true.”

“You don’t know me. Where I came from.”

“Where did you come from?”

“From a family of assholes. Mean drunks. Thieves and swindlers. I’ve got the same blood. I used to be an alcoholic.”

“Really?”

His mouth twists, and he nods. I’m only standing two feet away from him, but he feels so totally unreachable. I want to put my arms around him, but I feel frozen.

“Thank you for telling me this,” I whisper. “For letting me know you a little.”

He looks at me, solemn and unmoving, and he seems so alone, so sad, so tired, I can’t help myself. I close the distance between us and wrap my arms around him one more time. “Oh, Race.” I close my hand over the nape of his neck and pull his head down to my shoulder.

As soon as his face touches my skin, he lifts me up and carries me to the bed. I wrap my legs around his waist, and he lays me on my back. He extricates himself from my legs’ grasp, spreads my knees wide, and plunges a finger into my pussy.

“I want to be inside you,” he breathes. He drags his thumb over my clit. “I know I don’t deserve it, but I want to be inside you, Red. Just one more time.”

My eyes are already rolling back into my head as he climbs up on the bed and tosses me back a little, so there’s room for both of us. I feel him move between my legs. I feel the hardness of his cock against the smooth skin of my thighs, and try to squeeze them shut to capture him. I can’t seem to move, though. His fingers... Dipping into my pussy like I’m a vat of paint. Stroking like that.

Oh...

I moan as they curl inside me.

I feel my pussy lips parted and—“oh fuck”—he’s in my asshole. Just a finger but he slides it all the way and “God,” I’m being fucked in front and back and—

Oh, oh. “Ahhh.”

He pushes his tongue between my lips and drags it down, shining like white light over my clit; bringing every cell to life; plunging deeper, where his fingers pump. He hovers there, tickling and panting; then he laps my juices like they’re medicine.

My pulse races.

My skin tingles.

I curl my toes and rock myself into his face.

He pushes another finger in my cunt and there’re three now. I can only moan and pant. It almost hurts but his tongue is so warm and perfect, stroking up and down until I can’t tell where I want him, what I want. My clit is throbbing and it hurts the way he’s stretching me.

“I need your cock,” I gasp.

The finger in my asshole curls a little.

I rock against it. "Race!"

Three fingers inside my pussy push in deeper. "All the way in..."

My ass... I clench and quiver around the finger there. He pushes in a little more and the sensation is like a lightning bolt.

The tongue on my clit is such a fucking pro. Knows just what to do. Soft and wet, just a flicker at my clit, then dips back down to where I'm sopping wet.

"What a little fuck doll. Tell me who's your master, fuck doll?"

His words vibrate me; then he dives back in. My pussy is so wet his tongue glides over me, flickering, then pressing down. My cunt is stretched so wide I think I'm dying, and the fingers inside stroke, stroke, stroke. Every time I try to breathe my asshole quivers.

I don't know what's what.

I pant like an Olympian.

His tongue strokes up and down.

I fumble for his cock but I can't even lift my hand up.

"What a greedy little pussy cat." He stops what he's doing with his tongue and grins at me while his fingers inside me work dark, delicious magic.

I blink up at him, all my senses firing.

Sobs are building in my chest.

I feel lost.

He licks me, long and slow, from clit to gaping cunt, and then his eyes. He's looking at me and I'm crying.

"You were made to be my fuck doll. Say it."

"I was..."

Fingers inside me spread out. The one inside my ass is twirling.

"I was...made...to..."

I need his cock. Too many fingers, all of them so wet and soft and tickles, teasing...

"Augh!" He's so deep inside my asshole now.

Where the base of his fingers slam into my cunt, he drags his tongue.

I see stars.

"Tell me what you were made to do, fuck doll."

I try to open my eyes, but I'm pushing my ass off the bed. Every time I move the finger there shifts.

I throw my legs open wide. I'm crying. Tugging at his hair.

"Lick me again! I need to come!"

He rocks his fingers deeper into me. Oh God he's so deep. "Race..."

"Say it, Red. Tell me what you were made for and I'll fill you with my cock."

"I was..."

"You were made to fuck me, Red." He laps mercilessly at my clit.

"I was made to fuck you!"

A heartbeat, and I'm empty. Cold. Confused.

Strong hands around my waist. I'm turned over. I feel his fingers on me briefly, then I'm pushed forward on hands and knees.

He slams into me like a torpedo. I sprawl forward, losing my grip on the mattress. I almost fall on my face, but he's got me by the hips. His cock is pumping in and out so fast I see stars.

With each thrust, he comes at me at a slightly different angle, so he plows into a different spot inside. The vibrations ripple through my clit. I feel drunk with lust, like I can barely hold my head up.

“You’re such a good fuck, baby. So nice and wet and tight.”

I’m close to coming. So close I want to scream. I spread my legs wider and slump down on the sheets, letting my clit slide over them. Each thrust makes me lose a little more of my mind. I exist only for this. I’m noting but a pussy with a cock shoved deep inside me.

“Come now,” he says.

And I do.

# CHAPTER ELEVEN

## WOLFE

We walk to the water in silence, sometime near dusk. After I took her one last time, I locked her in the cabin with a gun and checked on my company. I returned to the part of the island where I left Linn and his crew and found them gone. The man in the tree house is gone as well.

I don't know what the fuck it means, but for now, I'm glad they're nowhere near Red as I walk her to the boat.

When we reach the sand, I shift her bags on my back and step closer to her, so our hips bump. I take her hand in mine and hold it gently, memorizing the softness of her skin, the rhythm of her gait. The way her hair lifts off her shoulders, waving in the salty wind.

I set her bags down, hand her my gun, take off my shirt and jeans, and swim out to the boat. I pull my sore body up and over the side, and before I fire the motors, I look out at her. She's my siren. She looks perfect with the island at her back.

I idle the boat over the cresting waves, and when I glide it onto the sand, she raises her hand to cover her eyes. I hop down and grab my clothes, her bags. I dress quickly in the boat and then step down to shore for her. I find her eyes wet and don't know what to do. I wipe a tear off her cheek with my thumb. "What's wrong, doll?"

"I don't want to go." She sniffs. "You need me here."

"I don't need you, Red. I want you. I want you bad, but I can get by without you. And I will."

"What if they come back?"

"That's not your problem, baby."

Before she can argue, I scoop her up and carry her into the boat. I sit her on a wooden bench behind the steering console and try to pretend I'm not remembering the first time I saw her, at the harbor dock.

I wonder what she's thinking. She looks so damn small as she wraps her arms around herself. I get the boat running and point toward land. The wind is brisk—colder than normal, gusting from a flat gray sky. I stand behind the steering wheel, praying she'll come up behind me and hoping she doesn't. I want to feel her arms around me one more time, but I know for her, the faster she cuts ties with me, the better.

And then I feel her arm slide around my waist. Heat spreads through me like a drug, and I can't help but put my arm around her shoulders and pull her up against my side.

The boat is bouncing under us, giving me a great excuse to hold her tightly. I look out ahead of us, at the shoreline, just a bump on the horizon now, but growing quickly.

I take our speed down a few notches, and the wind quiets a little. Red leans her head against me. Her arm around my back is tight, like she doesn't want to lose her grip on me. Her hand strokes softly over my hip. It's...soothing. As if we are the only two people in the world, and I'm not scanning the horizon line for other boats.

Her fingers are so tender. As if she really fucking cares.

For a moment, it's too much. My lungs freeze up, and I can barely pull air in and push it out. Black spots dot the water and the sky. Her grip tightens, and she looks up at me.

"Are you okay?"

I nod. I'm clenching my jaw, I realize belatedly, so that must be what gave me away. I open my mouth, hoping for something to lighten the mood. Something to mask the weird way I'm probably behaving.

I look down at her, and she's looking at me, and I instead ask a question whose answer matters to me very much. "Why do you like my paintings so much?"

I've never actually asked anyone that. I've read critics' and professors' guesses about why my work is so popular, but that's not the same as asking a real art critic. It's definitely not the same as asking Red.

She bites her lip to hide a smile.

"What's funny?"

"Nothing. I just can't believe you asked me that. It's still surreal."

"I imagine lots of things about the last day are," I say dryly. I know I sound nonchalant, but I feel the same way. I can't believe I'm about to let her go. I squeeze her gently. "Tell me, baby."

"Don't you know this already? Your work is analyzed a lot."

"I've read some of that. Not much. I don't have the internet at my place." I have a little tower I can set up when I want, but that's not often, and it's not something she needs to know. I pinch her side, hoping to tickle. "Go on, Red. Humor me."

"Okay. This might sound kind of obvious, but I like the animals. People have always reminded me of animals. Like, ask me anyone and I can tell what animal they are." She grins a silly little grin. "I feel like your paintings are of people. I can see personality, emotion, but they're animals. Something about that just really...draws me in."

I swallow. That's exactly what they are. The animals are people. Often specific people. I don't want to show her my reaction, but I'm pleased she knows. Every eagle is the prosecutor from the trial, and every squirrel is the judge. My rabbits have long been Cookie. Rabbits are the only animal I've painted dead.

I tuck her hair behind her ear, because I don't want to talk about that. "What kind of animal am I?"

"I have to think on that."

"No you don't. You're scared to say."

She smirks. "Ask me someone else."

"Hilary Clinton."

"Panda bear. One of the really intelligent ones."

"Barak Obama."

"Ferret. Of the top hat wearing variety," she says.

I swallow back a snicker. "J.K. Rowling."

"A well-groomed horse or pony with a nice mane."

That one gets a small hoot. Can't help it. "And me?"

"You're a stallion."

I smirk, and she smiles a sad, tight little smile. "You're hard to control, and you want what you want. You don't need a herd. You like to run."

"I think you need to start palm reading."

"Are you making fun of me?"

"No." I squeeze her shoulder. "I wanted your opinion. That's why I asked."

Water spreads out under us, and pretty soon, the shore is close enough that I can see

the cars in the harbor marina's parking lot. I try my best to drive the boat like usual. To keep my mind from getting ahead, from thinking about the ride back to the island.

I idle up to the marina and find a spot. My body's gone numb. I can barely feel her arm around me, even though it's there, and squeezing tightly. I take a few quick breaths, hoping she doesn't notice how unsteady they are, and tie us off, and put her bags on the dock. As I look at her, standing in my boat, I have the irrational hope that the car I rented for her didn't make it.

But when I turn around, I see the black Mercedes. Jesus, I feel sick.

I step out of the boat, moving like a robot. Like the death row inmate I'll never be—thank everything.

I hold out my hand, and Red lets me pull her up. As soon as her feet touch the dock, she throws her arms around me and buries her face in my chest. I hug her back and put my mouth down near her ear.

"I'm sorry for what happened. Sorry you got hurt," I murmur.

She clings to me, almost rigid. I drop a kiss on her hair.

"Please, Red. Please take care of yourself. Do the things I told you and don't make me worry."

She looks up at me, showing me her damp eyes. "I don't want to worry about you either!"

I pull her toward a little shack that boasts a small, plastic shower emblem. I have to have her one more time. I'll jerk her pants down and take her inside. Except we pass a bench, and suddenly I don't want to do anything but put my arms around her and leave them there forever.

I tug her down beside me. Kiss her mouth.

This is the last time.

# CHAPTER TWELVE

## *RED*

I'm standing by the black Mercedes Race rented, but I can't get in. My bags are in the trunk. The driver is watching in his rear-view. With every passing second, another fraction of a penny for his gas.

But I can't move. Race's hand is locked in mine, but the door is open. His eyes, his face, his big body—with everything, he's urging me inside the car.

I look up at him, and I can't even talk, because I'm lost again. I don't know how it's possible that this happened. That I feel so attached to someone I've known such a short amount of time. I don't know how it's possible that I can't stay.

Tears fill my eyes, and I blink them away. Race runs his hand over my hair.

"You're a good girl, baby. So good. You deserve nothing but the best." He kisses my cheek, so chaste and soft it makes me shiver.

My throat's so tight, it's hard to say, "I liked being your fuck doll."

"I would keep you if I could. Fill you with my cock all day and night. Punish that sweet ass. Red, I'm leaving here. Don't wait for me to find you. I won't. Don't come back for a while. Let things settle. Try to find a way to settle, too." He rubs his thumb down my cheek, looks into my eyes. "What do you love, Red?"

I swallow. I can think of only one thing. "Writing."

"So write. Write anything you want, baby."

I swallow past the huge lump in my throat and shake my head. "I don't want to write. I just want you."

He steps back a little, still holding my hand. "I don't deserve you, baby doll."

"Yes you do. Of course you do. You always do."

For the first time since we left the island, his smile falters. His lips press together and tuck down for just a fraction of a second—a sad look made much sadder by how quickly he turns it back into a smile.

"I'll miss you, Red. Please be safe. Be careful. Your account is full now. Hire some security if you feel you need it. Use the number I gave you for the conference call, and check in with me in two days. Bob will contact you after that. He's not far from you. He'll take care of you."

But I don't want Bob.

I don't want Bob.

I don't want anyone but Race.



# CHAPTER THIRTEEN

*RED*

*Six days later*

They say time dulls all aches, but I don't believe it.

I've been back for almost a week now, and if possible, I feel worse than I did the day I left the harbor. At least then, I could still smell him on me. For the first two days after returning to my old apartment, I could smell the ocean on my bag and clothes.

I called the conference call at the time Race told me to. I sat on the floor of my kitchen, eating Goldfish, holding my breath, because I just knew he would say something to me. Instead, I only heard the beep of him signing on. I said, "hello," and sealed my fate. He didn't need to speak, because he'd heard my voice. He knew I was okay.

I cried that night. I curled under my covers and asked myself what the hell's the matter with me. I think back to the things I did with Race—the physical things—and wonder why I never even came close to most of that with Carl. It's not because he liked guys, too. I know deep down: It was because of me. Because I never trusted him. I never opened to him fully.

And yet, I did with Race?

Why is that?

I don't shower until the third day. When I do, the scent of Gertrude's shampoo leaves my hair. When I go to sleep, my red mane spills around me, and that's when I feel the worst. I only slept by Race one night, but a few times, he got close enough so I could feel him on my hair. Here I sleep comfortably, in the queen sized bed I bought with his money.

Money. I never cared so much about it before, but now I love to check my bank account. Every penny displayed on my new iPhone bears his fingerprints.

There are times, like today, when I walked to check the mailbox where I first mailed Gertrude the letter—or yesterday, when I jogged home from my new kick boxing class—that I fanaticize about calling the bank, and somehow bribing them to tell me where he is. My bloated bank account connects us. It's the only thing I have right now. I'm aware of the irony—how, before I left Boston, money was the only thing I didn't have. The only thing holding me back. Now I've got it, yet it feels like I have nothing.

I spend a lot of time wondering if he's okay. Other than our one-time-only conference call date, Race left me no way to check on him—except for Bob, who hasn't called me yet. I wonder if he recovered. I hope he did.

I think a lot about Cookie's father, Robert Smythson. I look him up on Wikipedia and decide I hate him. On the fifth day, I spend almost all afternoon stalking Cookie's records. Newspaper articles that mentioned her before her death. Pictures of a vibrant, dark-haired woman with a big smile. I look up Bryson Paige, memorizing yet another player in their game, and then read all the stories from the trial.

When I'm feeling really masochistic, I go to Google Images and look for pictures of Race. Of course, the name I type in is James Wolfe. I never even found out why he told me to call him Race, but I think it suits him.

I don't like seeing the pictures of James. He looks so somber. His skin is pale, and his hair is collar-length. He's younger, but I'm not sure I can say he looks more innocent. He really just looks ill. Trod upon. Like he needs the refuge of a private island.

Whatever else I feel, I'm glad he found it.

On the sixth day, I finally get together with my old crew. I've talked to Katie a few times on the phone, but I haven't seen her since I got back. I haven't wanted to. It's hard to pinpoint why. Maybe I hold the picture thing against her. God knows it's not logical, but then I guess feelings sometimes aren't.

We got to trivia night, the same old crew, and I do worse than ever. I just can't think. I'm too distracted. I drink two beers and wander home to my lonely apartment, where I take a bath. I close my eyes and pretend that it's the ocean.

It's been six days. It feels like sixty.

And then the seventh sun rises, and I'm awoken by the vibrating of my cell phone on my new nightstand.

I grab it and pull it into my den of blankets. It's a New York number, so I'm hopeful. "Hello?"

"Red?"

For a second, a heartbreaking second, I think it's Race. Then the man speaks again, and I hear New York City there. His accent lacks a certain refinement Race's had—has.

I catch my breath. "You must be Bob."

"That's me."

I squeeze the phone, unsure, for a long moment, what to say. "I hope you're okay now."

"Doing better, yes. Thank you for asking. How are you, Red? You okay?"

I nod, then shake my head. "I could be worse," I tell him honestly.

"I'm in your neck of the woods for a few days. Would you like to meet tomorrow afternoon?"

\*

Bob is short—nothing like Race—with a mop of orange hair and a damp squeeze of a handshake. He wears a pale blue button-up without a tie, and black slacks that widen at the top for his apple-shaped midsection.

When I meet him at a bistro a few blocks from my place, I know him immediately, because he gives me a discreet, curious-seeming once-over, followed by a sincere smile.

"Right this way," he says, and leads me to a booth already stocked with bread.

I settle in across from him and check him out discreetly, too. He looks healthy, so that's good.

"Nice to meet you." I give him what I hope is a polite smile. "Race was so worried about you. I can tell he really cares for you."

He smiles tightly. "We go way back. Cousins—his father, my mother."

"Oh, okay." I cringe inwardly. I sound like a moron.

He waves at the bread. "Eat." He looks into his lap—no, down at a briefcase I failed to notice until this moment. His eyes flick up to mine. "I've got a few things here for you."

I'm reaching for a piece of bread when he says that. Instantly, my stomach clenches. I rub my lips together and get the bread anyway. I spend some time dipping it in olive oil, my fingers moving more slowly than usual. I feel frozen inside. Waiting to see what he has for me. And then I have a horrible thought, and I can't breathe without asking: "Is that the

NDA?”

He smiles, a little distracted as he thumbs through folders. “No. Race didn’t want a NDA with you.”

He plucks out a folder, cracks it open, and begins to look over something. I wait a few beats, and when he doesn’t lift his head, my curiosity overwhelms me.

“Where is Race now? Is he okay?”

Bob frowns. “He hasn’t been in touch with you?”

“No. Should he have?”

He shrugs. “My cousin, he’s got his own ideas about the best way.”

I have no idea what that means, so I nod, hoping I don’t look too pensive. Too impatient. I want to jump over the table and demand Bob tell me everything there ever was to know about Race.

Instead, I focus on measuring my breaths and eat my fucking bread.

Finally, he slides the folder to me. “Here ya go.”

I open it and skim the first sheet of paper inside. “It’s a consent form?” I frown. “For a painting?”

Bob nods. “Consent to use you as a model. This will give you fifteen percent of the proceeds, just the way he wanted.”

“Wanted?” I breathe.

“Wants,” he corrects with an awkward laugh.

I feel my cheeks go sunburn-hot. “What kind of picture is it?” I squeak. I fear I know the answer.

He laughs again. “I thought maybe you could explain to me. In the description here,” he points, “it says the painting is of a stallion and a fox.”

# CHAPTER FOURTEEN

*WOLFE*

It's the first time since Red left that I've seen another human face. The courier is a tall, thin, bearded man who looks about sixty. He arrives on a large sail boat, which he docks with surprising efficiency beside my small dock. He climbs out, walks straight to me, and introduces himself as Frank.

"I live nearby," he tells me conversationally. "One of the smaller islands that way—" He points west. "You're Race, I hear," he tells me, holding out his hand. "I offer a discreet courier service. Don't know what's in those boxes, don't care. In the future, you want to just leave 'em, you go right ahead. Anything goes as long as the cargo doesn't scream."

He winks, and I smile tightly. "Good to meet you."

Fifteen minutes, and he's gone. I walk slowly back to Trudie's.

I've been here every day since Red left—when I'm not in the tree stand hunched over a canvas—and I've packed a few rooms: laundry, living room, and now most of the kitchen. There are only a couple of rules, and I never break them. I use the john at my place, and I never go near Trudie's office.

I'm boxing up a collection of Garfield-themed coffee mugs when I hear a low whine, followed by another one. Sounds like speedboats, though who enjoys driving a speedboat on the ocean—I don't know. I look out a few windows, but I can't see anything. The damn thing is loud. As if it's approaching the island.

I walk into Gertrude's office, which faces the point. I know I shouldn't do it, and maybe that's why I do. Sometimes pain is good. Keeps numbness at bay.

I step into the office and walk over to the window, where sure enough, I see a lone speedboat bumping through the waves.

Right away, I think of Smythson. I've heard nothing from anyone since the day Linn and his crew left. I've had two tails on Linn, and confirmed he's done nothing out of the ordinary. He and his wife are seeing a marriage counselor.

Bob's phone was hacked, which is presumably how we were found out. There's no evidence the Smythsons found out from the picture Red sent Katie. Bob says Linn was behind him at the bank one day, when Linn was discussing me with a mutual friend and former Bonesman. Maybe that's how Linn knew to hack his phone. Maybe it was Smythson, and he dispatched Linn. Maybe Linn just lost it. I don't know.

I find myself not caring much.

I sit down at the desk, where I first assembled a stack of photos and mementos for Red. I lean back a little, listening to the ancient rolling chair creak. Then I do what I've been wanting to do. I spin around slowly and look at the nearest picture of her.

It's a five-by-seven in a pale frame that looks almost like shell. I find it beside a volume of Hunter S. Thompson poems and scoop it up, bringing it close to my face. She's younger here. So much younger, in her pale green dress and braces. I run my thumb over the glass, wishing I knew more about this girl. What she wanted. What she needed.

I have so many questions. How did she handle her mom's death? What was her life like in college?

I'll admit, I've gotten overly involved with the idea of her. And it's gotten worse, not

better, since she left.

I can't bring myself to wash my sheets. At night, I dream of her. Good dreams, nightmares... But Red is there.

I sit in the chair for a long time, holding her picture. Looking around the office in something very like dismay.

It doesn't matter if Linn never returns. If Smythson never comes to collect his secret. I don't ever know I'm free of them, so my life will stay the same. Except I'm moving. Bought a place two days ago, somewhere far from here. The water is bluer, the sand whiter, and it's far away from fucking Smythson. Far from all my memories.

I lean back and listen to the waves break on the rocks. Red's rocks. I'm so tired. I'm not sure I've ever felt so tired.

Maybe I nod off. Maybe I perish in my sleep and go to heaven. All I know is, the next time I open my eyes, Red is there in front of me.

\*

## **RED**

I walked home from meeting Bob yesterday afternoon, and I couldn't shake this eerie feeling. That my life would end somehow, and I'd have nothing to show for it. I'm writing now, working on a novel, but I'm only on page ten. I have no family. No commitments. I sat up all night, trying to think of some way to chase the foreboding feeling away. It was so strong, I checked under my bed, in all my closets, but all I found was empty space. Maybe that's the problem.

So I got up this morning and I went shopping. I bought myself a few new dresses, sandals, sunscreen, even a floppy hat. And then I called a charter boat service in Charleston. Every boat but one was rented. I booked the speedboat for six o'clock, but I was there at five oh-five. Same bag. New panties. One pair *crotchless*. Oh, and this time, a bathing suit.

When I first get off the boat, I'm worried maybe he's not here. Because of this, I booked the boat to pick me up tomorrow at this same time. If Race is here, we'll pay the driver for her time and send her away.

I hope he's here. I think he's here. I used an old journalist trick on Bob, asking him if Race was still at Rabbit Island. A lot of people don't like to lie, but they're perfectly willing to be evasive.

So when Bob said he felt he couldn't tell me, I just figured. If Race was gone, he would have just said "no."

I hike through the forest and try the door to Race's house with shaking fingers. It's unlocked. As soon as I step inside, I can smell his soap—his scent. I walk over to the bed and smell the pillow, and my eyes tear. The bathroom is clean, but empty. He's not downstairs—in fact, the entryway to the basement is already covered with another set of shelves I think came from the kitchen.

I find his gun on the kitchen counter and put it in my pocket, then keep moving. He's not in either of his tree houses, although I have to confess, I don't check the one near Gertrude's house. I just walk under it and listen.

I'm holding my breath by the time I make it to her back door. When I try it and the knob turns, I allow myself a moment of exuberance.

I have a moment of panic when I worry the house has been overtaken by vengeance-seeking baddies, but as I walk through, I find it quiet, and more packed up than last time. Someone has been here working.

"Race?" I say into the silence.

I'm scared to really yell for him, because if he doesn't answer, I don't know what I'll do. I check each room I pass, stunned anew by how quiet it is here on the island. Somewhere not far off, I can hear another speedboat; maybe it's circling the island, going to pick up someone else.

I reach Gertrude's office last, and there he is—sitting in her rickety old desk chair, sleeping with my picture in his hand, as if he's waiting just for me.

The sight of Race is glorious. He's wearing worn-out khakis with a simple black t-shirt and an ancient-looking pair of leather flip flops. My first thought—preposterous or hopeful—is I need to get this man some new clothes.

I take a step closer. His hair is just a little longer. His eyelashes, resting against his high cheekbones, are darker than my memory noted. And his mouth. Oh my new panties, that mouth.

I can't stand to wake him, so I sink down onto the rug. I watch him breathe. I thank my lucky stars that he's still here.

It takes him what feels like hours to stir, and in that time, I watch him like a stalker. The first sign he's waking is the way his brows tug together and his mouth flattens. Without more preamble, his eyes flip open. Settle on me. I watch his face contort—eyes bulging out, mouth falling open like he's looking at a ghost.

He looks around, as if to confirm he's where he thought he was. He sets his gaze back on me and stands up slowly. He looks down on me. "Red," he breathes. "What are you doing here?"

I know he's going to be pissed, but still—I can't contain a silly grin. "I came to visit." "Why?"

I shrug one shoulder. "I got these amazing crotchless panties, and the boys in Boston... Well. They're boys." I push myself to my feet and reach out to touch his package, which, to my delight, is already a hard bulge in his shorts.

I cup my palm over him. Race groans.

"I missed this." I look into his eyes. "I missed you."

I'm rubbing his erection, and I can tell he's started breathing just a little faster. His eyes, on mine, are molten—but he's trying to be rational. Trying not to grab my breasts or start talking dirty. "You're not supposed to be here. It's not safe."

"It's not?" I look around. "Seems pretty safe to me."

His mouth softens, and he reaches out to touch my cheek. "Red, you're crazy."

I close a hand over his hand. "Crazy because I want to live my life? Crazy because I'm not going back to something that's boring and unfulfilling?"

"Just crazy," he murmurs.

Then he jerks me into his arms.

I wrap my arms around his waist and have half a second to enjoy the feeling of being back in his arms. Then I'm being picked up, hauled off through the house. He climbs some

stairs, strides down a hall, pushes thorough a door, and then we're in a bedroom. He strips my shirt off, tosses me onto the bed. I hear the gun I had in my pocket thud against the floor—a pretty major oops, I guess—but I don't care. Race is here. I won't need it.

I look over and see a cat in the corner, and of course I sneeze.

“Shit,” he says. “You want to—”

“No way. I'm fine.”

“That you are.” He grins—the first one he's allowed himself since waking up.

I lie still as he peels my capris off and gasps at the site of my pale pink, crotchless panties.

“You know what you're asking for,” he rumbles.

“What?” I murmur as he spreads my legs and strokes my cunt.

“You're asking for a thorough fucking, Red. My cock, your pussy. Now”

# CHAPTER FIFTEEN

*WOLFE*

He pushes two fingers into me, and it feels as good as ever. “Shut your eyes, Red. Imagine me, pushed deep inside you. I’m going to fill you up till you can’t take another centimeter. And then...”

He wriggles the fingers inside my pussy, causing me to sigh. I sense more than see him taking his pants off with his free hand.

I open my eyes to the sight of his giant erection. “And then what?” He slides his fingers a little deeper into me, making my hips jerk.

“And then I’ll fuck your ass, my little fuck doll.”

“Race,” I murmur, writhing under his hand. “I want to suck your dick.”

“I want to suck your clit.” He stretches out beside me on the bed and pulls me up against him. His mouth finds mine, and we share a long, delicious kiss that snowballs in intensity, until I’m jerking him off and he’s teasing my clit, and I’m all tied up in knots. His fingers still pump in and out of my cunt, circling around my clit, bathing me in my own juices. “Sit on my face. Now.”

He pulls his fingers out, palms his massive cock, and wiggles his tongue.

“I want to taste you, baby. Climb on up.”

Somehow, I’ve never done this. It takes me a moment’s thought to get the position worked out. I straddle his face, feeling a little self-conscious as I stretch my torso over his smooth, tanned, taut stomach. With my ass wiggling in the air, and my dripping pussy positioned right over his face, I lean down and drag my tongue down Race’s happy trail.

I’m rewarded with a moan.

He reaches up and wraps his arms around my midsection, pulling my body lower, so I can feel his breath on my pussy. My breasts sway against his chest. I shriek as he licks my dripping slit, then reaches up and teases my entrance with a finger.

“In,” I urge.

He ignores my request, and instead hooks that lone finger into me, positioning it so he’s teasing my G-spot. I moan his name. He traces a fingertip around my ass and I start panting hard.

I had all this buildup planned for his cock, but suddenly all I want is to suck it, old school. I lean down, take the base of it in my hands, and lick around the plump, soft head. I trace my hands up and down his velvet shaft, then palm his balls with one hand while the other strokes him. I suck my cheeks in, creating a warm, damp dick vacuum. He lifts his hips and thrusts into my throat.

His tongue writhes its way between my pussy lips, and damn, it feels even better than usual when I’m sucking on his dick. His tongue is so wet and soft. The pleasure blinds me. I take his cock deeper down my throat and he gets his fingers in my cunt and ass. Push in, glide out. I grind down on his hand because my pussy craves the penetration.

I roll his balls in my palm like big, warm marbles and I feel them draw up. I’m rewarded with the salty taste of precum on my tongue.

“Fuck, Red.” His breath is hot against my cunt. His tongue flicks up and down, his fingers writhe inside me. I suck on his cock like it’s my life’s mission, his low, hoarse



moans driving me on. His hips keep lifting off the bed.

I suck my cheeks in hard, and he shudders. My throat is filled with him. I swallow it quickly and he moans, “Oh God, Red!”

He moves quickly, almost frighteningly so, tossing me back down on the mattress, climbing over me, positioning his head at my entrance.

“I need to be inside you, Red. I need to fuck you.”

“Yes.”

He drives inside so hard I’m thrust into the headboard. “Race! Oh Race!” I grab his arms. He pumps his hips.

“Tell me that you like it, doll.”

“Oh yes.” I lift my legs and encircle his hips. “I love your cock!”

“I love that cunt.”

And that’s the last thing that he says before I hear a metallic click. I hear a click and I look up, and there’s a man standing in the doorway. He’s pointing a gun at us. I recognize the face immediately, but I’m so surprised, my voice won’t work. I’m not sure what happens. I guess I must stiffen, because Race looks down at me, and when he does, he sees my face.

He turns around, and— “What the fuck? *BOB?*”

He sounds as uncertain as I feel, but there’s no denying: That is Bob pointing a gun at us. Not us. Now that Race has climbed off of me, it’s obvious he’s got the gun pointed right at *me*.

Race looks from me to Bob. His face is a riot—shocked, confused, helpless, angry. He’s off the bed like lightning and Bob fires a shot.

I shriek, and the lamp beside me shatters.

“I’d sit down if I were you,” Bob snaps.

The gun, for a moment pointed at neither of us, trains back on me. “Oh god, oh god, oh god,” I’m chanting.

Race stands in front of the bed, putting himself between Bob and I. I can see his shoulders rising and falling fast. He’s as scared as I am, but his voice is smooth and steady.

“Bob—what’s going on, man?”

“Nothing new,” Bob says. He sounds the same way he did in the restaurant with me.

“What are you doing here?” Race’s voice lilts a little on the end, and I’m shocked to see he’s moving subtly toward Bob.

Bob chuckles. “Just thought I’d drop by. It’s a nice day out here. Nice island. It’s been years since I was here. I keep this place running, so why shouldn’t I see it? Why shouldn’t I see it?” he repeats, his voice a little tighter. “I should see it! I should move here. It’s my island, my paintings, my women.”

“Okay. Whoa now. Let’s just all take a second,” Race starts.

Bob fires again, this time at the ceiling-mounted lamp. It shatters over us, and Race jerks backward, sprawling out on the bed, knocking me—no, kicking me onto the floor. I land hard on my ribs, and Bob’s voice raises, shrill and high.

“I don’t need a second, Race! Don’t tell me what to do, I call the shots here! You’re the shadow man! The shadow government paints! You’re the shadow. I’m the light! Cookie saw it. Cookie knew.”

“What are you talking about?” I scramble up and peek over the bed. Race sounds

angry now. “What the fuck are you talking about Cookie?”

“She was fucking mine! Not yours!” He laughs. “Did you believe Linn, that raving moron? Linn was lying! Took you for a ride! Not his story.” Bob shakes his head. “That was my story. Cookie and me. Jack of all trades, couldn’t pass the bar! I couldn’t pass the bar but I know laws, I’m good at that, I helped her try, but she couldn’t, so she died.”

Race inches closer to him, and Bob points the gun right at him. Heat fills my body like lava. I can’t breathe. Can’t move. *Please don’t do it! Please, no, God! Not Race!*

“What are you talking about Bob? Put the gun down. Are you on something, man?”

“I’m on fire,” Bob snaps. “I’m on fire, and I need the sprinklers to come and wash my sins away!”

“Under the bed, Red,” Race barks. But I can’t do it. I can’t take my eyes off Race.

“You think you’re smart. The big artist.” Bob laughs—more a cackle really. “I might do too much blow but I’m the smartest. No one ever knew.”

“Knew what?” Race says.

“Her ass was tight.” Bob laughs. “She wouldn’t spread her legs for me so I had to wait until she went to sleep.”

Bile rises in my throat. I swallow it down. I can see Race’s body trembling.

“Are you saying you killed Cookie?”

“Ding, ding, ding! Oh yes. That bitch didn’t want me. She wanted you maybe, not you,” he shakes his head like he’s confused. “She wanted that dipwad Bryson Paige.” Bob laughs. “It was easy to do. I’m good at the *covert*. Follow her, follow him... Sometimes I would watch but that never got my dick hard. I’m a one-man—” His eyes roll back a little as he speaks. “I’m a one-girl sort of man. It’s all in the *commitment*. I’m committed, I’m a nice guy. Loaning money to people. Managing *his* money. Linn’s in debt, big time. That fucking lawyer.”

Bob waves the gun at Race and mimes pulling the trigger. Race ducks, and I swear my heart stops.

Race rises up from behind a wing-backed chair with his arms out. “Listen, Bob. I understand—you’re very smart. I couldn’t have survived the last—”

Bob points the gun at Race and pulls the trigger. I watch as the bullet sails through Race’s arm, explodes behind me. I lunge for him, wrapping my arms around his waist, screaming.

Bob fires again. Race throws me down. I slide along the hardwood floor, my mouth coming in contact with something hard.

“Oh fuck, the gun!” Hell yes! The gun I brought from Race’s house is right here on the floor.

I grab it and turn around to find the two of them locked in a struggle on the rug. Race is on top, but Bob is pointing a gun at his head.

Nothing—nothing in my entire life has ever scared me more than that. I guess it’s true what they say about itchy fingers. I feel a flush of heat bloom all over my body, but especially my palms. Suddenly I have no choice—I have to move. I point the gun at Bob, pinned down under Race, and I fire without a second thought.

# CHAPTER SIXTEEN

## *THE BOSTON JOURNAL*

*Nine days later*

*A Charleston, South Carolina hospital today released Robert Bennett into the custody of federal agents. Bennett is the first cousin of James Wolfe, falsely accused almost seven years ago of murdering his wife Cookie Smythson and her lover Byron Paige.*

*Bennett's transfer from a medical facility to an arm of the FBI follows a series of dramatic events on an island off the coast of Charleston—a family showdown in which Bennett appeared at Wolfe's home with a gun, threatening Wolfe and girlfriend Sarah Ryder before confessing to the murders of Smythson and Paige. Bennett has also been implicated in a New York State drug-smuggling ring. Recently, according to police reports, Bennett had been abusing cocaine and prescription drugs.*

*In 2008, Wolfe endured a grueling trial for double homicide and only narrowly avoided conviction. He was widely condemned in the court of public opinion, and has spent the last six years living in seclusion.*

*Three days ago, the Journal found out James Wolfe is the popular contemporary nature artist known as "W." His most recent painting, Fox and Stallion, sold yesterday at auction for \$8.4 million.*

# EPILOGUE

## RED

Have you ever fucked your boyfriend under a palm tree on the beach? I have. And guess what? I'm doing it again—sometime today, if history is any indicator.

The private island Race rented so we could escape the media frenzy is only about half the size of our island off the coast of Charleston, but what it lacks in size, it makes up for in beauty.

We're somewhere in the Virgin Islands, somewhere so rural I don't even know the name, but believe me, it's breathtaking.

It took us three and a half days to get here. There was a lot of chaos after what happened with Bob, and Race had to get his bicep patched up. I'll admit, I was pretty much a wreck that first day. After I shot Bob, I passed out like some swooning debutante. Race says he caught me just before my head hit the hardwood.

At that point, Bob was out—because I shot him in the liver. Have you ever seen the hashtag *sorrynotsorry*?

We had to talk to the cops a jillion and one times, but eventually they decided our stories matched up. Just today, we got a call saying they'd arrested Tom Boyer, one of Cookie's old bodyguards and my tree house tormenter. He was the last holdout of the group of five who Bob hired to try to murder Race. I don't know how much time they'll get, but it won't be a little.

As for Bob—Race's lawyers think he'll probably get life. He can try to use the drugs as an excuse (he was clearly high as a kite that day at the island) but what he did to Cookie and Bryson Paige was premeditated. Juries don't look kindly on that sort of thing.

So far, the only dark spot on this trip is Bob. I'm not going to lie. It's been really hard for Race. A few times I've found him sitting in one of the beach chairs, right at the edge of the ocean. He'll have his legs hanging into the sea and his face tipped back toward the sun—and I know he must be thinking. I'm learning Race isn't the type to laze around and just enjoy himself. He likes to stay busy.

That's where I come in.

He doesn't know this, but before we got on the plane, I downloaded the entire *Kama Sutra* onto my iPhone, and while he swims or paints or thinks, I've been reading.

Some of the positions I've found have made him come for hours.

Yeah. I'm that kind of girlfriend.

Race is throwing me some curveballs, too. Like how he sleeps all curled around me, how he doesn't mind rubbing my shoulders every time I ask, and the way he kisses my forehead right before we go to sleep.

And Race in the bedroom? Well, I'm still surprised by that.

I'm chopping mangoes when he strolls into the kitchen, a towel thrown over his shoulder, swim trunks on his sexy hips. He comes up behind me and starts kissing my neck, and I just know.

He takes me by the hands and leads me out onto the patio, past the hammock, to the grove of palm trees just beside the water's edge. He lays me down and peels my swim suit off.

The last thing I see before I close my eyes is his face between my legs.  
Isn't that the best view?

-THE END-

Part four concludes the story of Red and Wolfe. I hope you enjoyed it! Part one of my next erotic fairy tale, Beast, is coming August 18, and can be purchased as a pre-order here: <http://amzn.to/1qYrodD>

Check out these excerpts of Beast:

- \* <http://www.therockstarsofromance.com/6/post/2014/07/exclusive-excerpt-reveal-beast-by-ella-james.html>
- \* <http://anasattic.com/exclusive-beast-by-ella-james-chapter-1/>

To celebrate the relase of Red & Wolfe four, I'm giving away a signed Red & Wolfe 1-4 paperback and a paperback copy of the BEND Anthology. To enter, go here:

- \* <http://www.therockstarsofromance.com/3/post/2014/07/release-day-giveaway-fun-win-red-wolfe-signed-books-50-gc.html>

If you enjoy my books, you should consider signing up for my newsletter. The odds that I will ever utilize it are low, and if I do, it won't be very often at all. Here's the sign-up link:

- \* <http://ellajamesbooks.us8.list-manage.com/subscribe?u=a22900f40502ee2fc5671a7bc&id=e7b30fab36>

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- \* [http://www.amazon.com/Selling-Scarlett-ebook/dp/B00CCRTFSC/ref=sr\\_1\\_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1365967821&sr=8-1&keywords=selling+scarlett](http://www.amazon.com/Selling-Scarlett-ebook/dp/B00CCRTFSC/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1365967821&sr=8-1&keywords=selling+scarlett)

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