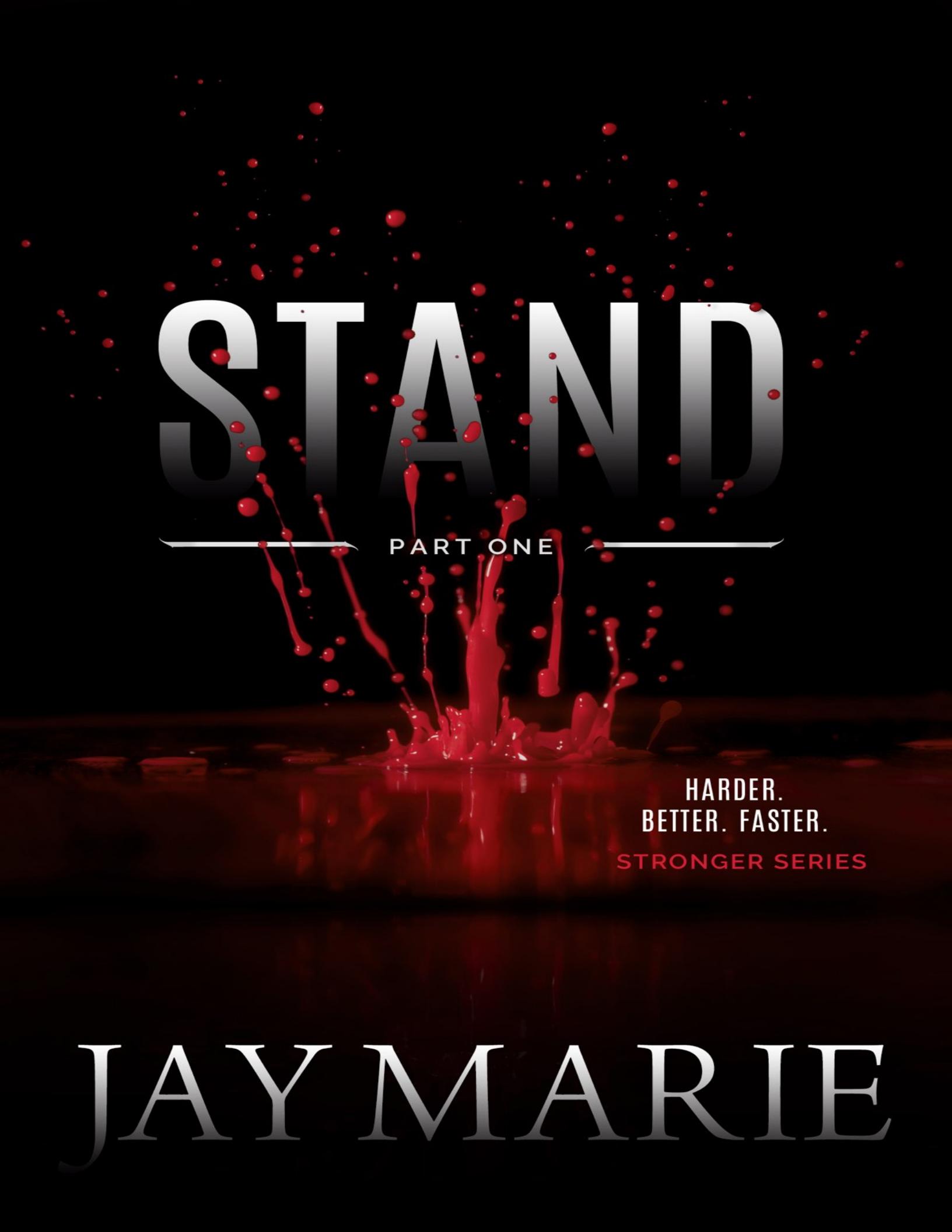


STAND



PART ONE

HARDER.
BETTER. FASTER.
STRONGER SERIES

JAY MARIE

STAND

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PART ONE OF TWO

BOOK 5 - THE STRONGER SERIES

JAY MARIE



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WARNING: This story is for mature adults only. It contains violence, mature and explicit content and non-consensual / dubious, graphic sexual activity that some readers may find upsetting.

Cover and Web Design by Amanda Simpson

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A NOTE FROM JAY

So, first things first, no, this is not the final ending of the series, and here's why. While I was going through the final revisions of Stand, I realized the book was just getting too big. It was on track to be over 265,000 words, which is gigantic, and I honestly wasn't sure it would even fit in paperback form. Amazon does have a page limit, so if it was going to get any closer to that, I decided to just split it in half. Part One is slightly smaller than Strike, so you're still getting a very large book and plenty of reading material while I finish finalizing Part Two.

Part Two is already written and has gone through my editors and beta readers, so the only thing I'm doing with it at this point is just a final read-through. That means it will not take me nearly as long to have it published. There's about 20 chapters and 2 epilogues in Part Two, so there's not much left to revise. Of course, that all depends on my ability to find the time to do it, which has been the biggest struggle. But that's what happens when you're a full-time lawyer and a new mother. Life happens and we all have to adapt to it, just like Jaden does.

However, you guys have been more than patient enough, so I thought I would release what I have and let you finally dig your hooks into something I have been dying for you to read. With that being said, I know there are going to be some haters out there that will be upset that I'm releasing

another book instead of the actual ending, accuse me of dragging my readers a long for money, lying about the number of books in the series, blah, blah, blah.

I don't have an agenda and I don't need the money. I make plenty enough as a lawyer. I literally do this for fun, which means I'm not going to rush my process to produce another assembly line book with the same plots, the same characters, and the same endings just so I can make another dollar. I'm good, thanks.

This is my art, and it means a lot to me, so no matter how long it takes, I'm not going to release it into the world until I'm fully satisfied with it. That's quality over quantity, and to me, it makes a huge difference for the reading experience as well as the writing experience.

So outside of all that, I hope you enjoy this next part of Jaden's story. It really was a blast to write 😊

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Big shout out to my amazing team! Thank you so much for all your hard work!

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DEDICATION

This is for you. For the ones who have suffered. For the ones who have despaired. For the ones who continue to fight every day to simply stay alive. And for the ones who are already lost. It is my greatest hope that you find your way back to us, for I am not done fighting for you...but only you can make yourself stronger.

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TRIGGER WARNINGS

Be warned, this next installment goes pretty dark, so please read with caution. Some triggers include detailed blood and gore, sexual violence, discussions of child abuse, descriptions of torture, forced drug overdose, one instance of low-detail animal abuse, and forced pregnancy. Please be protective of your mental health and check my [website](#) for a full list of all triggers. Thank you!

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LET THE GAMES BEGIN

“Tell me you’re mine.”

TPure ecstasy rushed through my veins, my heart pounding with adrenaline as my cock slid in and out of Jaden’s soaking-wet pussy, her cries of pain and pleasure spurring me on.

“I’m yours,” she moaned, her breath escaping in little pants of sweet desperation.

Her admission sent a dark wave of possession through me. My uncontrollable need to own every inch of her—mind, body, and soul—was an obsession that was never satisfied. It was never enough.

With my hands wrapped around her hips, her small but strong body beneath mine, I drove into her, forcing her to take every hard inch of me. Her breasts bounced beautifully as a thin sheen of sweat began to gather between them, glistening her skin to perfection.

“Oh God, do not fucking stop,” she gasped, arching her back and straining against the diamond-studded cuffs that kept her hands trapped above her head.

Lifting her legs to my shoulders, I reached down and slapped her ass hard enough to make her scream, the sound going straight to my cock.

“That fucking mouth of yours,” I warned.

Only moans replaced the objection hot on her lips.

Her wet, abused pussy clenched around me, gripping my cock in a vise of excruciating pleasure, making me fuck her even harder. Jaden was a goddamn goddess, sent to me from the depths of hell to torment my soul with a spirit I couldn't break, a heart I couldn't own, and a body I could not touch without the complete annihilation of my carefully constructed self-control. I was a slave to her power over me, a single glance capable of mass destruction, igniting a longing that ran so deep I would never be free from it.

And some days, I fucking hated her for it.

Pressing her knees together against my chest, I leaned over her, stretching that lithe body and striking out to pin her throat to the bed. Her amber eyes widened with alarm, her pupils so dilated that her beautiful hazel irises had nearly disappeared. And the more I squeezed, the harder her core pulsed with need around my cock.

Jaden struggled in my hold, the fear of my unyielding will and the uncertainty of its direction a constant shackle to every move she made. I could kill her in this very moment if I wanted to, wipe out her existence along with the plague she'd wielded over my life. And she knew this to her very core, the evidence of it all over her face as she waited for me to decide her fate. Her terror only made my dick harder.

And while it would be so easy for me to snuff the life right out of her, my will beckoned me to consider the exact opposite—creating life instead. To plant the seed that would command her body to nurture, to initiate the final act that would bind her to me in ways that could never be broken or paralleled by any other force.

My heart swelled at the vision of her growing belly, carrying my child to create the strongest legacy only she could give me. The legacy that she would give me. The legacy that I would now strive to construct, and expand my dominion over this world.

Relaxing my hold, I allowed Jaden the precious oxygen that filled her lungs, granting her another breath of life I could so easily take away. Gripping the back of her neck, I pulled her to me, my voice firm with the conviction I was eager to impose on her, my decision made and final.

“I’m going to put my fucking child in you.”

And then she screamed my name as she came, the sound a blinding beacon of eternal victory as I drove myself home.

“Hey! We’re about to land!”

The voice pulled me from my dream, the remnants of the last moments I’d shared with my wife before I’d left for Honduras slowly fading away. Sitting up from my seat, I rubbed the sleep from my eyes and stretched my arms out, expanding my stiff muscles. Visions of Jaden’s perfect body still held my attention captive, her moans echoing in the back of my head and distracting me from reality. I swore she’d be the first order of business the second I returned home, an urgent ambition to be continued as soon as possible.

The sound of the helicopter blades above me brought me back to the present, my focus now shifting from the steel rod in my pants to the mission ahead of us. Seven of my best men, including myself, were packed inside the helicopter, armed to the teeth and thirsty for blood.

When I glanced out the window, the lush green jungle outside waited to greet us, the promise of unfettered carnage an absolute pleasure to men like me. It’d been two weeks since Dominic’s funeral, and I’d spent the past six days watching Javier Spade’s compound.

My team and I had stuck mostly to the shadows, monitoring the comings and goings, the guards employed, the people who visit, the imports and exports of the compound, the security measures—every bit of intel we could extract. And now we finally had enough to execute and bring Javier’s world to a crashing halt.

After landing the helicopter, we made our way through the jungle to the top of the hill that oversaw Javier's compound.

Sweat dripped down the side of my temple, threatening to breach the lids of my eyes as I peered through the scope of my rifle. The humidity of the jungle in Honduras was fucking brutal this time of year, and all the goddamn gear I'd strapped myself down with was not helping in the slightest.

While I focused on my targets, my blood pressure decreased with massive disappointment at the same small number of guards patrolling the compound. I expected more would come over time—I had hoped for more, but Javier Spade was apparently more concerned with his money and financing his now struggling drug trades than the security of his own home and family.

"I only count ten on the grounds," Scott confirmed as he peered through the scope of his own rifle next to me.

"Twelve," I corrected. "There's two shooting up behind the shed."

He scoffed. "They hardly count."

"Dan, do you still have eyes on Spade?" I asked through my earpiece. He'd been quiet for too long.

"He's on to his third mistress," Dan answered gruffly. "Asshole has some stamina, I'll give him that."

"As long as they keep him busy," Scott added as he adjusted his scope.

"He could have picked a better hotel, though. Guess he likes fucking around cockroaches."

Dan didn't bother hiding the disgust in his tone. He was anxious to engage with Javier at the hotel he currently resided in, but my team and I needed to take the compound first. Then the real fun would begin.

The only person I hadn't been able to locate yet was his brother. And that was going to change tonight.

“Are you guys ready yet? We’re baking on this fucking roof,” Dan complained.

“Don’t worry, cupcake, you’ll get your chance in a minute,” Scott answered as he continued his focus on the compound. Waiting for the visual confirmation from the rest of the team was annoying the fuck out of me as well.

“Alright, we’re in position. Visual confirmation on the targets,” Conway said from the other end.

“Good. Let’s make this quick and clean. I have a wife to get home to,” I said, descending from my post. As much as I wanted to avenge the death of my youngest, dumb-fuck of a brother, my little spitfire of a wife would never be dethroned from my list of priorities.

Scott and I made our way through the thick brush and trees, stopping just outside the gates to observe through our scopes.

“Hit the signals,” I ordered as I focused on the guards while the area’s cell phone and internet signals were disrupted.

“Fire on the count of three … two … one.”

Bullets sprayed across the compound as each guard dropped simultaneously, the yard now littered with their bodies. Only the guards in the house were left protecting our three targets. It was so easy it was hardly enjoyable.

“Dan, your team is free to engage,” I told him through my earpiece.

“Finally,” he replied, his tone full of anticipation.

Scott tossed a grenade under the gate surrounding the property, those ten seconds of anticipation building in my blood before the gate burst open in a loud, fiery eruption of chaos. Our two armored trucks on standby burst through what was left of the gate, mowing down the black metal and creating a clear path for our entrance. The sound of a few more gunshots quickly silenced the men shouting from inside the house as we made our way across the lawn, joining the rest of the team inside.

Organized chaos screeched through my earpiece as Dan finally engaged with his target, the amusing whirlwind of cursing, gunshots, and screams giving me all the playback that I needed.

I continued to listen, smirking to myself as I waited patiently in the sunroom of the home. Scott and two more of our men held steady as the rest of the team hunted down the targets hiding in the upstairs bedrooms. I casually strolled around the room, observing family photos as more gunshots rang throughout the house, followed by terrified screams, shouting, and crying. I sighed as a woman and two teenage boys were dragged down the stairs and forced to their knees in the middle of the sunroom.

Javier's wife clutched their two sons to her body as she stared up at me with hateful tears in her eyes. I instantly recognized that kind of hate, the familiar heat of that emotion coming off her in vicious shock waves.

That strategy had never saved Jaden. And it certainly wouldn't save this bitch or her family either.

"Dan, do you have him?" I asked.

The continued scuffling and shouting on the other end of the audio feed was my only immediate confirmation until Dan's exacerbated voice came through.

"Fucker tried to jump out the damn window," he finally growled as he huffed into the speaker. "But we got him."

"You sound winded," I commented.

"Well, he is a massive piece of shit."

"Not for much longer." I pulled out my phone to video chat with Dan so Javier could witness the show I had planned for him.

When the video finally connected, Dan turned the camera in Javier's direction, his sweaty face swollen and beaten to shit as blood dripped down his nose and mouth. I made sure he could see the look of victory in my eyes as I stared him down for a few moments, relishing the fear that began to

manifest. A smirk formed on my mouth before I silently turned the camera back to his family, who were huddled together as they crouched on the floor. With a simple nod, the show began.

Drawing the machetes from their backs, my men wasted no time as they hacked away at Javier's family, their guttural screams filling the room, mixing with Javier's as their blood sprayed in all directions, splashing against the camera lens. It was only a few seconds, but they had been some of the most satisfying seconds I'd experienced in the past few weeks. I didn't even want to kill Javier yet. His suffering was far too enjoyable to end so soon. But at some point, all good things had to come to an end.

When it was over, and Javier's family was nothing but bludgeoned bloody pieces on the floor, I turned the camera back to my smiling blood-smattered face so he could remember it as vividly as possible. The rage on his face as his chest heaved up and down would be a favorite in my memory book. I ended the video chat without a needless word, my actions speaking plenty loud enough for me.

"He's all yours, Dan," I said into my headset before turning back to my men. "Raid the house, then burn it down."

Turning away, I headed back out to our convoy, the day's success making each step lighter than the last. Of course, we weren't quite out of the woods yet. There was still the matter of Javier's brother who I would eventually have to deal with. Hopefully, Dan would be able to get his location out of Javier before he finished with him.

Taking out my phone, I dialed Clive for an update on my wife and the little training exercise I had planned for her today. Suspicion was immediate when he answered on the third ring.

"So?" I asked, my impatience evident. "How'd she do?"

I was met with a second of silence before Clive cleared his throat and exhaled. "Unfortunately, sir, we've encountered a slight problem."

Rage punched straight through my chest as I wondered what the fuck kind of trouble Jaden had started now. She always loved to start shit when I wasn't there to immediately tan her ass with my belt.

“What. Problem.”

More silence. “Someone...used live rounds.”

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AMATEUR



Pain burned into my wrists, waking me with a groan. The weight of my own body dangled from the thick ropes that held my wrists above my head, making the pain so much worse.

Shaking myself from unconsciousness, I stretched my body out until my bare toes could touch the ground, albeit barely, and felt concrete.

God-fucking-dammit, not this shit again.

Looking down, I realized I was still in my damn pajamas. Fuckers couldn't even let me wake up properly before putting me through this bullshit. You'd think taking down an entire storage facility with over a dozen armed men practically by myself would assure my overly controlling "husband" that I could handle shit on my own now just fine. But as usual, I was fucking wrong.

Finding some stability, I ignored the pain in my limbs and tried to assess my surroundings. The walls around me were wood paneling, with a few windows that revealed the lush forest outside. Judging by the workbenches and cabinets behind me, I had to guess I was in a workshop of some sorts. Alone, thankfully.

I glanced up at my binds and grimaced. My wrists were awkwardly wrapped with the rope I dangled from, held together by a single knot. Attempting to spin myself around, I tried to find my footing and gain some semblance of control. That was when I noticed the tools laid out on the workbenches.

Knowing my short ass would never be able to reach the tools, I'd have to turn the ropes into a swing. Pushing off from the floor, I began to sway myself back and forth until I found a good rhythm.

And then a familiar bark caught my ear from somewhere behind another door.

“Oh, thank God,” I whispered to myself.

Drawing a low whistle from my breath, Camaro recognized the sound and immediately quieted. While I was happy we'd get to work together again, I didn't want her drawing any unnecessary attention just yet.

Lifting my knees, I swung myself closer and closer to the bench until my feet could finally reach it. Stretching my foot out, I gripped a lighter with my toes and quickly brought it up to my hands.

Grasping it tight, I fumbled with the lighter for what felt like way too long as I swung back and forth in the air like a damn pendulum. One frustrating minute later, the flame finally caught the spark and I was able to hold it against the rope. The heat of the flame burned against the sensitive skin of my wrists that had already been rubbed raw from the scratchy ropes. But I breathed through the pain until the rope finally weakened enough to snap, and my feet hit the floor. Rubbing my stinging wrists, I hunched down to the ground and out of sight.

Staying low, I made my way over to the wall near the single window to peer through. With nothing but trees to find and no guards in sight, I hoped I'd be able to make it out of here without causing a stir, which meant I'd need to do something about my bare feet.

Glancing from my perch, I scanned the area for anything I could use for some kind of foot protection. I doubted there'd be any kind of footwear in here that would fit my stupidly small-ass feet. But the sound of my dog's impatient warning bark made the wheels in my brain get to work. Following the sound of her whines, I groaned when I found the door she was behind locked.

Because of course it was.

“Hold on, Camaro,” I called with a sigh.

Irritated that this was the start of my day, I hustled my ass to the workbench where a crowbar was hanging off a nail on the wall. I lined the crowbar up against the doorframe and pressed all my weight against it. After some massive cursing and several more heaves, the door finally gave way and cracked open.

Camaro’s cry was immediate as soon as I stepped inside to what looked like a small storage room. Her crate shook and rattled as she bucked and jumped around inside it, desperate to escape. I gave her another low whistle to calm her down while I searched for the key to her cage. She quieted down and sat still, her big eyes following me as I moved through the room.

As I searched for the key, my eyes caught the attention of a pair of fluffy white bunny slippers on the floor in what I was sure would be size Jaden. I shook my head and scoffed, walking over to the slippers and picking them up from the floor. They were just as ridiculous as they were obnoxious.

Noticing there was a folded up note inside one of them, I pulled it out and unfolded it.

*Let's see you hop your way out of this
one.*

-C + D

I rolled my eyes. “Well, aren’t you both just a bunch of chuckle-fucks today,” I muttered to myself.

I couldn’t believe this was the footwear they wanted me to wear while I fought my way out of here. With a short laugh, I slipped them on, the material hugging my feet like a snuggly mitten. The stupid rabbit ears dragged against the floor as I walked, the largeness of them making Camaro growl as if they were real rabbits. They were hella soft though, so it was better than being barefoot until I found something more acceptable.

Noticing a set of keys on a nearby shelf, I snatched them up and moved over to the cage, crouching down to insert the smallest key on the ring. Thankfully it turned out to be the right one and the lock disengaged. Camaro practically rushed me the second I opened the door, knocking me to the floor as she sniffed and licked at my face.

“Okay, okay, I’m good, girl. Come on, get off.”

Giving her a few more pats and ruffling her ears, I stood and headed for the door with my dog at my side back into the main room.

Grabbing the crowbar from the floor, I headed for the main door and placed my ear against the wood, listening for any sounds that might indicate any potential threats outside. When I heard nothing, I slowly turned the handle and opened the door an inch to peer through. That was when I noticed a single guard passing through the trees, his back to the door.

“Fuck,” I whispered under my breath.

I waited until the guard was completely out of sight before opening the door so Camaro and I could slip through. Quietly closing it behind me, we quickly scaled the wall of the building until we made it to the corner and came face-to-face with a guard.

My heart dropped into my stomach as adrenaline burst through my system. The guard instantly raised his rifle, but my feet were too fast as I kicked the gun to the side, and swung the crowbar against his head, knocking him out instantly.

My foot immediately swelled in pain from the contact, the stupid bunny slippers providing zero protection.

Holy fuck! Okay, no more kicking for now.

Camaro growled at the unconscious guard as I fought to ignore my pulsing foot and rummaged through his vests for any other weapons he might have on him. I would have taken his damn shoes if I'd thought I wouldn't just trip all over the place in them.

Removing his utility belt, I strapped it around my waist, taking notice of the two Glocks and extra magazines attached to it. I then grabbed his M16 rifle, pressed it against my shoulder and stood, aiming it forward as Camaro and I swiftly moved through the property. My biggest issue was figuring out where the fuck I was and where I needed to go to get the fuck out of the danger zone. Which meant I needed to find higher ground.

Moving along the building, I came up to the other corner and peered around the edge, thankfully finding no one around. And then I noticed the dirt road leading through the trees.

Sprinting forward into the trees, Camaro kept at my pace until we were under the cover of the brush. The damn bunny slippers did not help with my mobility and made way too much noise, but it was the challenge I was given, so I'd have to work with it. Following the road, we stayed out of sight, carefully making our way through the trees until we came to another developed portion of the property.

Ducking behind a thick tree trunk, I crouched low to assess my potential threats. There were several buildings off in the distance, looking like small cabins, with at least five guards patrolling the area. If I had to take a guess, I'd say this was their training camp. If I was going to get out of here, I would have to steal a vehicle somehow.

Carefully moving from tree to tree, I scaled the landscape until I finally found the garage, two SUVs visible inside with the garage door wide open.

And then I heard a twig snap behind me. Dropping to the ground, I just narrowly dodged the fake bullet that exploded into a cloud of powder blue against the tree. I then quickly rolled over and sprayed the fucker with my own until he was covered in specs of dark red.

“Fuck!” he shouted, angrily tossing his gun to the ground. He should have been tossing his own ass to the ground instead.

That was when a snarling Rottweiler charged at him, leaping into the air and knocking him flat on his back. Camaro then jumped on top of his chest and growled into his face. If the players didn’t fall to the ground like a person getting shot would naturally do, she was trained to finish them off herself.

“What was that?” I heard a guard question.

“Did you guys hear that?”

“Are we starting? I didn’t know we were starting!”

“Move out!” another shouted.

Groaning aloud, I glared at the noisy fucker. “Hey asshat, dead men don’t fucking shout,” I critiqued. “Camaro, come.”

Camaro growled one more time before retreating back to my side, her body still tense. Turning back over, I looked on to see two more guards approaching my way. Staying flat to the ground, I aimed my rifle and fired twice, catching both of them in the chest.

“Shit,” they both cursed and immediately fell to the ground. Like they were fucking supposed to.

Sprinting forward, I rushed beyond them to the next thickest tree and crouched low, aiming my rifle again. Two other guards were heading farther away from me, but I lost sight of the fifth one.

Deciding I’d have to risk it, I moved forward from tree to tree until I reached the edge of the woods. When I felt it was clear enough, Camaro and I raced for the garage, securing ourselves behind the wall and listening for any sounds of movement outside.

Hearing nothing after a minute, I strapped my rifle to my back and headed over to the car nearest me, reaching for the door handle.

“Stop,” came a voice from outside.

“Fuck,” I whispered under my breath. Camaro’s growl was deep as she hunched low, ready to pounce.

“*Facile*,” I said to Camaro, ordering her to ease back. She straightened her back and ceased from growling, but her eyes were still very much set on whoever was behind me.

“Turn around!” he ordered.

Turning my head to the side first, I got a good look at the guard. Tall, thin, greasy hair, and an odd sense of nervousness about him. He stood about ten feet outside the open garage door, a pistol in his hand aimed right at me.

Dropping my hands to my side, my left hand discretely went for the gun at my hip as I turned to the right. Swiftly making the rest of my turn, I drew the pistol and fired before the guard even saw the gun, the red paint splattering against his chest.

“Goddamn it,” he muttered, lowering his gun to his side, but then his eyes landed on my feet, and he narrowed his gaze. “Why are you wearing bunny slippers?”

Son of a bitch.

I shook my head, not feeling sorry for the guy once he realized a very angry dog was about to chew his guts out for not falling down dead as expected.

What was with these guys?

With a snarl, Camaro made her jump for him, charging and knocking him to the ground, but as she did, a loud crack burst through the air, shattering my ears while my back slammed against the car behind me.

The guard screamed as Camaro tore into his arm as he tried to protect his face from her teeth and powerful jaws.

“Camaro, vabasta!”

She immediately released his arm and quickly turned back to stand in front of me, her sights still set on the guard. He sat up with a groan, clutching his bleeding and chewed-up arm, but the second he looked at me, his face instantly paled with horror. And then I felt an odd, warm wetness against my shirt.

“Oh, my God,” the guard murmured. “Shit, shit, fuck, shit!”

Glancing down, I found my shirt and pants were beginning to soak with blood, small droplets falling onto my dirty white bunny slippers. Confusion and distress fogged my brain as I tried to understand why the fuck I was bleeding, or if it was even my blood. Had I gotten injured earlier? Had I hurt someone else? Pain was completely overshadowed by the rush of adrenaline that forced me to focus on the source of the blood flow instead.

“What in the fuck,” I groaned, my arms shaking as I lifted my shirt to look for a possible wound. Fighting the wave of dizziness, I removed the rifle at my back and the utility belt from my waist, shaky hands dropping both haphazardly to the ground.

Gently pulling down the side of my pajama bottoms, my confusion spiked to panic when I noticed a bleeding red hole in my skin just to the right of my pelvis.

Had I actually been shot? With a real bullet?

How?

Reality suddenly ripped away the strength of my legs, causing me to slide down the side of the vehicle. When I planted my ass on the floor of the garage, I quickly found it difficult to continue keeping myself upright for much longer. Camaro growled and trotted to my side, her nose sniffing at the blood as she whined and barked with alarm.

The guard finally stood and rushed toward me, panic in his eyes as they scanned over my body.

“Oh, my God. I...I didn’t know the rounds were live.”

I frowned up at him in confusion.

Live rounds? Did he say live rounds? Why in the fuck would he have live rounds?

Exhaling deep, I gritted my teeth as I looked up at him. “What the fuck do you mean you didn’t know? It’s *your* gun, you amateur! Your responsibility!”

Darren never allowed live rounds in these kinds of training exercises, especially for me. Ever. So the fact that this guy was unknowingly walking around with live rounds was deeply concerning. If these were the men Darren hired to work for him then we were gonna have words.

“Oh, God,” the guard hitched. “I’m sorry, I’m so sorry. I don’t know where the bullets came from.”

I groaned again, astounded by this guy’s idiocy. I didn’t have time to question how the live rounds had made it into his gun. That could come later. Right now, I needed to stop the damn bleeding.

“Give me your shirt.”

Pausing for a moment, he looked at me with confusion.

“Now!” I shouted, the exertion giving to a wave of nausea. I couldn’t waste time being nice or tolerating this idiot’s shock. I needed him to stay focused on me instead of his very bleak looking future.

Jolting into action, he quickly unbuckled his protective vest, removed his shirt, and handed it to me. Bunching it into a ball, I pressed it against the entrance wound, applying the pressure I hoped would slow the bleeding.

“Fuck!” I cried, the pain burning from the compression. Looking back to the guard, I glared at his complete incompetence. “What the fuck are you still doing here? Go get help!”

He hunched back, his fear turning into absolute terror as realization dawned on him. “He’s...he’s gonna kill me for this,” he murmured.

For fuck’s sake, dude, I’m going to kill you!

I practically growled, my patience running thin with my blood pooling on the floor next to me.

“If you want it to be a quick death then go get fucking *help!*” I shouted at him, each word causing a new burst of pain in my side. I wondered if he considered how much worse his death would be if I bled out all over the floor because he was too in shock to help.

He abruptly stood, his chest heaving up and down as he sucked in air before finally grabbing the radio from his belt.

“This is Delta 3. Code 0. Red down. Repeat, Red down. Requesting immediate medical attention to garage C2. Over.”

A beep then sounded. “Roger, Delta 3. Over.”

“*Thank you,*” I groaned, fighting back the dizziness swirling in my head. But instead of assisting me further, he just stepped away from me like I was some kind of disease that might infect him.

Ignoring his clear panic, I continued to press the shirt into my abdomen, hoping I’d be able to keep myself from going into shock. Camaro’s body heat next to me helped keep the shivers at bay while I concentrated on breathing back the growing nausea.

Realizing his uselessness, Delta 3 slowly turned around to eye the pistol he used to shoot me. Picking it up from the ground, he pulled out the magazine to reveal a full clip of live rounds.

“How the f-fuck did you not notice the weight difference?” I muttered, my entire body shaking. “Where did you get that gun?”

He shook his head. “It’s mine,” he mumbled. “Someone must have tampered with it. Switched it somehow.”

I furrowed my brows. “Why?”

He shook his head. “I don’t know.” Turning to face me, he held up the gun. “But it won’t matter to him.” Before I realized what he was doing, he lifted the barrel and placed it in his mouth.

My heart froze.

“No, wait!” I shouted, just as he pulled the trigger.

The sound of the gunshot cracked through the air, piercing my ears and causing Camaro to bark and snarl at the perceived threat. When the guard’s body slumped to the ground, blood and brain matter pooled from the back of his head, flowing into a little river down the driveway.

“Goddamn it,” I whispered and rested my head against the car, just as a white van pulled up in front of the garage.

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PERFECT FUCKING TIMING



With the silent temperament of a ticking time bomb, I glared down at the sniffling excuse of a man who could barely contain his own composure for more than two seconds.

I hadn't even done anything to him yet and he was already shaking in the chair he was tied to, snot dripping down his nose to compliment his sweat-soaked grey t-shirt.

Given the circumstances, his reactions were an accurate reflection of the severity of the situation he had personally played a part in. He knew how badly he had fucked up, and I was far too bloodthirsty to be this goddamn patient.

It had been a long five-hour flight back to San Diego from Honduras, my desperation to return to my gravely injured wife making me a crazed animal out for blood and gore. Watching the security tape of her getting shot had been a serious mistake.

The fury igniting in my veins became a damn near uncontrollable inferno, making me want to incinerate everything in my path. But my craving to maim, murder, and avenge her could only be mitigated by tedious investigative work from the plane.

When I wasn't pacing, raging, or threatening someone's life over the phone, Scott and I spent the rest of the flight combing through days' worth of security footage.

Hunting down answers as to how and why a Glock 19 equipped with live rounds made it into one of Jaden's many training exercises was the only useful thing I could do from the plane.

"This is fucking bullshit. Why did it take him so long to call it in?!" I roared as I rewatched the footage from inside the garage. I watched every move Jaden made to remind myself that she was alive when my medical team found her. "He just fucking stood there like a dazed moron! Who the fuck recruited him?! And what the fuck is Jaden wearing on her goddamn feet?!"

Scott narrowed his eyes at the screen, tilting his head as he zoomed in on Jaden's legs. My anger had me pacing back and forth down the aisle of the plane, no doubt destroying the new carpeting I just paid for.

"They look like bunny slip—"

"What?" I growled as I answered my phone on the first ring, eager for answers.

"Check the file I just forwarded to Scott," Greg said, his voice distorted through the speaker phone.

I hung up the phone as Scott pulled up the file in question, another security feed popping up, this one taking place five minutes before Jaden's training exercise was set to begin. Brian Creston, the guard responsible, quickly came into view of the camera in Garage C2. He hurriedly pulled off the M16 hanging from his torso and the Glock from his belt holster, placed both on a nearby table, and moved out of view of the camera. He reappeared in another view, showing footage of the bathroom.

My gaze sharpened with rage. Rule number one was to always ensure your weapons were secure at *all times*. Leaving them out in the open and

unattended like that was exactly how an amateur got killed in the field. Or by me.

About fifteen seconds went by before another person came into view wearing a black hooded jacket that concealed his face. He carried the same standard guns on his body and stopped in front of the same table, laying them right next to Brian's. He then crouched down to tie his shoes, then stood back up and strapped himself with Brian's guns before quickly fleeing the building.

“What the hell...” Scott murmured as he scrutinized the footage.

When Creston returned, the jackass didn't even notice his guns had been switched as he quickly holstered them and ran out of the building. Given that they were now loaded with the actual bullets in question, he should have noticed the weight difference almost immediately.

My fists clenched in absolute fury.

We used specially modified ammunition called “simunition” for all training exercises. They were non-lethal projectiles with a detergent-based color marking compound that would show our trainees the accuracy of their aim in real time. They could be used in any of our standard weapons with a simple switch of the magazine. They were the most realistic option for training purposes, aside from the fact that they were much lighter than regular ammunition, which should have been a dead giveaway for Creston.

This would be the last fucking time a trainee would be allowed anywhere near Jaden.

Brian had clearly taken the smart way out by eating that bullet. I wanted to strangle the motherfucker until his head ripped from his neck. Had he still been alive, I would have spent days slowly breaking every single bone in his body before ripping scraps of flesh from the broken pieces.

At least he had one working braincell.

Angered that my fantasy of murder had been foiled, I turned my attention to figuring out who had switched the guns and why. Scrutinizing

the hooded figure, I sneered at his carelessness, zeroing in on the very telling detail he'd neglected to conceal on his hand: a dark tattoo of a spider, bold enough to be visible in the camera.

"Alan," Scott declared with a nod.

Fury burned a hole inside my chest.

"Have him collected. Discretely. I don't want to spook anyone else he might have been working with."

Nodding his head, he stepped away to make the call and within the hour Alan Yenner was rounded up and waiting for us in the shack. And he did not look well.

"Tell me the truth quickly and I *might* spare your family," I ordered, more interested in getting answers before spilling blood. I needed to know why before I did anything else. Jaden had only just gotten out of surgery and was resting in our trauma unit. Five minutes of looking at her still unconscious form was all I could bear before my blood rage boiled over the edge.

"The truth," I snapped. "Now."

"We already know what happened," Scott interjected. "What we don't know is why."

Alan's breathing hitched as his eyes darted back and forth between us.

My gaze hardened. "Do you really want to experience my reputation firsthand?"

All he could do was stutter and shake in his seat, probably from shock.

"Fine," I said, pulling out my knife and stepping up to the side of his head. I took his ear between my fingers and slowly sawed the knife through it, his sharp screams spurring me on as I severed it from his head and dropped it into his lap. Stepping back, I waited impatiently for him to regain his composure before I took the other one. Men who couldn't listen to orders obviously had no use for their ears.

"If you're not going to listen, Alan, I'll take the other one," I warned.

Alan's eyes widened with fear as his chest heaved up and down, sweat lining his forehead.

"Okay, okay, okay," he panted, trying to catch his breath. "L-look, B-brian just saw something he shouldn't have s-seen. So we s-switched out his guns, knowing he would do something stupid, like a misfire. We were certain you'd kill him for it. P-problem solved."

I stood there, silent, and absolutely stunned.

What?

"What the fuck did he see, exactly?" Scott asked, his voice low with warning.

I swore I could see the light bulb going on and off in Alan's head, trying to determine what was safe to tell me.

"Don't make us bleed it out of you," he added.

Alan took several more short breaths before his glassy eyes pleaded back up at us as if mercy was still on the table somewhere, just out of reach.

"Some...some of the guys at the docks had taken a few pounds of coke from one of the shipments for themselves. Brian caught them."

I shared a quick glance with Scott, confirming my thoughts.

"Along with yourself," I added.

Alan's gaze shifted to the floor before he nodded sheepishly.

"When?" I asked.

"Y-yesterday."

"This is the first we're hearing of this," Scott replied. "Clearly Brian kept that information to himself."

"H-he was still a liability to us. He had leverage."

"So why didn't you just fucking kill him while you were still at the docks?" I growled.

"He got a-away and we couldn't f-find him. We knew that o-once he got back to the base, we couldn't kill him without rousing suspicion."

"So instead of killing him yourself, you set him up," Scott stated.

Alan nodded meekly. “We just gave you a r-reason to kill him instead,” he murmured. “No one would question that. All we had to do was make a quick switch. Minimal effort n-needed. He’s a n-new guy. Using the wrong ammunition wasn’t u-unbelievable. He was bound to fuck up at s-some point.”

“Yet you didn’t even bother trying to hide the security footage of you making the switch,” I added. “Not exactly the slickest plan if you’re incapable of covering your own tracks.”

His brows furrowed. “Someone was s-supposed to handle that.”

Scott smiled smugly as he slowly shook his head at him. “Seems they failed,” he answered for him.

“Or maybe,” I continued, arching a brow, “they wanted you to take the fall for all of them and left the footage as is.”

Alan’s eyes bounced back and forth as he considered the possibility that he’d been played. What a concept.

Crossing my arms over my chest, I worked to rein in my rage before I ripped the guy’s fucking face off for his sheer stupidity.

“Tell me. Did you anticipate my wife becoming a casualty in this plan?”

All the blood in Alan’s face slowly drained away at the implication.

“We thought she’d be fine! She’s a tough girl, we all knew that—”

Wrath like I’d never known surged like a black tidal wave of death in my chest. Rearing back, my fist collided with his jaw, snapping his head to the side before continuing to pummel his face until it was barely recognizable. Blood coated my fist and my shirt, but it covered Alan’s entire face as he attempted to continue breathing through his shattered nose.

Shaking my head at the traitor before me, I sighed in disappointment, having never seen such reckless stupidity before. We would need to complete a serious cleansing of our ranks to weed out this kind of foolishness. I couldn’t trust men like this to do the job I paid them

handsomely to do if they were still looking to score outside their duties. Reform would be swift and lethal.

Turning to Scott, I kept my voice low for only him to hear. “Find out who the others are and collect anything you can from them. Keep him and the others alive and fed for three days. I will finish them on the third.”

Scott nodded and immediately moved for the tools laid out on the table as I headed for the back door, the sounds of Alan’s screams echoing as I exited the shack.

I didn’t stop until I found myself at the underground level of the house where the infirmary was located. The trauma unit had calmed down now that Jaden was out of surgery and mostly in the clear. The next few days were critical for her and they would be fucking unbearable for me. Helplessness to Jaden’s unintended suffering was not a circumstance I was accustomed to.

I found Sid reviewing Jaden’s vitals at the foot of her hospital bed. The wires and tubes connected to her body that were keeping her alive made my chest tighten.

“How is she?” I asked, my eyes sweeping over her sleeping form.

Sid turned to look at me, his eyes darting low to my bloodied hands, then back up to my eyes before pausing. A single glare from me got him talking.

“She’s a tough girl,” he said with a nod, clearing his throat several times. “She did very well in surgery. We were able to correct the fractures, so they will heal appropriately. But unfortunately, we were not able to save her ovary or fallopian tube.”

Sighing in disappointment, I cursed under my breath.

Sid raised a brow. “She only needs one, you know,” he added carefully.

“You mean she’s down to *only one*,” I countered. If I wanted Jaden to have my children, I couldn’t risk her losing her other ovary. “When her recovery is over, I want her birth control implant replaced with a fake one.

If she's not pregnant within the first two months, we'll start the fertility shots."

Sid frowned. "Why not just tell her the truth? Why hide your intentions?"

I growled in irritation. I didn't like my orders being questioned, but when it came to Sid, I tried to make exceptions every now and then.

"Because once she knows, she'll fight me at every turn. I already have two wars on my hands, I don't need to add a third one in my own home."

It was always easier to ask for forgiveness than it was for permission, though I didn't give a shit about either. It would be easier for Jaden to accept what was already done than constantly fighting against it and failing anyway. This was the lesser struggle for both of us.

Sid coughed quietly into his sleeve. "And what exactly do you expect me to tell her when she suddenly bleeds again?"

I turned to glare at him, unconcerned with the trivial dilemma. "I don't know, Sid, you're the doctor. Figure it out."

He sighed as he put his hands in the pockets of his white coat. I didn't know why he bothered to wear it down here, but I didn't really care that he did. Maybe he liked the idea of still looking like a licensed medical professional.

"This will be *at least* six months out before we can attempt any of this."

"No shit," I growled. With the severity of Jaden's injuries, I wouldn't be fucking her for the next several months, which put my plan on getting her pregnant on hiatus. What perfect fucking timing for her.

"She got very lucky, you know," Sid commented. "Had the bullet not ricochet off that concrete wall, her injuries would be much worse. She might have lost a lot more than her ovary given the close range."

I could feel my jaw clenching at the truth of his words. It had been close. Too close. She could have fucking bled out had the medical team not arrived when they did.

“Lucky that she happened to encounter the one guard with live ammunition?” I countered before turning my gaze back to Sid. “Yeah, what are the odds of that?”

I shook my head. If there was trouble to be found, Jaden would sure as shit always be the one to find it. She was a fucking magnet for chaos.

“The bone fractures will heal and the damaged tissues will repair themselves over time. She will be okay, Darren. But you both are going to have to be *very* patient.”

There were no words Sid could say that would relieve the weight in my chest, a heaviness that cemented its way through my system.

“You can go now, Sid,” I said, dismissing him altogether.

He glanced down before turning toward the door. “Don’t forget to wash your hands before touching her.”

I grunted at his reminder, moving to the nearby sink to wash away the dried blood from my skin with hot water. When I was finished, I pulled a chair to Jaden’s bedside and took one of her small hands in mine. Her hands were cold like I’d suspected, making me close my freshly warmed up palms around hers.

With Jaden’s heart monitor beeping in the background, I was left alone to brood and plan in silence while I waited for her to wake. I’d been gone only a week, hell-bent on finding Javier Spade to collect the blood he owed for killing Dominic. And this is what I come home to. Disappointment, murderous rage, and frustration stormed inside me, and there was only one thing that would calm it—absolute fucking carnage.

DAMAGES



B^{eep.....beep.....beep.....}

What the fuck is that stupid noise?

Beep.....beep.....beep.....

Oh no.....no...not this shit...not again.....

Beep.....beep.....beep.....

Ugh.....goddamn it.....I survived...why do I always have to survive everything?

The very weight of my eyelids was painful, the heaviness a barrier to sight I had no interest in fighting. I preferred to stay unconscious.

But hearing required no effort, so when the sound of the heart monitor echoed in my ears, telling me I was still very much alive, I wanted to hurl it out the fucking window. But I couldn't. Because I knew my body was broken. Again.

Everything hurt. *Everything.*

I didn't even want to assess the damage I had sustained, knowing there was nothing to distract me from concentrating on every nerve ending attached to my body. I was already under the impression that an elephant

was sitting on my pelvis, the pressure so incredibly destabilizing I could barely breathe.

I decided to test the strength of my fingers first, finding my right hand stuck in a warm but gentle embrace. A single curl of my fingertips gave life to the rustling of fabrics and furniture, the grip on my hand suddenly growing stronger.

“Jaden?” came a soft deep voice next to me. “Can you hear me?”

I hummed my acknowledgment, taking a slow breath, the expansion of my chest making me groan from the strain.

“Sid! Get in here now!”

The sudden shout made me wince, but the sound of quickly moving footsteps and a swinging door changed the course of my attention.

“Jaden?” came another voice. “Jaden, can you hear us?”

“Mhm,” I mumbled, hoping they would finally stop asking me questions.

But with the soft stroking of a thumb along my cheek, I knew I wouldn’t be so lucky.

“Open your eyes, princess,” Darren whispered, the longing in his voice a soothing reminder of his own helplessness. As it was, he could do nothing for me but witness the aftermath and destruction of his own makings.

I tightened my fingers around his palm instead, denying him for a little while longer while I could still get away with it.

A few more moments of silence brought me the clarity I needed, my situational awareness now expanding beyond the agony of my own body and the limits of the bed. It bounced off the walls until I could finally sense everything and everyone in the room, down to the last speck of dust in the air. Awareness required focus, and focus required energy, summoning just enough to finally see again.

Slowly cracking my eyelids, my vision fixated on a massive blur of a man sitting at my bedside. I felt his hand gently graze against my cheek,

brushing the loose hair away from my face.

“There she is,” Darren murmured, his voice low, but his tone grateful.

I grunted in response, finding my mouth far too dry to formulate actual words before wincing from the light.

“Bright,” I mumbled anyway, hoping my voice was loud enough.

In a flash, the light was gone and the stinging brightness faded away, but the shivers that began to erupt down my limbs had me hunching into myself for warmth.

“C-cold,” I murmured, still clutching at the blanket with my other hand.

Darren gently took it from my grasp and draped it all the way up to my neck, gently tucking it behind my shoulders. My body soaked in the warmth like a sponge, comforting me enough to calm some of the shivers down.

“Don’t try to move,” Darren ordered, as if I had any intention to try. He then lifted a small paper cup to my cracked mouth. “Just take a small sip.” Little drops of water poured in, washing away the desert that caked my mouth, allowing for small moments of relief.

God, I felt heavy. So very heavy. But consciousness was mine again, and I wanted answers.

“What. H-happened,” I barely whispered, desperately needing to know how fucked I was.

“You were shot,” Darren answered plainly, his hand tightening around mine again. “But you’re going to be fine.”

Sure, I was. Every day was fine when you were me.

The echo of footsteps grew louder until they stopped at the foot of my bed.

“How are you feeling, Mrs. Davis?” came Sid’s voice. “Are you in any pain?”

“An e-elephant,” I began, “is sitting. On. My t-torso.”

Sid nodded. “Good to know the morphine is working,” he replied.

I grunted at that. I suppose pressure was better than pain.

“What’s the damage?” I whispered as my vision started to become clearer.

Sid took a deep breath before side-eyeing Darren as if he wasn’t sure what to tell me.

Oh, fuck, it was bad. It had to be bad.

Was I paralyzed? Did the bullet hit my spine?

“Well, the bullet ricocheted off the concrete wall of the garage and struck through your pelvis. It entered at such an angle that it exited cleanly through your glutes. Luckily, no fragments of the bullet were detected. That made your surgical repairs a little less complicated, and you did very well during the surgery.”

I blinked at him. The bullet exited through my ass cheek? Bikini season was going to be lit.

“But the force of the bullet did cause a few hip and pelvic fractures,” Sid continued. “You also have a torn sacrotuberous ligament and some sciatic nerve damage. But, not to worry. All of that will heal in time.”

How much time?

Absorbing his words took longer than I liked. It took even longer to accept them. I now had damage to my bones, muscles, ligaments, and nerves. And I need not worry. Why did it feel like he was leaving something out?

“What else?” I asked pointedly, clutching the blanket tighter.

Sid shook his head with a smirk. “Still sharp as ever, Mrs. Davis.”

Darren grunted at that, side-eyeing Sid with a warning glare.

“The worst of your injury is regrettably, the loss of your right ovary and connecting fallopian tube. Both were severely compromised and unfortunately could not be saved. There was also a small tear to your uterus that we were able to repair, so scar tissue is likely to develop. But you should know though that you are expected to make a full recovery and within time, you should have no trouble conceiving in the future.”

I was silent for a minute after this little revelation, Sid's warning of Darren's bigger concern at the forefront of it all. I didn't know if fate was trying to play a cruel trick on me or if it had just failed to fully release me of one of my greatest fears. I'd almost been granted the relief I wanted from ever having to bear Darren's children. Almost.

Technically, you're halfway there.

Why the fuck did women have to have two ovaries? One really wasn't enough?

I sighed in disappointment, though in reality I should be kind of grateful. That bullet bought my uterus some more time. A price always had to be paid.

"With all that said, Mrs. Davis, you're incredibly lucky the bullet was a ricochet and not a direct hit. Your injuries would have been much worse otherwise and your recovery would not look as promising."

I could see Darren's jaw tense as Sid reminded us all of how close I probably came to death. Wouldn't be the first time, and if things were going to go my way, it wouldn't be the last time either. But death would have to wait its turn. I still had shit to do.

Darren offered me another sip of water, to which I greatly took.

"What about the live rounds?" I asked him after he set the cup aside.

His eyes went dark, his jaw set tight as his gaze penetrated me deeply. It was that kind of look that always reminded me of how dangerous he really was. Especially when it came to things like vengeance.

"It's already been handled."

I knew I'd have to beat it out of him.

"So, who wanted me dead and why?" I continued pushing.

He shook his head, his hair falling loose over his forehead. He hadn't cut his hair since well before he left for Honduras. It had grown long enough to fall over his brow now.

“No one wanted you dead, Jaden. It was an accident. But I don’t want you to think about that right now. Your focus needs to be on your recovery. Nothing else.”

I pursed my lips at his response. I didn’t understand how someone could *accidentally* try to get me killed or how live rounds *accidentally* made their way into my training exercise but dwelling on it was a lost cause. I knew that was the most I was going to get out of Darren on the subject, so I decided to change it. For now.

“So what does my recovery look like?” God, my throat felt like it had gone through a wood chipper.

Sid sighed like he was actually sad for me. “You have a very long road ahead of you.”

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CARNAGE



I stared out the window of my office, watching the wind whip through the trees as the nearing storm blew closer. As a child, I had loved thunderstorms. I'd rush to the nearest window and watch the sky darken until the sun had lost all hope of shining through. I'd find thrill seeing the lightning crack across those menacing looking clouds, scorching the earth wherever it could touch.

I found it fascinating, but my mother was always less than enthused. Storms meant she had to remain inside, so the sunshine was her obvious preference. But even so, she'd still sit on the couch with me and watch the lightning, counting the seconds between each roll of thunder to note how fast the storm moved.

After she died, the storms stopped being an observation and quickly became a new method of training as instructed by my father. No longer did I watch from the safety of the windows. I learned to endure them from within, track through them, predict them, survive them, exploit them. I'd spent so much of my education in the rain, I'd almost started preferring them, the storms becoming a natural part of who I was.

So when someone threatens me with a storm of their own, they'd better hope they can match the hurricane I would eventually swallow them with.

"You're sure it was Matt?" I asked, my eyes catching the strike of lightning not too far off in the distance.

Scott took another step forward, the conviction in his eyes telling me his information was accurate.

"Yes. All three of them confirmed he'd promised them a better cut to be his spies before Brian spotted them at the docks. They made up the coke story as a cover to lessen the blow on themselves, but Matt ultimately convinced them they had to kill Brian. He helped them formulate a strategy, but the poor execution was all their own."

Son of a fucking bitch.

After I had spent an hour tormenting the shit out of the ones responsible for the bullet Jaden endured, I let Scott spend the next hour torturing them for actual answers. Before, I hadn't cared about the answers, but after I had been satisfied with the amount of blood coating my hands and arms and finally calmed down, I let Scott handle the rest. The intel he collected only added to my rage, instead of subsiding it.

If Matt was trying to sway my own men to be his spies, that was one thing. But creating an influence that harmed my wife was another thing entirely. Gunning for my brother to satisfy his oath to avenge Regina's death already put him on a suicide mission, but now I would be destroying far more than he would ever be anticipating. His entire fucking legacy.

"Matt has a shipment coming through in the next week for some very big clients." I knew this because one of those clients was also my own. "Let's intercept that shipment before it gets a chance to dock."

Scott nodded with a smile, the man loving every chance to wreak some havoc wherever he could. "I'll begin setting it up," he said with a nod.

"And the traitors?"

A dark smile spread across Scott's face as his eyes met mine. "They're awaiting their chance for redemption. The guards have already gathered in the shack. We're ready when you are."

"Good. Meet me down there in twenty minutes."

Scott nodded and left the room, his phone already at his ear as he began to set up the plans I had just put in motion. Scott loved organizing our little side missions, and I was only too happy to let him, his strategies were flawless in their own right. And with Matt and his pesky little interferences with my operations, it was time for a little retribution—to remind him who he was fucking with.

I was truly surprised he wasn't taking a more direct approach with Daniel. Instead he was wasting his time trying to fuck with me and my investments. It seemed Matt preferred spending more of his time as a goddamn snake, crawling on his belly between the shadows to avoid the inevitable firefight he was clearly heading for. Maybe he knew I was Daniel's best defense, that killing me would ensure Daniel's destruction, and then there'd be no one left to avenge us.

Twenty years in the business, and this was where we were now.

I should just finish him myself at this point, but with Miguel Spade's impending revenge for the death of his brother and his family, I had to expand my resources to prepare for that as well. Matt was slow to these kinds of things. He didn't have the experience I did, so I could take my time with him. But Miguel would strike at first sight.

Though Miguel would be easier to dispose of than Matt would, Miguel's resources being that small and inadequate in comparison. Matt would need to be destroyed from within, and that would take much more time and planning than I wanted to deal with. Especially when my attention was also being divided by Jaden's lengthy recovery.

And therein lies my other issue. My wife was once again at the mercy of her vulnerabilities. This time, without my intent. The first time had been a

lesson she needed to learn, that her entire state of being was wholly dependent upon my will. If I wanted her broken, she'd be broken. If I wanted her strong, she'd be strong. The point was that none of it was up to her. Her body and mind were mine to command, and she would submit to that whether she wanted to or not.

But unfortunately, this was not something I could snap my fingers and change in an instant. This was entirely outside of my carefully constructed control of her and the environment I kept her in. My enemies were starting to penetrate my defenses, and Jaden was paying the price for it. Now I would have to watch her struggle in ways I was unprepared for.

She couldn't walk.

This little girl, who could bring scorpion kicks to my chin, who could back flip midair, who could strangle me with the strength of her thighs alone, could no longer fucking walk.

She would be bedridden for months until the bones in her hip and pelvis healed, which meant she wouldn't be allowed to move her legs any more than a few inches.

Even after everything she'd been through, Jaden was still very prideful. This level of destruction to her body would devastate her. It was bad enough she was as small as she was. Now she was injured on top of it, during a fucking war no less. From a goddamn gunshot wound that should have been impossible. I couldn't believe the chances of it, and on my own fucking property, with my own fucking men.

I'd had every gun in that training section under review for any more mishaps that could occur, those two guns thankfully being the only ones. I had the fucking things destroyed out of spite.

It had only been three days since Jaden woke from surgery. She was still in the infirmary, sleeping more than anything else. I hated leaving her down there, but with her injuries, it was the best place for her to be right now.

At least she wasn't alone. I'd stationed Carla down there and had even allowed a bed to be placed in the corner of the room for Camaro. And she still had Clive and Owen to stonewall her like usual until she stopped trying to annoy them. My little spitfire of a wife was going to have a very long, hard road ahead of her, but she had no choice in the matter. Like always, she would do what was expected of her. Endure. Adapt. And evolve. Luckily, those traits were some of the best things Jaden was a pro at. And once she was finally passed this giant roadblock, we could move on to the next phase of our lives.

Starting a family.

Her single ovary be damned, I'd make that fucking thing produce the best goddamn eggs of its life. Once Jaden was fully recovered, there would be no more waiting. I'd have the fucking family I deserved, and she would give it to me whether she was ready or not.

Time was no longer on either of our sides. It was now or never.

Stepping away from the window, I pulled some spare black cargo pants and a light gray T-shirt from one of the drawers and changed my clothes and shoes. As I headed down toward the shack, my blood began to rush with visions of violence and carnage. This little "redemption" fight was more than personal, and it would certainly leave my soldiers with an impression they would never forget. Not everyone got to witness these fights, but for those who did, I'd never had any one of them even blink in the direction of betrayal.

But this little match was specifically for all the trainees new to the ranks. They were about to learn the deadly cost of their incompetence and betrayal.

Making my way to the bottom of the steps, I saw about twenty trainee soldiers gathered around the four traitors of the evening. Even though they all looked like shit from the torture and beatings they'd been put through, I made sure they had eaten well and rested the day before to give me

somewhat of a challenge. But by the looks of them, I doubted they would last very long.

Which was why I decided to take on all four of them at once.

The stakes had been laid out, their crimes and failures revealed for all to hear, each word only further fueling my need for vengeance and gore.

What occurred next was a bloodbath to rival any other.

By the time it was over, only ten minutes had passed, and I found myself coated in more blood and gore than ever before. Four mangled, completely unrecognizable bodies were spread out across the concrete floor, the cheers of my newbie soldiers slowly dying as the screams quickly filled the air.

When the wails finally stopped, a grim silence had befallen the chamber, my men avoiding eye contact as they came face-to-face with the brutal consequences of harming what was mine in any way, directly or indirectly.

It was a dark lesson, but I wanted it ingrained in every one of their brains.

I left the shack without another word, blood still dripping from my hands as I made my way past my terrified soldiers. Satisfaction was instantaneous but minimal, wishing I could relive that moment on repeat, but you could only kill a man so many times before there was nothing left to bring back.

Vengeance had been served. Now needed to be the time for healing. And I would ensure Jaden had the best goddamn recovery this world had ever seen.

ENDURANCE



Nightime had befallen my hospital room. Even though I had no windows, I could feel the ominous darkness taking over.

Fuck, I was tired. So goddamn tired. But I just couldn't sleep anymore. I was too goddamn angry.

The morphine could numb my pain away and make my body feel absolutely nothing, but it couldn't do shit for the dangerous emotions thundering away in my head. I'd been here before, trapped in a useless, broken body, bound to the excruciating limitations of injuries I had no choice but to endure.

It wasn't fair.

After Sid explained to me the height of the hurdles I was facing, I completely shut down for the rest of the day. I didn't want to hear anymore. Didn't want to face it. Didn't have the energy to process it. I just wanted to be left the fuck alone.

I had come to accept that when my bones finally healed, I would likely have to learn how to walk again. Fucking *walk*. Of all the things to be robbed of, it had to be the most basic of bodily movements. My legs, my most powerful assets, were fucking useless to me now in every possible

way. The devastation was palpable; everyone in the room could feel my energy shifting into a tornado of despair and unbridled anger. But I'd kept it contained.

Until now.

Now that my head was finally clear and I wasn't so drugged up, I could truly reflect and then absolutely fucking rage to the sky.

My breath came in and out with too much angst, my chest heaving to accommodate the rush of oxygen while my blood raced through what was left of my broken heart. I hadn't felt an eruption coming like this since I broke apart in that hotel room when we were honeymooning in Italy. I'd been betrayed by Darren then. And now I'd been betrayed by the universe. Except this time, the usual destruction I was capable of was restricted to only what was within my immediate reach.

With a single swipe of my arm, I scattered everything on top of the medical cabinet next to me all over the floor. Glass shattered against the wall as I chucked whatever the fuck was in my hand across the room. The tray over my lap was whipped into the air, the bedside table shoved over to crash against the floor, the sheets in my hands ripped into ribbons. And when nothing was left to target, I grabbed my hair.

“Fuuuuuuuuucckkkk!!” I screamed at the top of my lungs, not giving a flying fuck who heard me.

Scalding tears of anger and frustration slid down my face as my fingers tangled through my hair and held tight at my roots. I sucked back massive gusts of oxygen to calm myself down, but all I wanted to do was take a sledgehammer to the fucking walls.

Why does this keep happening to me?

“Because you’re built for it.”

My head shot up as my eyes darted across the room, searching for the source of the voice. And when I didn’t see anyone, my gaze crept to the shadows in the corner where the light could not reach.

I quickly wiped my tears away and stared into the darkness, waiting for him to step into the light.

Like some kind of shadow demon, Darren stepped out of the darkness and into the dim glow of the room. My breath caught in my throat at the sight of him.

His body was drenched in so much blood it looked like he had fucking bathed in it. With his arms folded across his chest, he radiated the most menacing energy I had ever felt from him. It made me shudder as he stepped closer, the look on his face pinning me in place, too terrified to move or blink.

“What...?” That was all I could manage to say to iterate the question in my head.

The closer he got, the more I could smell the carnage on him. It was fresh, the blood still glistening in the soft light. Some of it had also coagulated into the wrinkles of his gray shirt, and some had dried in speckles across his face and neck. I didn’t realize I was holding my breath until he stopped at the foot of my bed, a dark expression on his face that left me utterly haunted.

“What...happened?”

Darren dipped his chin, his eyes blazing with so much possession and pure malevolence it scared the absolute shit out of me.

“I slaughtered them,” he rasped, his voice damn near unrecognizable.
“For you.”

My eyes widened in horror. “Who?”

“The men responsible.”

My eyes resumed their assessment of the amount of blood still dripping from his clothes. I had expected it. I just didn’t expect to witness the immediate grotesque aftermath of it.

“How many were there?”

“Four.”

I swallowed dryly at the implication. He'd literally just come back from killing those four people. And he wanted me to know that. Why?

"What did you do to them?" I whispered, my gaze still entranced by the amount of blood and gore caked all over him.

"I tore them apart."

My brows lifted in shock. "With what, your bare hands?"

"Yes."

My mouth instantly went dry, all the blood quickly draining from my face. Darren had just sent four men to their graves in literal pieces with his bare fucking hands for what had happened to me.

His bare fucking hands.

Darren's particular brand of violence and bloodshed was legendary, but what I saw before me had surpassed all manner of my previous experiences and expectations. I'd never seen him wear someone else's blood and guts with such...delight. It was actually really fucking disturbing, and it left me questioning what I thought I knew and understood about this man—if what I thought I knew was only just surface level. If I had to drown any deeper than I already was, the pressure alone would crush me into the empty black pit of Darren's soul. I didn't want to know any more than I already had to.

"Jesus, Darren," I hissed.

A cruel smirk formed in the corner of his mouth. "I really can't explain to you how much of a rush it is to bask in the blood of our enemies. How fucking satisfying it is."

I gulped, biting deep into my tongue for strength as I took in his words.

A part of me wondered if Darren had done it more for me, or for himself.

Gaping up at him from the safety of my hospital bed, I just had no words. My mind was incapable of competing with this interaction. What could I even say?

I knew he was going to kill them. But I didn't expect...this.

“How did you—”

“I meant what I said earlier,” he interrupted. “About you being built for it.”

I furrowed my brow at the sudden change in subject. “Built for what?”

“Endurance.”

I paused, recognizing that he’d heard me. I hadn’t realized I’d said that out loud.

I sighed in contempt. I was so tired of being tested by him.

“Endurance is exhausting,” I replied bitterly.

He nodded like he was agreeing with me.

“Don’t you understand what that means, though?”

I arched a brow expectantly.

He tipped his head at me, like the answer was obvious. “It means you’re unbreakable.”

I scoffed, my eyes shooting to the ceiling at the audacity of his exaggerations.

“You broke me in the basement, remember?”

“For a time,” he concurred. “But it didn’t stick, did it?”

“Yeah, only because you *wanted* to put me back together.”

Darren shook his head. “No, Jaden. I may have given you the shovel, but you’re the one who dug yourself out.”

I looked up at him with indignation. Why the hell was he bringing this up now?

“You somehow managed to reshape yourself into something completely untouchable. And I lacked the foresight to see it coming.”

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

“You’re unrivaled, Jaden. Unmatched in every way. This”—he gestured to the bed—“means nothing. Because we both know it’s not going to stop you. It might slow you down for a minute, but it won’t hold forever. I’ve never seen someone come back from the dead as often as you have. And

you're always stronger for it every single time. So I know this will be nothing more than another temporary nuisance for you to thoroughly annihilate.”

My gaze sharpened at his appeasement, the scowl on my face deepening from the odd revelation of what I assumed was some fucked-up form of flattery. Because the only reason I was like this was because of all the shit he'd put me through over the years.

I was what he made me, and yet for some reason, he was giving me all the credit.

Grunting at Darren's declaration of me, I crossed my arms and looked away from the intensity of his watchful eyes. I didn't know how to take those kinds of “compliments” from him, especially while he stood there covered in the blood and guts of four dead men like some kind of modern-day Viking.

“So the next time you question your misfortunes, Jaden, remember what I told you.”

My gaze returned to his as I released a deep sigh of annoyance. I understood what he was saying.

I was built for endurance.

I couldn't argue with that. After everything I'd been through, I was still here. I might not be technically standing, but I sure as fuck wasn't dead yet.

Darren smirked. “Get some sleep, princess. Your morphine is about to get cut in half if it's enabling you to still be this destructive three days after major surgery. The pain will help keep you still until you learn not to aggravate your injuries like I'm sure you just did after this little display.”

My jaw dropped in utter disbelief. No fucking way was he serious.

“You're not serious,” I accused. But he was. Darren didn't make empty promises.

“Enjoy the numb while you can, little girl. You're in for a rough couple of weeks.”

Then he turned away and headed for the door, undeterred by the glass shattering under his boots. If I had just one more thing to throw at him, I would have chucked it right at the back of his head.

“How the fuck did you even get in here, anyway?” I shouted after him.

He chuckled softly, pushing the door open without another glance, leaving me alone to stew over it for the rest of the night. If I had known he was there the entire time, I would have waited until he was gone before destroying everything within reach.

Fine, keep your secrets, motherfucker.

And I'll keep mine.

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RECOVERY

Five weeks. Five long, slow, boring-as-fuck weeks of being trapped in this bed, buried down in this bunker of a hospital, unable to move barely an inch without disrupting the series of aches that plagued the lower half of my body.

True to his word, Darren had my morphine significantly decreased like the asshole he was, much to Sid's disapproval. Sid did get him to change his mind after a few days when he couldn't stand seeing me so damn miserable from the pain.

While it did keep me still like Darren had wanted, it also prevented me from eating or keeping anything down. So whatever meds Darren had ordered next were just as effective in keeping me still since they made me too damn tired to move. I went from torture victim one week to complete zombie the next.

Sid wasn't kidding when he said I had a long road ahead of me, and it felt like I'd barely left the fucking station.

While the first week was the hardest, and the second week barely a memory, the third week gave boredom a whole new meaning. I tried to sleep, tried to rest as much as I could, preferring to walk in my dream world than lie practically paralyzed in my real one. But eventually, my body was

done resting, and I had to face the boredom of reality and the bullet holes that burned through my pelvis.

I made the mistake of looking the first time the medical staff changed my dressings. And while the scar wasn't as big as I thought it would be, it was still ugly. I didn't want my body looking as battle worn as Darren's, not needing the reminders of all the shit I'd lived through. Between the wolf bite on my forearm, the bullet graze on my other arm, and the fucking initials carved into my ass, I had enough physical manifestations of trauma.

Don't even get me started on the tattoos on my wrists.

Being stuck in a sterile white room with no windows did wonders for my mental health, and my company wasn't all that great either. Like usual, Clive and Owen were shit for conversation, and Carla never had anything interesting to say. The most I could use them for was to play euchre for a few hours of the day until they refused to play any longer.

Poor Camaro didn't understand why I couldn't play with her, why I wouldn't get out of bed. She'd often put her paws up on the bed so I could scratch behind her ears and whine until someone finally told her to get down. I missed running with her at my side through the woods, trying my damnedest to outrun her, but she never gave an inch.

Eventually, I felt strong enough to play fetch with one of her toys, making a point to throw the ball directly at Clive's head as often as I could. It was only fair I get some entertainment out of it too, especially since I still owed him and Owen payback for the bunny slipper prank.

I watched a lot of movies, most of which were either action, mysteries, or documentaries. Comedies would make me laugh, and horror films would make me jump, so anything that would cause involuntary movement was automatically out.

There was also lots of reading, most of it medical to help me understand my condition and anything else I could learn about the human body. I was also given a small medical device that used ultrasound waves to help heal

my bones faster. I hoped it was working. I wanted to get the fuck out of this bed.

When I was strong enough to finally sit up on my own, I needed something else to do besides read and watch movies all day. Carla had offered to set up my art supplies next to my bed, to which I was only too eager to accept. We needed some damn color to distract me before my depression took the full-time shift.

When I was allowed any sort of pain medication, my physical pain would mostly be numbed away, but my emotional pain could withstand anything. When I'd been this injured last time, at least I had been surrounded by the beauty of the island and the ocean. But now I was stuck underground with no windows and no scenery to be had. Just blank white walls. I needed my art to help liven the place up.

The fear of my recovery didn't help either. The temporary loss of my hip function was detrimental to my ability to fight or move in any capacity. To be able to bear weight, to withstand force and exertion, to enable flexibility, support strength, and speed in motion. All of that was needed to complete a simple kick. And most days, I could barely move my knee without strain.

Sid would come in every day and try his best to be encouraging, reminding me to be patient while my bones healed and to enjoy the rest while I could. Because once they were healed, then the real hard work would begin—learning to walk again. I dreaded it as much as I looked forward to it. The frustration would be real, but at least I wouldn't be trapped in this bed anymore. I'd rather stumble around like a toddler than waste away under these sheets.

But the most surprising thing I found about being stuck down here was how little Darren visited me. At least while I was awake. After he'd magically appeared from the shadows that day, completely drenched in blood, I hadn't seen him for a week.

The times he did visit were brief, and he wasn't exactly the greatest company. Other people might find it difficult to read him, but I was so well-tuned to his very essence that I knew when something was off. I could sense it the second he stepped into the room, feel it touching my skin like a cloud of smoke. And while he may pride himself on keeping his emotions in check, I could see he was always on the verge of losing that carefully constructed self-control.

Darren's rage was palpable, a thick invisible fog that permeated the room so much so I almost found it difficult to breathe around him. Sometimes I'd wake up in the middle of the night and catch him watching me from my bedside. His eyes would pool with hatred when he looked at me, his gaze sweeping over my broken body. Like if he glared at it enough, it would heal itself out of fear of his wrath. And while physically this sucked for me, emotionally, I could see it fucked with him hard.

My injury was the manifestation that he was, in fact, not the master of everything. He could not control the universe or all the beings within it. My world was not as impenetrable as he had thought, especially behind the supposed safety of his gates. And he was beside himself.

Because it meant he had failed me. And he did not like to admit defeat.

It didn't matter that he had eviscerated the people responsible, that he had avenged me for what they did. It would never be enough. What was done was done and he couldn't do anything more for me than what he already had. For the first time, it seemed he was helpless. And it did not suit him.

It was such a strange fluke that no one could have predicted. Intentional infliction of harm was expected, but accidental? Unheard of. Unimaginable. Impossible. Not under Darren's watch. Everything was always under his control. Until it suddenly wasn't.

I supposed that, in the end, there might be some kind of silver lining. Eventually, I would physically recover and move on. But Darren would live

with this emotional turmoil for the rest of his life. Living with the fact that he'd been bested by chance.

If fucking with Darren's mental state required taking another bullet, would I do it again? I just fucking might. Because witnessing his internal struggle was too damn delicious. For once, he suffered alongside me, which made everything all the more bearable.

So when he came to me this morning with a surprise visit to tell me I was being moved out of the infirmary and back into our bedroom, I thought my favorite movie would be over. But we were just moving on to the sequel.

I couldn't help but notice how gentle Darren had been as he lifted me from my hospital bed and carefully placed me into the heavily padded seat of the wheelchair. His eyes scanned every twitch of my face as I absorbed the discomfort of sitting upright in a chair for the first time in over a month. I realized I was still holding up my weight from the arm of the chair, fearful of increasing the pressure I was already beginning to feel.

"How's the pain level, Mrs. Davis?" Sid asked, his voice laced with skepticism.

"Um," I murmured as I slowly lowered myself even farther into the seat, wincing with each inch.

"Fuck it, I'll just carry you," Darren insisted, his arms reaching out.

"No, no," I argued, a groan in the back of my throat. "It's fine. I'm fine."

When I finally allowed my entire body to relax into the chair, the pressure increased, causing me to suck in a huge breath as my hips adjusted to the added weight. The pain was dull, but it was still noticeable nonetheless.

Looking up at Darren and Sid, with the rest of the nursing staff surrounding us, I didn't want to give them a reason to keep me buried down here any longer. I wanted the fuck out.

“Really, I’m good,” I assured, hoping my fake-ass smile was convincing enough. I knew Darren could see right through it with the look he gave me, but he wouldn’t argue. He wanted me out of there just as much as I did.

Sid nodded. “Alright then, let’s go,” he said, signaling to one of the nurses to wheel my wheelchair to the door.

We all moved through the hallway like some kind of single unit, Darren to my right, Clive and Owen ahead and to my left with Camaro, while Sid, two nurses, and Carla made up the back, carrying my books and tablet. No one said anything as we piled into the giant elevator and returned to the world above.

When the elevator doors opened, I was reminded how much brighter the sun made everything look. I nearly winced as I was wheeled out of the elevator and down the hall toward the staircase. Pausing at the bottom, Darren reached down to lift me out of the chair.

“Put your arms around my neck.”

Reaching up, I gripped the hard, curved muscle of his wide shoulders and slid my arms around his neck. It was hard not to tense up as he placed his hands under my knees and carefully pulled my body to his chest. He took each step slowly, working hard not to jostle me until we reached the top. Clive carried up my wheelchair, but Darren refused to put me back in it, preferring to carry me the rest of the way to our bedroom.

The bed had been made up with far more pillows than I remembered, and a medical station had been set up next to my side.

With the covers pulled back, Darren carefully eased me down onto the bed, gently tucking my legs under the sheets. I held my breath as the pressure over my pelvis shifted. Closing my eyes, I leaned back against the pillows and waited for the discomfort to pass. When I opened my eyes again, everyone in the room was staring at me expectantly.

“What?” I said, cocking a brow. “*I’m fine.*”

“Are you sure?” Darren asked me, his big body leaning down to tuck my loose hair behind my ear. “You don’t need anything else to make yourself more comfortable?”

I couldn’t help but eye him suspiciously. He was being uncharacteristically delicate with me, and it was making me nervous.

I shook my head. “No, I’m okay for now.”

He nodded, a satisfied look on his face as he straightened back to his full height. “Good.”

“Yes, that is very good,” Sid commented, taking a step forward. “My staff will stop by every few hours to check on you, administer your medications, and bring you anything you might need. Do you have any questions? Concerns?”

That seemed a little excessive, but I shook my head either way, ready to lose my awkward audience.

“Okay then, rest easy.” Sid ushered his staff out of the room, leaving Darren, Carla, and my bodyguards behind.

Carla then walked around and placed my books and tablet on the table next to my bedside. “I’ll just leave these here for you. I’m going to go back and get the rest of your art supplies. Do you want them to be set up here for you as well?”

My eyes shifted to Darren to see if he would object, but he said nothing as he stared back at me, waiting for my answer. I was surprised he was being so lenient.

“No, they can go back in my studio for now. I’ll let you know if I want them.”

She nodded with a smile. “Okay then, I will take care of it.”

When she left the room, Clive and Owen took up their space on two sofa chairs set up for them near the door. That left me and my now brooding husband staring intently at each other.

“Something wrong?” I asked him.

He sighed heavily before shaking his head. “No. I’m just glad to see you back in our bed where you belong.”

I lifted my chin and nodded in acknowledgment. “It is definitely preferable to the infirmary. But I still hate being bedridden.”

“I know,” he said, his voice surprisingly solemn. “Give it two more weeks and we can start getting you out on the wheelchair more often.”

I smirked at him. “That’s a long way away. You can’t always be around to carry me up and down the stairs.”

Darren’s gaze darkened as he dipped his chin. “The hell I can’t.”

I shrugged, shaking my head at his intense determination. “If you say so.”

He then stepped closer to me, leaning down to cup my jaw in his big hand. “I have a few things I need to take care of, but I’ll see you at dinner.” Pressing his lips to mine, he kissed me in a way that left me aching for something more, and I hated him for it.

“Be a good girl,” he warned and headed for the door, pausing for a single glance back at me, his eyes flashing with something I didn’t initially recognize. Relief maybe? But then he left the room entirely before I could assess further.

After I watched him go, a deep longing echoed in my chest as I leaned back into the pillows. This past month had left me empty inside, an unbearable weight pressing against my heart as I internally urged my body to heal itself. As much as I hated the man, I felt neglected because Darren could barely stand to be around me in the infirmary. And now that I was back in our bed, I wondered how his treatment of me would differ. If at all.

Time would tell tonight.

FOUND



Seeing Jaden back in our bed brought a small sense of warmth and stability into my life. I needed her up here where I had better access whenever I wanted. It pained me to keep her down in the infirmary, but it was the best place for her. Especially since it meant she would be far away from me.

The last time she'd been this injured, Sid had recommended that I stay away from her. We both agreed that my presence often brought her anxiety, and stressing her out in any way during such a vulnerable state was not conducive to her recovery. As much as I loved to terrorize my wife on the daily, it was only enjoyable when she could actually fight back.

So like last time, I stayed away...at least as much as I could withstand.

Most of my visits occurred while she was asleep to avoid disturbing her. But that meant I would just stew in my unrelenting anger, watching her eyes wince at the slightest movement. No matter how many times I relived the moment of ripping apart the bodies of the men responsible in my head, it was never enough. Truthfully, it wasn't like I deserved the peace anyway, so I clung to that toxic cloud that followed me everywhere, reveling in its righteous punishment.

My failure was a knife digging deep into my back, and no matter what I did, I just couldn't reach it to rip the fucking thing out. It dug at me deeper every day.

I could teach Jaden everything I knew, train her to be the most lethal soldier alive, make her the most formidable opponent the world had ever seen. I could give her every resource imaginable to defend herself against any single threat that came her way and be wholly confident in her capabilities. But the one thing I couldn't do was make her fucking bulletproof.

Even with all the skills and resources in the world at my disposal, I was still bound by the limits of the human body. But Jaden was strong. I'd made damn sure of that. And if she was strong enough to survive me, then she could survive a fucking bullet. God knows I'd lost count of all the ones I'd taken over the years.

But now that Jaden's fractures were mostly healed, she was no longer in that fragile zone of potential infection or other complications. We could finally move on to the next step of her recovery. And I fully intended on participating.

"Sir! We finally found it," Eric said as he rushed into my office, his face lit with an excitement that didn't fit him. Missing significant portions of his ears did him no favors, but somehow, he still found a way to make himself useful.

Sitting back in my office chair behind my desk, I held my hand out. He hurried over and placed a small red velvet box in my waiting palm. When I lifted its lid, satisfaction swarmed as I looked down at Jaden's missing engagement ring, the one she told me had been stolen by Tony Graves's men when he made the *grave* mistake of taking her from me last year.

I'd had every single man, woman, and child I could think of looking for this damn thing, refusing to allow anyone to steal from me.

"Where was it found?"

“We traced it down to the shadiest pawn shop I’ve ever seen in Tempe, Arizona. Found the new owners pretty quickly and collected without issue.”

I nodded. “Good. Did you find out who originally had it?”

Eric shrugged, a frown tugging at his lips. “The security cameras didn’t get a good look at her face. She used a common name. But the shop owner remembered she was a real pretty blonde.”

That caught my attention.

“I want that security footage. And I want it yesterday.”

Eric nodded quickly. “Yes, sir,” he mumbled and rushed out of my office.

My gaze swept across the room as Eric shut the door behind him, the doubt and paranoia slowly sinking into my skin like a toxin. Denial tasted just as bitter, a refusal to accept even the slightest possibility.

A heavy sigh escaped me as I stared at the ring, rolling the tiny thing between my thumb and forefinger. It was a long shot. There were a lot of pretty blondes out there. But as suspicion ate at me, I needed to be sure.

Kayla’s body was never found. Jaden claimed she had to have died from all the blood she found in the room Kayla had been taken to at that storage facility. Maybe she’d been moved and killed somewhere else. Or maybe, by some divine miracle, she escaped them. Maybe Kayla was alive after all. But if that was the case, and this blonde at the pawn shop was the same girl, why would she have Jaden’s ring?

The thought chewed right through my skull, burrowing deep enough to drive me insane. Maybe Jaden knew Kayla was alive; maybe she didn’t. But if she had lied to me, knowing full well Kayla was alive, then I had to assume the worst—that Jaden had assisted in her escape.

My blood boiled at the thought. I had been so awestruck at the sight of my little warrior of a wife, covered in blood and dirt, with a rifle over her shoulder and a bloody machete in her hand, her hair wild and flowing while a building went up in flames at her back. I’d never been so caught up by a

singular moment when time stopped and all manner of thinking with it. I could have been stabbed in the chest and never have even noticed.

That particular scenario, that split second of distraction, would have been the only opportunity that would have allowed Jaden's lie to pass right by me unnoticed. I'd been a dumbstruck fool, but only momentarily. If anyone could accomplish such a thing, it would be Jaden.

But even so, it was an incredibly curious thing to consider. If Jaden had assisted, why hadn't she gone with Kayla? What made her stay behind?

She had to know I would find her. Even without the collar tracking her, Jaden could never escape me for very long. She'd never feel peace again, knowing she'd spend what little days she had left constantly looking over her shoulder, never being able to rest in one place for too long.

None of it would be worth it just for me to find her and drag her right back. And if she thought our time in the basement had been bad, she had no idea the lengths my cruelty could go. I would have made our time down there look like a fucking carnival.

And hopefully that had been the deciding factor if Jaden had helped but still chose to stay behind.

Because she fucking knew better.

She knew it wasn't worth it. And if that was the case, then maybe I could forgive her for her deception, for the hand she played in Kayla's escape. Because if Jaden was too afraid to run from me, knowing what the consequences would be, then there would be quite a victory celebration in my future. Because even when given the chance, she chose to stay instead.

And that was the trust I had been longing for since day one.

But that was the rare optimist in me. There was another possibility storming in the back of my mind that was utterly ridiculous to even entertain. Jaden's ex was still as elusive as ever, somehow still capable of evading my grasp at every turn.

If Kayla had lived and was smart, she would know she would never be able to return to her life before. Which meant she would have to find refuge on her own, or she would do what any spiteful bitch would do—seek revenge.

And who better to assist with that than the same man still searching for the woman who had just guaranteed Kayla's freedom? It was a wild theory, but I always considered every possibility imaginable, no matter how outlandish. But if that were the case, then perhaps I'd finally be able to kill two birds with one very large, jagged stone.

Looking down at my watch, I saw that there was still an hour before dinner. Heat bloomed in my chest at the thought of coaxing the truth out of Jaden, missing the way her body trembled in my arms when I confronted her.

The fear in her eyes did things to me I still couldn't explain, always pushing me to the edge of losing control. It was a fucking aphrodisiac I couldn't get enough of, watching those pretty hazel eyes widen and gloss over, her pupils dilating. She was so beautiful when she was terrified.

A fresh idea had my ass out of my chair and around my desk to head straight upstairs to my ensuite bathroom.

"Out," I ordered as I passed by Clive and Owen at the door and moved straight for the bathtub. I heard the bedroom door shut as I turned on the faucet and began filling the tub with hot water and the vanilla bath oils and salts that made Jaden's skin feel like fucking silk.

I could feel her suspicious eyes burning into my back as I turned the faucet off when the tub was full. I then took the ring from the box and tucked it in the corner ledge of the tub out of Jaden's sight.

Returning to the bedroom, I began to loosen the tie around my neck as I made my way over to my wife's side of the bed.

"What's going on?" she asked me casually, trying to keep her voice light.

Pulling the tie away, I removed my jacket and started unbuttoning my shirt.

“I thought we’d take a bath together before dinner,” I answered, tossing the shirt on the floor.

Jaden’s eyes roamed over my body as I kicked off my shoes and moved for my belt next, her little pink tongue sticking out to wet her lips. I kept my smirk to myself.

“Are you sure that’s a good idea?” she asked as she watched me step out of my pants.

“You’ll be fine,” I said as I removed the rest of my clothes and reached to grab the hem of the long nightgown she’d been wearing. She didn’t fight me as I gently pulled the gown from her body, her bare skin making my cock harden immediately.

Lifting her from the bed, I carried her to the bathroom and carefully eased us down into the steaming tub.

Jaden gasped as the water hit her skin but said nothing more as I gently placed her between my legs. Pulling her shoulders back, I had her shift more of her upper body weight onto my chest instead of her pelvis.

“Okay?” I asked, running my fingertips along her arms. Her body was still pretty stiff.

“Yeah,” she murmured, her hands pressing into my legs while her nails dug into my skin.

“Relax,” I coaxed, attempting to soothe her stiff demeanor. “Take a deep breath.” Her chest rose as she sucked in oxygen. “Now lie back as you exhale.” She did as she was told, finally loosening her limbs and allowing herself to lie back, resting her head against my shoulder. “How’s the pain?” I asked, drawing her hair back from her face so I could see her more clearly.

“It’s dull. I’m okay,” she replied, her voice breathy and constrained.

“Good,” I said, running my nose along her temple, taking in the scent of her hair.

An ache built in my chest from how much I missed holding her small body like this against my own. I had to fight the urge to crush her against me so we could never part. And the more she relaxed, the more I craved.

All I wanted to do was lift her hips and sink her onto my throbbing cock, to bask in that liquid heat of hers that was meant for me and me alone. But I knew it would be another month before I could even dream of just tasting her there.

Jaden was practically putty in my hands as she let me wash her body without protest, not a single curve left untouched. But when my fingertips grazed the circular scar at her pelvis, white-hot anger struck me.

Both entrance and exit wounds had healed nicely, but they would always remain a permanent physical reminder of my failure.

I didn't want to reflect on that now. I wanted to perform my responsibility of taking care of what was mine and satisfying all her needs. Now that she had no choice but to let me.

Moments like this sometimes brought me back to our time in the basement—times when I would bathe with her just like this. When she was wholly dependent upon me for literally every single thing, when I was the only thing she knew. I was her entire universe, the literal oxygen she needed to breathe and thrive.

We were miles away from that now. Ever since I watched Jaden emerge from the burning debris of the building she had destroyed, I knew I was no longer looking at the same girl.

She was the rising phoenix that left nothing but ash in her wake, and she didn't need shit from me anymore. I'd never felt so useless in my fucking life.

But now that fire bird had broken wings and needed to be nursed back to health. And just like that, Jaden went back to being the vulnerable little girl she'd been forced into when I held her down there in that cold, dark room.

The way her eyes would light up when I finally came to see her was truly intoxicating. Because I knew then how much she actually *needed* me.

She needed me to release her. Warm her. Bathe her. Feed her. Fuck her. Command her. Love her. And I craved giving her all of it, watching her body long for the things only I could give her. And when she'd been fully cared for, she turned into a kitten in my hands, purring so proudly just for me.

I missed that need in her. Missed the dependability she had in me. And suddenly that opportunity to relive it had returned to me. Now that it was here, I decided to capitalize on it for just a little bit longer.

It wasn't like Jaden needed to go anywhere anyway. Her duty to satisfy my needs didn't stop just because she was injured, and this was how she'd do it. By letting me take care of her the way I wanted to.

But before I could get any more lost in my little paradise than I already was, I had an agenda to complete before the water turned cold.

"I have a surprise for you," I drawled, reaching back to grab the ring I'd hidden in the corner ledge of the tub.

"Oh?" Jaden asked, her voice low and sleepy.

Taking Jaden's left hand from under the water, her entire body stiffened almost instantly as I slipped the ring on her finger to join her matching wedding band.

"Look what my men found," I said with enthusiasm, trapping her hand in mine so she could see what had finally been returned.

I watched all the color drain from Jaden's face, and a blaze of anger washed over me. Her chest was motionless as she held her breath, her eyes mimicking the sparkle of the exceptionally large diamond dwarfing her finger.

Finally, she spoke. "Where did they find it?" she asked, her voice small and quiet.

“It was traded at a pawn shop in Arizona, then sold to another couple before it was retrieved,” I answered, my eyes calculating every fraction of her face. “The shop owner said it was traded by a pretty blond girl.”

Jaden’s jaw clenched as she focused on not curling her left hand into a fist, the other one reaching under the water to rest against her hip.

Stress could cause inflammation, and as of right now, Jaden should not be feeling stressed. She should be relieved to have her ring returned to her, but that was clearly not the case.

“The couple—they’re still alive, right?” she asked.

I narrowed my eyes at her attempt to deflect. “Does it matter?”

“Yes, it does,” she exclaimed quickly, her slim fingers curling around my hand. “They shouldn’t have to suffer because they unknowingly bought a stolen ring.”

“I don’t know, and I don’t care,” I snapped, glaring down at her. “You said Tony’s men took your ring, but some girl sold it to one hell of a shady shop.”

Jaden’s brow furrowed as her mouth turned into a scowl. “What are you implying? Are you calling me a liar?”

I growled at her instigation. “I’m telling you that your story still has yet to be substantiated.”

I allowed Jaden to yank her hand from mine as she scoffed at my implications. “I don’t know what to tell you, Darren. Maybe she was a girlfriend, or maybe she stole it from them. I have no other explanation, and I don’t know why you’d even expect one from me.”

I took in a breath to ease my anger. The point of this was not to start an argument with her—just to observe her reaction. And I had my answer.

“Regardless, I will find the ones responsible for its loss. I imagine it’ll be difficult to continue stealing with two severed hands.”

“I imagine it will,” she agreed, her voice taking on a note of agitation.

“I imagine it will also be in your best interest to ensure it never leaves your finger again. Do I make myself clear?”

“Yes.”

“Good.”

Attempting to quell her obvious distress, I gently dragged my knuckle up and down her arm in a soothing manner. She sagged against me with a drawn exhale, her attempts to disburse the panic from her body a noticeable struggle.

The sound of the bedroom door opening announced our dinner had been delivered. I decided to have it brought up here so Jaden could eat comfortably in bed.

“That’s dinner,” I said, nipping her earlobe lightly with my teeth. Her body shivered against mine, making me smirk.

After carefully removing myself from behind her, I dried off and wrapped a towel around my waist. I then laid two towels down on the end of the bed and turned back to retrieve Jaden.

Releasing the plug, I gently lifted her from the tub, water spilling all over the floor as I carried her from the bathroom.

“You’re getting water everywhere,” she commented as I laid her on the towels.

“So what.” At least water didn’t need to be scrubbed out of the carpet.

I patted her legs dry while she dried her arms, the sight of her naked body laid out before me making me a crazed animal.

Reining it in, I left her to put on some sweatpants, and when I returned, Jaden had managed to drag herself off the towels and back to her side of the bed, having tucked her legs under the covers.

I eyed her disapprovingly but said nothing as I pulled the bed tray from under the bed frame and set it over her lap.

“Uh, can I at least have a shirt?”

I shook my head. “No.”

She scoffed, a scowl forming on her lips. “Why the hell not?”

“Because I said so. You don’t need clothes to eat dinner. And I’ve been deprived long enough.”

She rolled her eyes and folded her arms across her bare chest, glaring at me with the cutest kind of disdain.

Ignoring her irritation, I blazed through her mental barrier and took her face in my hands, kissing her with enough warning to remind her exactly who was still in charge.

But once her fingers wrapped around my wrist, stroking along my arm, I was reminded that while she was finally strong enough for me, she was still currently very fragile.

Releasing her face, I said nothing as I took the plate from the cart brought in and placed it on Jaden’s tray. We ate in silence as I put on the last documentary Jaden had been watching earlier in the day. Something about penguins.

She spent more time staring at the TV than on her own plate, but I knew she wasn’t actually watching. Her gaze was unfocused as she did what she always did when I laid my cards out on the table. She was calculating.

The alleged thieves of her ring should be inconsequential to her, yet here she was, broadcasting her silent turmoil like a fucking beacon.

Over the years, Jaden had crafted a pretty decent poker face, but I was an expert in her body language. And it told me exactly what I had hoped would never be possible.

Kayla was still very much alive.

HE KNEW



I slept like absolute shit. The whole night, I could hear myself screaming at the top of my lungs in my head, absolute terror ripping through my body. I woke up gasping nearly every hour, dreaming of the lie I thought I had so carefully concealed. I should have known better. I should have fucking known.

Shifting slightly to my side, I turned my back to the man who I could only hope was still asleep next to me. Darren was trained to be a light sleeper for a reason. He always had one eye open on the shadows around him. Sometimes I wished those shadows would just come and take me anyway. Maybe I'd be better off with them.

When I pulled my hand behind my pillow, the stupid diamond ring snagged against the pillowcase, making a noise that caused me to freeze. When no movement behind me followed, I gently pulled my hand away. My heart rattled in my chest as I twisted the cursed thing around my finger, its weight suddenly heavier than ever.

There wasn't a day that went by when I didn't think of Kayla, hoping like hell she made it out. Wondering if she had ever found Jason. At least I knew she made it as far as Arizona and got some money for the ring.

Hopefully, she got a good price for it. Even if she didn't find Jason, it would be enough to keep her safe and hidden for a while.

But it wouldn't last much longer.

Darren knew. There was no way he didn't. Not after my shitty performance of containing my shock and fear of the truth. If there was video footage of Kayla at the shop, then there would be no denying she was alive. And if Darren knew she was alive, he would hunt her down.

The question was, what would he do with her if she was found?

Would he return her to Matt to form a truce?

Would he sell her again to another buyer?

Or would he just kill her?

I took a deep breath to slow my racing heart at the thought of what might happen to Kayla. But then my heart stopped completely at the thought of what Darren would do to me if he found out I helped her. If he discovered just how much I had lied to him.

I could hear the rattling of my cage in the basement just ringing in my ears, echoing my name with a cruel, shrill laughter. My body shuddered.

No. I would not go back there. *I would not.*

I would strangle myself with my own fucking hair if he put me in that cage again.

I had to believe that Darren had zero evidence of my involvement and was only testing the waters yesterday by gauging my reaction to the return of my ring.

He clearly had reasonable suspicion for sure, but I prayed that was all he would ever have. If there was footage of her, my only hope would be to convince him that Kayla had to have stolen the ring from the same men I said took it from me and then made her escape.

Would he believe me? I doubted it. He knew I lied once already. My words would never hold credibility again.

I let a heavy sigh escape my lungs. I was so fucked.

When the sun began to bleed into the room from behind the cracks of the heavy curtains, I gave up trying to go back to sleep. Shifting back, I turned to look behind me and froze when I found an empty bed.

My eyes shot back up as they bounced around the dimly lit room, searching for the stealthy giant that snuck away without my noticing. I didn't even feel the bed move.

Suspicion was heavy when I found nothing in the room, no movement, not even a whisper of air. He'd disappeared like the shadow he was. Feeling his side of the bed, I found the sheets were only slightly warm. *Fuck*.

Sitting back against my pillows, I rubbed my puffy eyelids with the palms of my hands. And then I felt the air shift to my right.

"Looking for someone?" Darren asked, interrupting my peace and making me jump. The involuntary movement had me wincing from the jolt in my hip, my glare evident as my tired eyes found his. I wanted to admonish him for it, but the stern look he was currently wearing made me think better of it.

He stared down at me with that hard expression, wearing only a pair of black sweatpants with his arms folded across his naked chest. I felt my stomach tighten just looking at him.

He was such a massive man, broad and muscled, tattooed and scarred, merciless and lethal. A beautiful monster that stalked my nightmares and haunted my days. God, I fucking hated him.

"I didn't hear you get up," I said, wincing at him.

He relaxed his arms and slowly approached my side of the bed, taking a seat at the edge, right beside my hips. His dark blue eyes held mine captive.

I feared if I looked away even for a second, I would lose track of the predator right in front of me. I was exactly where he wanted me, trapped in place, but that didn't mean the hunt was over.

"You didn't sleep well," he stated, his eyes traveling down my body. It wasn't a question. Just a factual observation.

I tried to shrug him off, quickly compartmentalizing my anxieties and keeping my voice even.

“My hip was bothering me throughout the night. Made it difficult to sleep comfortably.” It wasn’t a total lie. My hip did ache throughout the night. It just wasn’t the main reason I didn’t sleep.

Darren’s focused gaze traveled down to stop at my hips, making my skin warm under his scrutiny. I didn’t like it.

My eyes glanced at Camaro’s bed in the corner of the room, wishing she’d wake up already and cause some kind of intervention. The lazy dog couldn’t even guard me from awkward silences.

“What’s on your agenda today?” I asked with a yawn, hoping to change the subject.

“You are,” he replied, his eyes returning to mine.

“Oh?” I said, arching a brow, my arms raised mid-stretch.

“Mm-hmm,” he affirmed with a nod. “I cleared my whole day just for you.”

Joy.

I eyed him suspiciously. “I’m sure whatever you had planned is far more exciting than spending your entire day in bed with me. I’m pretty boring right now.”

He shook his head with a smirk. “Boring is the last word I would ever use to describe you. Besides, now that I have you back in our bed, I’m not feeling as inclined to leave it so soon.”

I eyed him carefully, my stomach clenching nervously at his sudden change in routine. After our minute revelation yesterday, I wasn’t quite ready to immerse myself back into his full attentions just yet. But I couldn’t let him believe there was anything wrong. I had to continue proving my false innocence.

I revealed a small smile. “And just what are we supposed to do in bed all day?”

He knew damn well he couldn't fuck me yet, so what the hell did he have planned?

He lifted a brow, a look of pure innocence flashing across his eyes. "How about a movie marathon?"

I paused, drawing back in surprise at his suggestion. "What movie series?"

He shrugged. "I'll let you decide. Just don't pick something I'll consider to be a form of torture. Otherwise, I'll have to find other ways to entertain myself," he said, his fingertips sliding up my exposed thigh.

I pursed my lips at his warning, watching as he stepped away from the bed to head into the closet. After helping me with my morning routine, Darren emerged from the bathroom freshly showered and shaved, smelling absolutely divine.

As much as he didn't want to see me in any clothes, wearing only his t-shirt was apparently a suitable compromise to ensure breakfast could be served without drama or bloodshed.

So when the knock came on our bedroom door, I made sure the sheets covered my entire lower body before Darren answered it with just a towel still around his waist.

Clive and Owen rolled the cart inside with a large tray on top of it, stopping at the front of the bed while Darren headed back into the bathroom.

"Aw, thanks, Betty Crocker, but aren't you two supposed to be wearing frilly kitchen aprons or something?" I snarked as I watched them set up my bed tray and fill a plate for me.

Neither one of them said anything as Clive placed my tray over my lap and set my plate down with a glass of orange juice. I slumped in slight disappointment. They wouldn't chide with me when Darren was nearby. It didn't mean they wouldn't pay me back when he was out of earshot.

“Jaden, you shouldn’t tease your bodyguards,” Darren scolded me as he walked out of the bathroom.

“If they can take a bullet for me, then they can certainly take a joke as well,” I retorted.

Owen snorted while Clive shook his head as he tried to hide his smirk.

“Besides, I still owe them for the bunny slipper prank they pulled.”

Darren’s brows furrowed. “What bunny slipper prank?”

I folded my arms as I stared Clive and Owen down as they tried to hide their smirks. “These two jesters thought it would be funny to have me complete that last training exercise in a pair of obnoxious fuzzy white bunny slippers.”

Darren’s eyes shot over to my two bodyguards, but neither of them met his gaze.

“Is that what those were? Bunny slippers?” he questioned, his tone lighter than expected.

“Mm-hmm,” I replied. “I think a little payback is warranted.”

“Hey, you wore those slippers like a champ,” Owen chimed in, pointing at me. “Despite how ridiculous you looked, we were pretty impressed with how well you did in them.”

I scowled at him. “They were incredibly difficult to sneak around in.”

Clive folded his arms in front of his chest and stared down at me. “No one forced you to wear them, Jaden,” he reminded me. “Anyone else would have gone barefoot, but not you. You accepted the challenge and dominated your opposition in literal bunny slippers.” He then started to chuckle. “It was probably the funniest thing I’ve ever seen.”

I rolled my eyes. “I’d like to see you guys do your job in bunny slippers. We’ll see who’s laughing then.”

Darren’s eyes suddenly darkened as his mouth lifted into a sneer. “Maybe you will,” he said to me. I smiled back with devious hopefulness.

Darren then dismissed my bodyguards and fixed himself a plate, sitting beside me on the bed. I'd been given a generous portion of scrambled eggs, bacon, a stack of pancakes, and a small bowl of fruit. I wanted to roll my eyes at the ridiculous amount of food that Clive had piled onto my plate.

"So what are we watching?" Darren asked as he sipped his coffee.

I thought for a minute about what he might find enjoyable to watch that also happened to have sequels. And then an interesting one struck.

"How about *The Matrix*?" I suggested.

Darren shrugged as he considered it. "Sure. I've never seen it."

I dropped my fork, instantly appalled.

"You've never seen *The Matrix*?" I nearly growled. "It's like, my favorite trilogy."

He chuckled slightly under his breath. "Well, I guess that settles it then."

A sense of eagerness overcame me at the thought of his reaction to the films. They were action movies, after all, so he should be able to find something to like about them. At least I hoped.

Aack. Why the fuck did I care if he liked them or not? Fuck him. I should have chosen Star Wars.

Darren was surprisingly silent throughout the movie, but I could tell he was making a professional assessment, especially regarding the fight scenes and weaponry.

"Well, I can see why you'd like it," he commented as the credits began to roll.

"Did you like it?" I asked as I pulled my head from his shoulder that I had been leaning on for his benefit.

He shrugged. "It was decent. The fight scenes are way too choreographed to be realistic, but I can appreciate the skill that went into them."

I nodded in agreement. “I think they’re meant to be more entertaining than realistic.”

“Probably, but the number of mistakes made during production were getting a little annoying.”

I frowned at him. “What mistakes?”

He smirked. “In one scene, Trinity is holding a Beretta 92F to an agent’s head, and then it suddenly switches to a Beretta 84F when she pulls the trigger.”

I rolled my eyes. “You would notice that.”

“Also, the bomb they dropped in the elevator had mercury switches, which is a poor choice since the mercury could touch the contacts during the fall and cause a premature explosion.”

I glared at him. “You know this movie came out in 1999, right?”

He shrugged. “The premise itself is a little faulty too. Whatever energy the machines could extract from humans would likely equal the same amount of energy needed just to keep them alive. Not a very good power source.”

I scowled at him. “I think the machines had very limited options. Are you done shitting all over one of my favorite movies?” I growled.

“Alright, alright, I’ll stop.” Darren chuckled, raising his palms in surrender.

“Thank you,” I said with a glare.

“But Tank also gave Trinity instructions for the wrong helicopter. It was a B-212, yet the program he downloaded was for a B-260 shown on his computer.”

I grabbed one of the smaller throw pillows and chucked it at his stupid head.

REVELATION



The soft sound of steady, rhythmic breathing cascaded across my skin, flowing gently into my ears like a delicate sonata. It pained me to admit that such a sweet sound could calm my undying rage. A remedy to swiftly lull me into a sense of tranquility unmatched by any others. But it was only due to the source of that sound.

Warmth filled my chest as I stared down through the bars of the metal cage that contained my most precious possession. The pale skin of her naked body contrasted so beautifully with the purple bruises marking her, the aftereffect of my brutal touch.

Her chest slowly rose and fell, drawing my eyes to her hardened nipples that had peeked out from behind her slender arms. She'd been clutching her chest all night to keep herself warm, but eventually, she learned to sleep through the shivers I purposely plagued her with. My beautiful, adaptable little soldier.

Glossy strands of red hair had fallen over her angelic face, only poorly shielding her from my gaze. I suddenly had an urge to run my fingers through it, relishing the softness before wrapping it tightly around my fist like a leash.

And she'd love me for it. Because that was who she was now. My toy. My doll. My little puppet. Just waiting for me to play with her.

In a matter of weeks, I'd successfully reduced Jaden to nothing more than a sweet little pet.

It took patience, time, and so much discipline, but eventually, everybody broke. Even the strongest of us. And with the mind games I liked to play, Jaden never stood a chance, especially with a pretty shock collar around her neck.

Psychological torture was an art form in warfare, and I happened to be a very talented artist. Jaden was not weak-minded by any means, and conditioning her had been a challenge I couldn't help but enjoy.

But every day, little by little, that steel trap surrounding her mind would crack. And those little cracks were enough to allow me to slither through to tamper, and corrupt, and rewire everything I wanted. With enough pressure, Jaden became play-dough in my hands, and it was my greatest pleasure to mold and shape her to my liking.

I'd warned her of the inevitable so long ago when I'd had her dangling from those chains, fighting me with everything she had, still believing she had a choice. Back when she was still just a dollar sign at the warehouse.

And while I had broken her, the little spitfire had also successfully broken me.

For the first time in my life, I found myself alarmingly obsessed. To such a disturbing degree that I would compromise my own sanity and relentlessly fixate until my mind was so damn distracted I could focus on nothing else.

I'd never wanted anything with such an intense urgency before in my life. This tiny sprig of a girl had consumed me entirely, mind, body, and soul, and there was no escaping her. I was well and truly gone, tortured by a prize that had grabbed my soul by the throat and ruthlessly claimed it.

The strength of my obsession was unrivaled, and even when I'd finally acted and taken her, it did nothing to dull the flame. It just grew and grew

until the blazing inferno threatened to burn us both to the ground.

The lengths I would go to for this woman—to keep her in my grasp and under my control—was boundless. There couldn't have been a deadlier fixation.

Jaden was mine. And to my detriment...I was hers.

Bending down, I unlocked the cage and pulled the top up to let it lean against the wall, careful not to wake my Sleeping Beauty.

Lifting her small, shivering frame from the cage, I carried her to the bed and gently laid her under the sheets. I then shed the rest of my clothes and got in with her, pulling her freezing-cold body into my chest and wrapping my arms tightly around her.

I sighed with contentment at the feel of her against me, her head pressing against my chest as she slept. I ran my thumb along the side of her soft cheek, the yellow blemishes of a fading bruise I'd given her the week before catching my attention.

It paired well with the healing split lip that followed, a reminder of how valuable her silence was when facing my wrath.

Even deep in her sleep, Jaden's response to me was almost immediate as she burrowed herself further into my chest, seeking what only I could give her. She knew the source of her comfort and understood that anything and everything she needed would always come from me and only me.

Clothing her, feeding her, bathing her, fucking her—it all came from me. It took her a long time to accept and adjust, but eventually, she learned to stop biting the hand that fed her.

Jaden's reliance on me was now so deeply embedded into her brain that she wouldn't even walk unless I told her she could. She knew that I didn't want her moving a single inch unless I either carried her or gave her explicit permission.

One single unauthorized step could land her in a world of pain she'd learned long ago how to avoid. Her first instinct now would be to crawl to

me on command before ever assuming I'd allow her the privilege of autonomy—of choice.

Appeasement was her goal now. And she was getting damn good at it.

I held her like that for another thirty minutes before she finally stirred in my embrace. Her eyes fluttered open, a quiet morning grumble escaping her throat before she realized where she was. And when she did, a sleepy smile formed on her lips, and her eyes closed again as she pressed further into me.

“Morning,” she whispered sweetly.

Clutching her tightly, I kissed the top of her head, loving how she felt in my arms like this—soft, sleepy, malleable, and completely mine.

“Good morning,” I murmured, brushing her hair from her face and running my fingers through the silky strands.

And what a morning it would be.

My eyes opened immediately, the last fragments of the memory fading away as I quickly surveyed the bedroom. Once satisfied, I lay back into the bed, releasing a deep breath, and adjusted my raging hard-on, courtesy of a very fond pastime. A time much like today, minus the feisty attitude and sharp tongue.

I glanced to my right to find Jaden still sleeping quietly, her body curled into itself. Recognizing the tell, I reached over and pulled her to me, pressing my chest into her back and burying my nose in her hair. I smiled as her body instantly melted into mine, my warm embrace giving her exactly what she needed.

She'd been back in this bed for the last three weeks, and now I never wanted her to leave it. I couldn't help but draw the parallels between our time in the basement and now.

Once again, she was entirely reliant on me to take care of her, and I fucking loved it. Her dependence satisfied a need in me to provide and

protect, something the little brat had continuously robbed me of time and time again.

Falling back into an old, familiar routine had me relishing the past. Just knowing that Jaden was essentially trapped in our bed, unable to leave without my permission, unable to do nothing but wait for me to give the orders, was an antidote to my never-ending fury.

The knowledge that she was always there, stuck like a baby bird in a nest, gave me a sense of relief I didn't know I needed. She was safe in our bed. She was cared for in our bed. And I would always know exactly where she was, right where she belonged.

But her bones had already healed, and soon, she would need to fly away from the protection of the nest. And while I knew I couldn't keep her trapped here forever, I intended to clip the growing feathers of her wings for just a little bit longer while I still could.

Jaden could fly when I was damn well ready to allow it. And that time had not come yet.

But while I wouldn't let her fly, I had no issue with watching her crawl.

When Jaden finally woke, a sleepy moan vibrating from her back to my chest, sinister ideas were already forming in my head.

"Is it morning already?" she mumbled.

I pressed my lips to her temple. "It is," I confirmed.

"Boo, hiss."

I smirked. "I don't know what you're complaining about. It's not like you're going anywhere."

"No shit," she whispered in disappointment.

Normally, I'd give her ass a good hard smack for that one, but I didn't want to disrupt her rehabilitation, so I took one of her nipples between my fingers and twisted. She jolted, a sharp gasp leaving her throat just as I released her.

“I heard that,” I warned, ignoring her huff of irritation as I turned to get out of bed.

Getting a start to her morning routine, I carried Jaden into the bathroom. By the time we emerged, we’d both been freshly showered, clothed, and her breakfast awaited her on the newly made bed.

I carried Jaden back to the bed, placing her in my lap, and proceeded to feed her every bite on her plate, much to her annoyance.

“My arms aren’t broken, you know,” she reminded me between bites, keeping her tone somewhat playful.

I cocked a brow. “And?” I replied, holding another forkful of scrambled eggs to her mouth. She pursed her lips for a second but then opened to wrap her lips around the fork.

“And I think it’s time you should probably stop babying me. I can’t get stronger if you’re constantly doing everything for me,” she stated carefully, maintaining a teasing smile to lessen the blow.

“Ah,” I said, holding up the last bite of her plate to her before placing the tray on the nightstand. “Is that what you think I’m doing? Babying you?”

“What else would you call it?”

“Taking care of what’s mine,” I shot back.

She raised a brow, undeterred. “Would that also involve me getting back on my literal feet anytime soon?”

My eyes narrowed at the question because currently, it would not.

“So eager to escape your confines, aren’t you?” I pressed.

She tilted her head with a glare on her pretty face. “Yes, because I’m clearly living my best life over here.”

“I’m certainly enjoying it. Helplessness has always looked good on you.”

She furrowed her brow, the disdain very obvious on her face. “Okay, now you’re just being an asshole.”

Snatching her throat, I slammed her back into the bed, looming over her as I tried to keep my agitation in check.

“Careful, princess. Being an ungrateful little brat toward your husband is no way to start the day,” I growled down at her.

She glared back up at me, unfazed. “I want to start walking, Darren. My bones have healed. This has gone on long enough.”

“That’s not up to you.”

She groaned loudly in frustration, both her hands grabbing onto the arm that kept her pinned down.

“What do I have to do to get out of this bed?” she practically yelled. “I can’t take any more of this. I need to move!”

I said nothing as I glared down at her desire to thwart my plans for her recovery. But the sinister thoughts I had earlier returned for another chance to manifest into reality.

“Okay, Jaden, you don’t want me to baby you anymore? Tough shit. You’re mine to do with as I please.” She scoffed at me, the scowl on her face only making her look even more adorable. “But if you really want to get back on your feet, then you’re going to have to get through the *baby steps* before anything else.”

She huffed out a breath, the frustration growing on her face when she struggled to get her way.

“Anything. As long as it gets me out of this bed, I’ll do anything.” I could hear the desperation in her voice. Maybe the morning could be salvaged after all.

Oh, little girl, you’re going to regret those words.

Smirking, I grabbed her hips and pulled her off the bed to place her ass on the floor. She looked up at me incredulously as I walked away and sat down on the sofa across the room.

“What’s the first thing a baby has to do before it can learn to walk?” I asked her.

Her eyes shot down to the floor, a look of worry passing over her pretty face before realization dawned on her. Her shoulders slowly sank as she sighed with disdain.

“Crawl,” she answered solemnly.

I leaned forward, letting my hands hang between my knees, and then pointed at the empty space in front of me.

“Crawl to me, Jaden,” I ordered. “And maybe then I’ll consider the next step in allowing you to kneel for me.”

I watched her gaze sharpen, the fire blazing in her eyes at my taunting. But that fire quickly turned into smoke as she scanned the distance between me and her.

Jaden had a long way to go, but if she wanted it as badly as she said, she’d do whatever it took.

“Come here, little girl. I want to see that ass moving.”

I could see her gritting her teeth, the tension in her jaw likely causing quite the headache.

Finally gathering her strength, she placed her hands on the floor and leaned forward until her knees supported her.

A tight grimace escaped her features, but she hid it away quickly, stretching out her hand to grip the carpet. Her hips wobbled slightly as she moved, but she seemed to stabilize herself after a few feet.

I didn’t like her eyes deliberately avoiding mine as she slowly crept across the carpet, her focus in all the wrong places.

“Look at me,” I ordered, my voice stern enough to make her visibly shudder. “Keep your eyes on me.”

Jaden lifted her gaze in annoyance, a fresh scowl growing on her face. But in that singular moment, she suddenly paused, halting in place on her hands and knees. I arched a brow at her expectantly.

“I don’t recall telling you to stop.”

And just like that, I felt a sudden shift in the air.

The energy in the room began to drastically change, making the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. Jaden never even said a word.

She just stared back at me with sharp deliberation, her eyes beginning to glow with a familiar animalistic ferocity that warned of an impending danger just over the horizon. It drew me in almost immediately.

Lowering her chin, Jaden narrowed her eyes to create the sexiest little glare, her shoulders rolling as she arched her spine. A sly little grin peeked from the corner of her mouth as she resumed her pace, inching closer and closer to me.

Like a hellcat ready to pounce and devour.

Fuck.

In an instant, I was insanely hard, my mind transported back to a time that made my blood rush with a primal hunger I was dying to unleash. Even with her temporary disability, my wife still managed to make crawling look so damn sexy when she stared at me like that.

Jaden was a goddamn professional at malicious compliance. The kind of expertise that could deceive so easily, betraying my own desires and coaxing me into a false sense of control that had long ago slipped right through my fingers, completely undetected.

She could be so dangerously persuasive like that, convincing me she was the one wrapped around my finger, not the other way around.

Jaden's ability to boldly flaunt defiant obedience with such ease and enticing sensuality was truly a flawless art form I could worship all day. A beautifully calculated rebellion disguised as submission flying right under the radar.

How she managed to holster that kind of power and use it against me was a mystery, but considering how good she made it look, I was only too happy to be a willing victim. She showed me exactly how a queen ruled her king with surrender, wielding it with a ruthless precision strong enough to bring me instantly to my knees.

She was only five feet away from me, and my cock became so painfully hard I had to work to restrain myself from shoving her face to the floor and fucking her into oblivion.

But if I ever wanted to fuck her that hard again, I had to keep myself in check. And it just made me want to relive ripping those fuckers apart responsible for depriving me of the sweet nirvana hidden between Jaden's thighs.

When she finally reached me, she gently sat back on her legs, her big hazel eyes burning with defiance.

"Satisfied?" she asked smoothly.

"No. Open your mouth."

Grabbing the back of her neck, I tangled my hand in her hair and yanked her up to her knees. The action caused her lips to part in a painful grimace, giving me the opportunity to pull my dick out and shove it right in her mouth.

I only gave her a few seconds to adjust before I began fucking her throat like it owed me money. The wet heat of her mouth instantly satisfied the dark urge inside me that hankered to conquer her every single day.

"Fuck," I muttered, gripping the back of her head with both hands to keep her in place, making her reach up to grasp my forearms for support. Just watching my cock slide in and out of her mouth after going so long without was enough to drive me insane. But once again, her eyes were still definitely elsewhere. "Look at me," I growled, thrusting a little harder for emphasis.

She whimpered, but her watery eyes shot up to mine, tears leaking down the sides of her beautifully flushed face. I pulled out just long enough to allow her a single breath before plunging back in and taking what belonged only to me.

Like the goddess she was, her hand trailed lower from my hips until she cupped my balls, squeezing and rolling them in her palm, driving me

insane.

Good fucking girl.

A raw growl reverberated up my throat at the feel of her delicate little hands on me, dutifully fulfilling her purpose, obliging the role I'd given her no choice but to accept.

Jaden's devotion to satisfying my needs was so finely tuned and profound, it was a marvel that such a gorgeous creature could exist so perfectly. The pride of my ownership of her swelled through my chest, a fierce possessiveness taking over as I surged inside my favorite toy.

"You are so fucking *mine*," I snarled.

Jaden groaned, the vibration in her throat giving me that final push as I bore down on her and came down her throat, holding her still until she swallowed every drop.

When I finally pulled out, Jaden instantly dropped to the floor as I released her to tuck myself back into my pants.

"Now I'm only marginally satisfied," I said, the heat in my voice barely satiated as I reached down to lift Jaden from the floor. She coughed and sputtered in my arms, still trying to catch her breath while she wiped the tears and saliva from her face.

"I stand by what I said. You're still an asshole," she snapped.

I gently set her down on the bed and placed my hands on either side of her head, leaning over her and caging her in.

"You said you'd do anything. Next time, choose your words more wisely," I warned, then pulled away to finish getting ready for the day.

As it turned out, Jaden had managed to salvage the morning after all.

I LEFT Jaden to wallow in her boring day and headed down to my office, finding Scott at the conference table with a tablet in his hands. His focus

was intense, his brows furrowing as he watched whatever the hell was going on in front of him.

“What now?” I asked, folding my arms across my chest as I stood over him.

He shook his head. “I got tired of waiting for you to review this footage.”

My jaw clenched. I knew what footage he was talking about. The one I had ordered immediately but couldn’t bring myself to watch for fear of what it would reveal.

I’d had it for weeks, but I knew if I saw what had occurred right under my nose, I didn’t know what condition I would leave Jaden in once I was done punishing her. I thought it would be better to wait until she was fully recovered before I unleashed that kind of unbridled wrath on her.

But evidently, Scott was too impatient for that.

I sighed as I pinched the bridge of my nose, dreading the answer.

“Tell me it’s not her.”

Grumbling, Scott slid the tablet over, pausing the security footage of a small blonde woman standing at the counter of a pawn shop. The hood of her jacket covered most of her head, but from this angle, it was impossible for her to hide not only her pretty face, but the sparkle of the little blue diamonds collaring her neck.

I closed my eyes as a blinding fury seeped through my veins like an acidic poison, disturbing every cell in my body. Without thinking, I grabbed the arm of the chair closest to me and whipped it across the room, finding only a modicum of satisfaction as it splintered to pieces on the floor.

“FUCK!”

Planting my hands on my hips, I paced the room, trying my absolute damnedest to keep myself from going upstairs and throttling Jaden until her blood soaked through the fucking sheets. That conniving little...

“This doesn’t necessarily mean Jaden had a hand in it,” Scott reminded me.

I lifted my head and glared at him. We both knew better than that.

“She still had the fucking collar on,” I grumbled, throwing my hand up as I continued to pace. “So somehow she was able to block the tracking signal.”

“And it’s likely been removed by now,” Scott added. “This was months ago.”

I stopped pacing and turned to look out the window, thinking back to the day Kayla and Jaden were kidnapped.

“Tony had a blocking device on him. She must have gotten ahold of it somehow.”

“So either she stole it from Tony, or she stole it from the men Jaden claimed had killed her.”

Or Jaden helped her steal it.

“If they planned to relocate Kayla, they would need the blocker with them. But why bother? If they weren’t planning on returning her, why not just remove the damn collar? It was their fucking design, for fuck’s sake. It shouldn’t have been hard.”

My thoughts were laced with suspicion. Kayla didn’t have the training. I couldn’t see her successfully escaping a fucking playpen, let alone the clutches of another captor.

“Maybe she escaped before they could take it off,” Scott answered.

I frowned. “The fact that she would be able to escape at all is already hard to believe. But successfully escaping with the blocker? Even less likely.”

“But not impossible.”

No, not impossible.

Jaden had destroyed that entire building, an unlikely accident on her part. Which conveniently destroyed any security footage from inside or out.

“Jaden could have just as easily found Tony, taken the blocker, and then handed it and her ring over to Kayla. Then destroyed the building and any evidence of her involvement along with it.”

That was far more believable than Kayla escaping on her own.

“But why risk the exposure by giving her the ring?” Scott asked. “It couldn’t have been useful in Kayla’s escape.”

“No, but the money Kayla could get for the ring would help her evade recapture and disappear forever.”

Scott sighed as he sat back in his chair, crossing his arms over his chest.

“I hate to say it, but that sounds like something Jaden would do,” he said, his tone almost apologetic. “But if she did help Kayla, you’ve got to take the win that she didn’t go with her when she had the chance.”

That was the only redeeming lining keeping me from breaking more bones in her body. Even if she had helped Kayla, she still chose to stay. At least I hoped that was the circumstance. The opportunity of escape might not have been suitable for two people at the time.

“We’re assuming Jaden had the chance to even consider it. Kayla may have had no choice but to leave her behind,” I reasoned. “Either way, Jaden still lied to me.” Her body had already confirmed it.

“Maybe she knows where she was headed then.”

I shook my head. “I doubt it. Jaden would have told her to keep it to herself, so even if I did find out, she wouldn’t be able to give her up, even if she wanted to.”

Scott nodded. “So where would she go to hide?”

“She’s just untrained, not dumb, so she would know to stay away from anyone she knew who could recognize her.”

I started pacing again, my arms folding over my chest as I went over the unlikely possibilities of her escape. Maybe I wasn’t giving Kayla enough credit. She had managed to make it this far for this long without being detected. But I was not convinced she had done it all alone.

“She had to have had help somewhere along the line. She doesn’t have the skills to remain hidden for this long,” I mused.

Was there anyone Kayla could rely on? A single ally in the world she could hide behind and trust to keep her safe?

And then it hit me like a punch to the gut. There was only one person I could think of that she might have sought out, the one person she would know who has managed to remain undetected throughout all my efforts. No doubt Jaden would have told her about the son of a bitch at some point.

“She found Jaden’s ex.”

Scott’s eyes lit up with recognition. It was the only thing that made sense.

“Well, fuck,” he growled.

“We need to double our efforts. If Kayla did find that fuck, then she had to have left a trail somewhere. Plus, she may still prove useful in getting Matt to back the fuck down.”

I’d gladly hand her right back over to Matt if it meant I could get him off Daniel’s ass and save myself the aggravation. But if he somehow managed to kill Daniel, then I’d kill her and send him the recording.

Scott nodded in agreement. “I’ll dispatch another team specifically for her. She had to have made some mistakes along the way. If we find her, we find him.”

I released a heavy sigh as a new plan was formulated. But even that wasn’t enough to quell the fresh rage still blazing through my blood.

If I saw Jaden now, I might just accidentally kill her. The only proof I had of her involvement was circumstantial at best, but her body would always tell me the truth no matter how much she tried to mask it.

I would need to be tactful in this, patient, let her believe nothing was wrong until the time was right to confront her about her deception.

Suddenly, my need to ensure Jaden’s swift recovery was overshadowed by a need to punish her for trying to undermine me.

For fucking lying right to my face.

If she thought she was getting out of that bed anytime soon, she had another thing coming. I was going to drag it out until it drove her so crazy she'd be begging me to let her walk again.

And I did so love it when she begged.

It was time to give her a little taste of the past and remind her of her fucking place.

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BABY STEPS



The past two weeks threw me for a loop. After forcing me to crawl like the asshole he was, Darren had disappeared for three days.

No one would tell me where he was, and I didn't care to keep pressing it. When he did return, he seemed different, broody, reserved, and incredibly stern.

For some reason, he took it upon himself to be my primary caretaker, which was odd, seeing as he never had this much time for me before.

He was annoyingly attentive, dutiful in every way, reliable to a fault, and suspiciously eager to help whenever and wherever he could. In fact, he rarely let me do a single thing without his assistance, and it was driving me nuts. I was temporarily disabled from the waist down, not a quadriplegic.

He was also oddly strict when Sid suggested I start doing light exercises in bed, only allowing me to do them once a day so I wouldn't strain myself, which was absolute nonsense. I had rested enough and was dying for some movement.

Unfortunately, Darren's aptitude for the role of nursemaid was quickly overshadowed by the smug cloud of arrogance he exhumed each time I had

to surrender my dependence to him. It seemed he enjoyed being my sole provider of every need I could not acquire or handle for myself.

He preferred to carry me rather than let me use the wheelchair. He'd taken a liking to hand-feeding me whenever he could, which was annoying as fuck. And he was the only one allowed to bathe me, something he strived for nearly every day.

And while he thrived in practice, the actions haunted me from another time I preferred to forget entirely. The nightmares of my time in the basement had finally begun to wane, allowing me some moments of peace when I was able to sleep. But the longer Darren continued to be my sole caretaker, the more I feared I'd fall back into that dark abyss with zero control.

Given that it had been about two and a half months now, my bones had healed. Most of my pain had dissipated two weeks ago, and the only discomfort I had was due to the developing muscle atrophy. Which was another reason I needed to get the fuck up and start moving.

But Darren refused to let me do anything until I had the X-rays to prove without a doubt that my bones were healed. And according to Sid, the X-ray machine had conveniently been "inoperable" for the past week.

So after spending days and days annoying the absolute fuck out of Darren to get it fixed, it was finally magically working again this morning. I practically jumped out of Darren's arms when Sid confirmed what we all knew weeks ago.

I was so damn relieved at the prospect of beginning occupational and physical therapy to get my ass walking again. But for some bullshit reason, I was forced to wait another week to start. And it pissed me off.

I begged Darren for days and got nowhere. Literally. I was seriously about to start fist-fighting the motherfucker in bed, my legs be damned. I still had working arms.

I warned him that if he didn't give the green light soon, I would do it on my own without medical assistance. He threatened to tie me to the bed if I ever tried. So naturally, I just ... snapped.

I screamed at him until my voice was hoarse, the cuss words flowing from my mouth like another language. I told him there would be no bed to tie me to if I destroyed the fucking thing before he could even find the restraints.

I expected a full reprimand for the rainbow of colorful language I'd unleashed on him, but all he did was smirk and leave the bedroom. I was so angry I threw all the pillows from the bed across the room, not giving a shit if they knocked anything over.

Camaro attacked and chewed up the pillows like they were some kind of threat. She was so confused. I ended up ripping the top sheet to shreds until my arms and hands ached.

Clive and Owen gave me a standing ovation when I finally finished raging. I warned them the bedside lamps would be aimed at their heads next if they didn't immediately fuck right off.

I was so damn eager to get back on my feet, to break my reliance on others, especially Darren. And I didn't understand why he was so reluctant to let me.

It was visibly noticeable the better I got at completing my exercises in bed, the grumpier he would get. But he needed to get the fuck over it. Once I could walk again, he wouldn't be able to treat me like a fucking newborn anymore.

But today, he finally, *finally* relented. I was so relieved to see Sid and his medical team enter the room like they were my damn saviors. I knew Sid wouldn't try to hinder my progress. He was the backup I needed against my unreasonable tyrant.

Even as Darren watched me eagerly pull my legs out from under the covers and drape them over the side of the bed, his gaze hardened. I ignored

his broodiness in favor of the fact that the soles of my feet were actually touching the floor.

Today was the day I would finally get to stand for the first time. That was all Darren would allow. And I was fucking elated. It wasn't much, but it was something.

"How do you feel, Mrs. Davis?" Sid asked as he stood next to me.

It was such an odd sensation. My legs felt so heavy, like they weighed hundreds of pounds, like if I moved them, they would drag me down to the floor like two anchors. But the prospect of using them to hold me up was suddenly terrifying.

What if I wasn't strong enough, and they gave out? What if they didn't work at all? What if I was permanently fucked?

"Nervous," I answered, my heart fluttering in my chest as I looked down at the floor. Why did it feel like I was so high up?

"That's understandable, but you have nothing to worry about. I promise you'll be okay."

"I know," I affirmed with a nod.

I glanced up at Darren who remained a dark, brooding statue in front of me. His eyes were fierce and his body was rigid as he stared down at me in a sharp all-black suit.

I could tell he was in the midst of reconsidering all of this, on the verge of telling everyone to pack it up and come back tomorrow.

Bastard.

I let the full force of my sadness glisten in my gaze, practically begging him to let me do this. I was literally on the brink of insanity and didn't think I could handle one more second of delay, let alone another entire day.

Catching my plea, his jaw ticked as his mouth tightened into an expression of annoyance.

Finally relenting, Darren unfolded his arms, removed his jacket, and started rolling up his sleeves to his elbows, revealing the beautiful tattoos

on each of his forearms. He then stepped up to me and leaned down to hold out both of his hands, silently waiting for me to take them.

My relieved heart was still racing, excitement and nerves all wrapped in one big bundle at the pit of my stomach.

“You’re only going to stand for just a few seconds and then slowly sit back down,” Sid reminded me.

Nodding, I released a heavy breath and reached out to place my hands in Darren’s, clenching his giant palms like a lifeline. He gripped them back with an assurance I knew I could rely on. Then, with all the strength I had, I pulled myself up from the bed and finally stood on my own two feet.

Blood rushed to my head almost immediately, and the room spun. My knees shook, and my body wavered, forcing me to sit back down.

“Fuck,” I whispered under my breath, attempting to pull my hands free.

“I heard that,” Darren warned as he held my hands even tighter, refusing to let go. “You got dizzy, didn’t you?” He said it like a damn accusation, like it was all he needed to call this whole thing off and force me back into bed.

Begrudgingly, I nodded, closing my eyes as I waited for everything around me to slow down.

“That’s normal,” Sid commented, then turned to cough into his sleeve. “Try again but more slowly this time.”

When the dizziness finally passed, I released a slow breath and waited for my stomach to relax. Then, lifting my chin, I squared my shoulders and pressed down on Darren’s hands again to slowly pull myself back up. My knees continued to shake, like they could give out on me at any second, but I focused on keeping my balance.

“How do you feel?” Sid asked.

“Weird,” I replied. “It feels heavy. Unstable. Like my legs want to give out.”

“I’m not going to let you fall, Jaden,” Darren assured as he clutched my hands tighter.

Barely steady, I counted to ten and then sat back down, suddenly exhausted from the exertion. God, this was pathetic.

“Excellent job, Mrs. Davis. You did really well.”

I frowned. “All I did was stand.”

“Standing on your own two feet is half the battle,” Sid replied. “Next, you’ll be walking and running, then kicking your husband’s head around in no time.”

I snorted at that, catching the death glare Darren shot at Sid.

When did Sid become so brave?

“Sounds like a plan to me,” I agreed, cocking a brow at the unimpressed monster of a man in front of me, a challenging smirk on my face.

“Baby steps,” Darren snarked, an arrogant grin tugging at his lips.

Baby steps. Except I had yet to take a real single step. The kind where you put one foot in front of the other. The kind that I had been waiting for since I woke up from surgery. But the best I could get at the moment was standing for ten awkward seconds.

It was better than nothing. And when I had managed to stand and sit back down about ten times and then again on my own for at least nine seconds without help, the day was declared done. At least, that was what they all told me.

Before he left, Darren had tucked me into the bed, securing me under the covers like he wanted to make it as difficult as possible for me to leave it. The second the door closed behind him and the rest of the staff, I ripped the sheets off like the stubborn bitch I was.

Clive and Owen rolled their eyes at me as they began their usual stroll through the room, watching the windows.

“Where’s my dog?” I asked them. I hadn’t seen Camaro all morning, and I assumed it was because they didn’t want her getting in the way of my

therapy.

“Groomers,” Clive answered without taking his eyes off the window.

“I think you guys should go get her. It can’t take all morning to groom a dog.”

Both sets of eyes shot to me with the same look of suspicion on their faces.

“Why?” Owen asked. “What shit are you trying to get into now?”

I rolled my eyes and pulled my legs back over the side of the bed.

Clive’s eyes sharpened. “Jaden, what are you doing?”

Ignoring him, I began to raise my foot into the air, holding it out in front of me as I gripped the side of the bed for balance.

“Jaden, you’re supposed to be resting,” Owen chastised.

“Fuck that.” I was so tired of being a prisoner of this bed.

Lifting my foot another inch, I could feel the muscles in my leg protesting, the weight seeming overbearing and unnatural. The same feeling came with the other leg.

“Jaden, why do you always have to push?” Clive complained with a sigh.

“Because I drink a tall serving of dumb bitch juice every morning. Now go get my damn dog.”

Clive groaned aloud, pulling out his phone to make the call while Owen crossed the room and quickly swooped my legs back onto the bed.

“Hey!”

“Knock it off,” he snapped before stepping away.

I glared at him, folding my arms in front of me and lifting my feet one foot at a time while I lay back on the bed.

“I want to go out on the balcony,” I announced, keeping my tone even.

“And I want you to stop being a pain in the ass,” Owen replied.

“Then bring me my stupid wheelchair, or I’ll just drag my ass out there, and you can explain to Darren how I managed that on my own.”

Owen rolled his eyes and brought my wheelchair from the corner of the room to my side of the bed. Sliding my ass over to the edge, I maneuvered into the chair and rolled myself away and onto the balcony that opened up to the expansive backyard and the gorgeous view of the Pacific Ocean.

A few moments later, I heard the sound of Camaro entering the bedroom. I sat back and whistled for her to find me. She responded immediately with a quiet bark and made her way toward the special call I was making.

“Hey, pretty girl!” I sang when she entered the balcony and placed her head on my knee. “You smell so nice and clean.” She whined as she wiggled her butt, her little nub of a tail wagging in small circles.

When she was settled next to my chair, and Clive and Owen were quiet inside the bedroom, I took my opportunity.

Rolling my wheelchair a little closer to the white stone railing, I leaned forward and placed my hands over the ledge. Carefully placing my feet on the ground, I inched forward from my seat, gripped the ledge, and yanked myself up.

The blood didn’t rush as fast this time; I was a little more prepared. What I wasn’t prepared for was how euphoric it felt to be standing on my own—without an audience. No help from Darren to steady me. No help from Sid to guide me. Just me and my broken-ass body following instinct and muscle memory.

A breeze blew from the shore and flowed through my hair, giving me a false sense of hope that all of this bullshit would be over soon. I was recovering at a snail’s pace, and I had a strong feeling it was being done on purpose.

The question was why?

Why keep me disabled and vulnerable?

It didn’t make sense.

“Goddammit, Jaden!” Clive snapped angrily as he stormed his way onto the balcony. “Sit the fuck down before you hurt yourself.”

“I feel fine, actually,” I replied, ignoring his aggravation. And I really did. There was no pain or discomfort, and I felt much more stable than I had earlier. My knees were weak but steady. And my confidence was already rising, giving me the strength I needed to keep going.

“Sit. Down.”

I felt my entire body stiffen from the stern order that came from behind, the voice dark and threatening. When the shock wore off, I felt myself deflate entirely, followed by a sigh of frustration.

Releasing the ledge, I lowered myself back into the wheelchair, my shoulders slumping and my face glaring out into the ocean.

I didn’t even turn around to acknowledge Darren’s presence, but I didn’t have to when I could feel him standing directly behind me.

Clive left the balcony without a word, leaving me alone with the angry giant bearing down at me from behind.

Darren took two steps forward and leaned his hip against the banister, crossing his ankles and folding his arms in front of his chest. The sigh that came from him made me scowl even harder.

“Jaden, are we really going to have problems here?” he asked, his tone taking on a dangerous note.

I clenched my jaw in response, my eyes refusing to meet his.

“Answer me,” he barked.

“Yes,” I snapped through gritted teeth. “We’re going to have problems if you continue to hinder my recovery.”

That was a bold accusation, but it was the only thing that made sense. Plus, I wanted to see if he would deny it.

When he didn’t say anything, my eyes shot to his, daring him to lie to me.

“It’s been three months, Darren. I should have been walking weeks ago.”

He rolled his eyes before turning to look at me, and then his gaze suddenly zeroed in on my shoulder. His facial features softened for just a moment as his arm slowly began to reach out to me.

“Don’t move,” he said quietly.

But of course I did, tilting my head down to look at what had caught his attention on my shoulder. It was a large brown spider.

Yuck.

With a grunt, I flicked the thing away with my fingernail and turned back to the near blank look on his face. I was not about to let him change the subject now.

“Don’t tell me I’m wrong, Darren,” I continued. “I can’t keep wasting away like this.”

Still, he said nothing, looking a little lost in thought for some reason. But as I waited for his response, I watched his eyes as they began to grow dark, his facial features stoic, his entire demeanor shifting into the lethal predator he was.

Keeping my eyes captive, he leaned down and pulled my wheelchair so I faced him. With his hands gripping either side of the arms of the chair, he lowered his upper body until we were practically nose to nose, his massive bulk effectively caging me in.

The intensity of his gaze left me cold and painfully anxious, but I wouldn’t let it show. The man fed off my fear, and right now, I would have him fucking starve.

“Who owns you, Jaden?” he asked, his tone a dark warning.

I scoffed and looked away. “I’m not playing this game—”

His hand struck out to my throat, gripping it tightly until almost all of my oxygen was cut off. I swung my arm out to strike his face, but his hand caught my wrist and pinned it down against the arm of the chair. Five

seconds later, he loosened his grip just enough for me to suck in a huge breath of air, but both his hands remained exactly where they were.

“Answer the fucking question,” he growled.

My chest heaved, and my blood raced, but even with a stomach full of fear, I refused him.

“No.”

Darren ripped me out of that chair so fast, I didn’t even realize it until I felt my back slam onto the bed. His heavy body pinned mine in place, my wrists caught in one of his hands, trapping them above my head.

“I’m going to ask you one more time,” he seethed, “and if you don’t give me the correct answer, I will fuck you until your pelvis breaks all over again. And then you can spend *another* three months trapped in this bed.”

His threat made my body instantly slack, my head falling back onto the bed with a rage-filled groan.

Gripping my jaw in his large hand, he yanked my face close to his.

“Who owns you, Jaden?” he asked again, his tone ripe with warning.

I could feel the tears building at the corners of my eyes, my frustration, anger, and fear molding into a dangerous chemical. I knew Darren would follow through on his threat.

Hurting me came so easily to him, it was of no consequence. He would always do as he pleased, and I would have no choice but to fall in line.

“You do,” I spat out bitterly.

“And who owns this body?”

“You do,” I repeated, my tone now blank with indifference.

“And who decides what happens to it?”

“You.”

“That’s right,” he snarled. “*I do.* You are not in charge of your recovery, little girl. I am. I decide when you stand. I decide when you walk. And I decide when you can leave this bed.”

I felt my chest heaving under his as I tried to calm my breathing, but my heart was beating too fast for me to catch up. Darren's eyes locked onto mine, his gaze so cold it drew shivers up my spine, making my jaw clench.

"You know, I would love nothing more than to keep you permanently chained to this bed and fuck you at all hours of the day. Your inability to walk makes no difference to me as long as I can still spread your legs whenever I want."

I grimaced, a gasped sob escaping my lips at the cruelty of his words. A reminder that everything I had was a privilege he granted, including my ability to put one foot in front of the other. My most basic human functions were his to command.

Hatred clawed its way up my spine as I clenched my trapped fists in his hand, wishing I had the strength of a thousand men so I could just shove him off me and show him what it meant to feel this helpless. The tears I had been holding back by a thread finally slipped free and slid down the sides of my temple.

I would not allow him to turn me into his robotic sex slave a second time.

Darren's harsh features softened slightly as he watched my stupid tears fall, his grip on my jaw relaxing enough for his thumb to reach up and gently wipe one away.

"But I'm not going to do that," he murmured, causing my eyes to shift and plead with his. "I may be cruel, Jaden, but I'm not that cruel." *Yes, you are.* "I'm also smart enough to know how counterproductive that is to my own self-interests." His thumb continued to gently stroke the side of my cheek, coaxing a false sense of comfort in his sudden tenderness. "Regardless, you need to accept the recovery plan I've chosen for you, even if it's at a slower pace than you'd like. Do you understand?"

I groaned in despair, shaking my head. "No, I don't understand. I don't understand why you're deliberately keeping me like this. Why you're

sabotaging me!"

Darren inhaled a slow, quiet breath, his eyes drifting over me like a predator would while they played with their food. A single corner of his mouth lifted, the glint of something heinous taking over his features. And then he sighed and whispered softly.

"Because you're just so damn cute when you're helpless."

I felt all the oxygen leave my body at his admission. The scowl I knew was forming on my face only made the smile on his widen. And then he dipped his head to slam his lips against mine in an all-consuming kiss, claiming my mouth in a show of force I couldn't combat.

Wrapping his hand around my jaw, he forced my lips to part, allowing his tongue access to mine. He kissed me with a single-minded purpose, his message clear and unquestionable. That he held all the power. That I had no recourse other than to accept his will like it was my divine duty to obey his every word.

Nothing burned hotter in my blood than my hatred for this man. But my hatred for myself was a close second every time he touched me.

When he released me, I was panting and breathless, my entire body tight with heated tension. His hand remained wrapped around my jaw, his thumb grazing along my cheek as his gaze finally softened.

"Now, are you going to be a good girl and do what you're told, or do I need to keep you here another week?"

I sighed in defeat, my body no longer fighting his hold on my wrists, and resigned myself to what I knew I couldn't control.

"I'll be good," I muttered, my voice barely above a whisper.

"That's my girl," he drawled and lowered his head to reward me with another kiss to show his approval of my submission.

This one started small, but it grew into another display of dominance that I quickly gave in to just to appease him. Opening my mouth wider, I allowed his tongue to spar with mine, to take exactly what he wanted.

His free hand began to travel from my face, down my chest and under my shirt and bra until he was cupping my bare breast. Rolling my nipple between his thumb and forefinger, I whimpered into his mouth as I instinctively tried to pull my wrists from his grip.

Aside from that one blow job, he'd barely touched me since the accident, a price I was willing to pay to put some distance between his hands and my body. But now that my bones were healed, all bets were off, and I wondered how much longer he would go without.

Releasing my breast, he roamed his hand over my abdomen, moving farther south until his fingers breached the lining of my thong. I gasped into his mouth as his finger slipped even lower and brushed passed my clit to stop where the wetness I was trying to ignore had gathered.

Fuck.

Pulling from my lips, he brushed his mouth against my cheek.

“You’re wet,” he declared, his voice smug with triumph.

He slowly dragged his finger back and forth over my swelling clit, making my body shudder from a pleasure I wanted so badly to deny.

“Walk away,” I pleaded, my breath coming out in pants as he continued to play with me.

“Not a fucking chance,” he growled, pulling back just to rip my lounge shorts and thong away and toss them over his shoulder.

“Darren, wait,” I begged, my anxiety spiking as he parted my knees with his hands. I didn’t know if he was going to fuck me or tease me, but I was nervous that his sudden proximity would cause him to lose control and do something I’d regret.

“No,” he snarled and then covered my pussy with his mouth.

My head fell back against the bed, my traitorous body surrendering to the will of his tongue almost immediately. It had been a long three months without any sex. But while my mind was grateful for the break, my pussy was eager to make up for the lost time.

Darren's tongue swept over every square inch of me, licking and sucking and biting until my moans and whimpers could no longer be contained. I gasped as he inserted a finger, thrusting in and out, causing my core to convulse around him.

The pressure built, and my hips involuntarily jerked against his mouth with a need I never wanted to admit. Answering my body's call, he inserted a second finger and curled them inside me, stroking my inner walls as his tongue lapped up my slit like a man starved.

And then I was coming in his mouth, my orgasm bursting throughout my body in waves that overtook all reasonable thought. But Darren didn't stop. Even when I tried to wiggle away, he pressed his arm across my abdomen and held me down as he continued his feast.

"Ah!" I cried. "It's too much." The sensitivity was so intense, causing me to squirm and fight even more, but Darren kept me trapped in place, unrelenting in his objective.

My body was taut with so much tension, my nails digging into the sheets as my hips and legs trembled helplessly under him. The pressure was quick to build, and before I could comprehend it, I was coming again, screaming and crying as shock wave after shock wave violently barreled through my body.

When my hips finally dropped back to the bed, my entire being pathetically spent, Darren finally released me and pulled back just in time for him to suddenly come all over my spread pussy with a feral groan. I hadn't even noticed he'd been stroking himself the entire time, waiting for his own release to arrive so he could coat me in his cum.

His chest heaved slightly as he reached out and rubbed his seed all over my tender, swollen flesh, causing my body to flinch with little jolts of pleasure.

"Fuck, I missed this image," he growled, the savage hunger in his voice barely contained.

I said nothing as I waited for him to finish gawking at me, my eyes tracing lines in the ceiling to distract myself from what we'd just done.

Grabbing my shorts from the floor, Darren moved to put them back on, and I quickly planted my feet into the mattress.

"What are you doing? I need to clean up first," I protested.

"Like fuck you do," he growled, yanking my legs into the shorts and pulling them up my thighs. "I want your pussy soaking in my cum until I say otherwise. Now lift your hips."

I scowled at first, then prepared to raise my hips when he suddenly smacked the side of my ass so hard I was sure it would leave a bruise.

"Ow!"

"Do as I say," he ordered, his voice stern with warning.

I growled at him. "I was—" Another smack landed in the same spot even harder, making me grit my teeth and launch my hips up so he could slip the shorts back up to my waist.

Stepping back, he pocketed my thong and then leaned over to right my body back up against the pillows.

My ass still stinging, I folded my arms across my chest and stared straight ahead, avoiding his domineering gaze. But then I felt his hand softly tangle in my hair, a gesture that appeared sweet at first until he tightened his fist and yanked my head into an awkward angle.

I gasped at the sudden sharp pain, my entire body tensing up as his other hand gripped my jaw. Darren held me still as he kissed me, parading his dominance over me with his lips and tongue until I was breathless and panting.

"Remember what I said," he warned, pulling away. "Don't let me catch you disobeying me again."

He released my hair and then walked out of the bedroom, shutting the door behind him with a finality that made me shudder inside. Frustrated, I

fell all the way back against the pillows, my face tilted up toward the ceiling.

I guess today's menu included boredom, a sticky cum-coated pussy, and a heavy serving of self-loathing.

A few seconds later, Clive and Owen came back into the room, shutting the door and sauntering inside. I didn't need to look at them to know they were wearing their signature "told you so" smirks on their faces.

"Still want that daily glass of dumb bitch juice, Jaden?"

"Shut the fuck up, Clive."

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CRYSTAL CLEAR

The very next day, Darren sent Anya and Irina to me for my full workup.

Waxing, haircut, manicure, pedicure—the works. Apparently, since I was so eager to return to the world, I needed to look like I was ready. That meant returning to my usual badass redhead goddess image that I wore so well.

Aside from the wonderful pain of waxing just about every crevice of my body, I had to admit that I did feel a little more human after they left.

Another week went by of just stretching, standing, and light exercises. It was my extended punishment for going against my husband, for daring to challenge his rule. His methods made zero sense to me, but the more I thought about it, the more it made me see the only truth possible.

He liked me like this.

He liked me trapped. Vulnerable. Dependent.

He liked being *needed* by me.

Not to mention I'm sure he loved knowing I was always in the same place every moment of every day. He could always count on seeing me in bed the second he walked into the room. And I imagined every time he did, he would hope to see that longing in my eyes, the relief that came from his presence, and the desire to keep him close.

Delusional fuck.

Once upon a time, that had been true. Painfully true. But those were the darkest days of my life. Days of mindless instinct for survival, days when I allowed my shell to be Darren's puppet while I retreated internally in an attempt at self-preservation. And those wretched days were over and never coming back.

However, I had to imagine it was a lot more enjoyable for Darren when I had working legs. He had to miss it, right? The fighting, the fucking, showing me off to the world, the pure unadulterated entertainment that came with owning a woman like me.

There was no way he was satisfied with the current state of things. How was he so calm knowing I was this defenseless? And while we were at war, for fuck's sake!

He should have been ecstatic about my progress, but instead, he acted like an angry bear as he pushed my wheelchair outside and stopped near the pool. I was finally going to start with water therapy today. It was the closest thing I could get to walking, so I would take it with open arms and a grateful smile.

Sid stood with two other members of his staff next to the pool, waiting for me. Camaro lay down on the bed that had been brought out for her next to Clive and Owen, who sat in the shade.

"Good morning, Mrs. Davis," Sid greeted with a genuine smile. "Are you ready to walk again?"

"Absolutely."

I could feel the disapproval coming off Darren in waves as he tried to hide his scowl from me. He didn't like my eagerness. Well, too fucking bad.

"Excellent. Then let's get started."

Dressed in a sporty two-piece bathing suit, I was lifted from my chair and carried directly into the pool. Darren had changed into a pair of black swim shorts so he could help me if I needed him. I was determined not to.

Once we reached the three-foot marker, Darren reluctantly lowered me into the water. When I stood upright with no assistance, I felt the smile on my face reach well beyond my eyes.

“How do you feel, Mrs. Davis?” Sid asked from above. “Any pain? Discomfort?”

Darren’s eyes sharpened as he searched my face for any sign that I might downplay what I was feeling. But I was happy to speak the truth.

“Nope.”

Granted, the water helped keep any weight off my pelvis, but either way, I was finally standing on my own.

“Okay then, one little step at a time,” Sid instructed.

Darren then took my hands and held them in front of him, offering me support and standing directly in my path to the other side of the pool. I almost rolled my eyes, but remembering what happened last time, I decided against it and gripped his hands instead.

“Whenever you’re ready,” he said gently.

On a nod, I took a deep breath and slowly lifted my foot. When I felt no pain, I leaned forward, set my foot down a few inches farther, and let my back foot follow.

Nothing. I felt nothing. No pain.

I took another tentative step, my legs feeling wobbly and unstable as I slowly moved them through the water.

My hips were so tight, each movement feeling like I was pulling against the strongest rubber band in the world. My stride was pathetically short, barely a foot, but it was still another step closer to gaining back my independence.

My hands clung tightly onto Darren’s much larger ones, finding trust in his strength to hold me up. He walked backward with every step I took, his watchful eyes studying every tick of my facial features as he helped me

through the water, and I was careful not to give away a single sign of trouble.

By the time we reached the other side of the pool, my chest was heaving with excitement. When I looked up at Darren, he wore a somber smile, not exactly infectious but encouraging nonetheless.

“How do you feel?” he asked.

“Fucking amazing.”

His gaze immediately hardened. “Watch your mouth,” he warned.

“Okay, Mrs. Davis, walk back to the other side now,” Sid called.

Darren then turned around and guided me back the way we came, only stepping back when I moved forward.

“Stop looking down,” he scolded. “Keep your eyes on me.”

I hadn’t even realized I had been watching my feet the whole time, fearful I would miss something and trip over it—in a fucking pool, no less. But I glanced up and focused my eyes on his as I took one heavy, wobbly step after another. Only once did I lose my footing and start to tip over, but Darren kept me upright with ease.

“I’ve got you,” he reassured, his tone soft yet strong. “Keep going.”

And I did. For the next thirty-five minutes, we walked back and forth, hand in hand, until I found myself growing tired enough to stumble. Fighting to keep my eyelids open, my hips were becoming so damn stiff, and I could feel them actually start to ache.

“I think that’s probably enough for today,” Sid suggested as he turned away to suddenly cough obnoxiously into his sleeve.

“No, I can keep going,” I replied quickly. I didn’t care if I was tired. I was finally moving, and I wasn’t ready to go back to my helpless state yet.

But Darren shook his head. “No, Jaden. You did really well today. You don’t need to overexert yourself. You’re already tired as it is.”

“No, I’m not,” I retorted, which earned me a sharp warning glare in return.

A breath of disappointment left me as I fought the urge to yawn and failed.

“We can pick this up again tomorrow,” Sid offered with a pained groan as he tried to recover from his little coughing fit.

My eyes darted back to Darren’s, pleading with him to let me stay.

“Can we just float for a little while?” I asked sweetly, keeping my tone as innocent as possible. “I’m not ready to go back to bed yet. And it’s such a nice day out.”

Attempting to avoid a repeat of our last altercation, I had to employ a different tactic. Being an artist of persuasion, I utilized my best offense against my stern opposition and reached back for the big guns—my bedroom kitten eyes.

Darren sighed in annoyance as he looked down at me, his eyes narrowing in suspicion because he knew exactly what I was doing. His grip on my hands tightened as he considered my request.

I decided to make it even easier for him and bit my lower lip, a whispered “please” under my breath—the final nail in the coffin.

“Goddammit,” he cursed under his breath. “Sid, bring Jaden something to float on,” he ordered.

I positively beamed up at him, his features slightly softening in response to my gratitude.

Gripping the small inflatable inner-tube I’d been given, I kept my upper body out of the water and just let my legs hang below me. Darren floated with me for about two minutes until he abandoned the idea and started swimming laps instead.

Clive and Owen took Camaro for a walk while I was content to just float away in the corner and watch Darren swim, enticed by the rippling muscles of his back and arms as he powered through the water like a shark.

Jealousy vibrated through my useless legs as I watched his body move so swiftly, all four of his limbs working in strong synchronized movements.

Envy turned into inspiration, and I found myself slowly kicking my sore and tired legs under the water again. The muscle atrophy had drained me of my energy but not my ambition.

Suppressing another yawn, I lifted my heels to bend my knees and draw circles in the water with my toes. I made sure not to aggravate my hips further, hopeful that the cool water kept any inflammation at bay.

Clutching the inner-tube, I placed my chin on my folded arms and closed my heavy eyelids, resting them for just a moment.

Lost in my focus, I suddenly realized that the water had grown still, and the splashing sounds had quieted. I tilted my head up to look around the pool to see if Darren had gotten out, but I didn't see him anywhere.

"You're a *bad* little girl, Jaden," Darren's smooth voice said behind me.

I jolted in the water, my heart rate spiking as I turned to see him leaning against the wall of the pool, his wet hair slicked back and his eyes blazing with heat.

"Stop doing that!" I growled at him, irritated by his ability to sneak around so easily. For a man his size, it shouldn't be possible.

"Stop doing what?" he asked as he moved closer to me, his predatory gaze making me slowly retreat in the water.

"Sneaking up on me like that. Those little jumps I get are really irritating."

"Maybe you need to start paying more attention to your surroundings instead of daydreaming." I huffed at his accusation. "But since we're on the topic of what's irritating, I recall you being told you were done for the day."

I frowned at him. "What are you talking about?"

"You think I didn't notice you kicking your legs in the water? That didn't look like floating to me, which is the only thing I agreed to allow you to do. Yet, here you are, disobeying me anyway. *Again.*" His tone was stern, thick with disapproval, making my stomach clench in anticipation.

But I met his glare head-on. “I’m just being proactive,” I argued. “I didn’t strain myself in any way with those tiny little movements.”

He shook his head. “I know you’re eager to walk again, princess, but you need to follow instructions if you want to get there effectively. That includes resting, whether you want to or not. I was assured you understood that.”

I groaned at him. “Ya know, you were always so eager to push my body beyond its limits before, and now, suddenly you’re completely reversing course.”

“You weren’t injured then,” he countered.

“My bones have healed.”

“But your muscles and tendons are still in recovery.”

“And stressing them is the only way to improve their function.”

“Under medical supervision,” he emphasized.

“I’m *fine*,” I reiterated. “If I want to push myself, then I should be allowed to do that. Aren’t you tired of seeing me like this?”

Darren shook his head as his eyes darkened. “This isn’t up for debate, Jaden. Keep pushing it and I swear to God you won’t be leaving that bed for another month.”

I didn’t know why I opened my stupid mouth, but I just couldn’t help confirming those nagging suspicions. It was the only way to know what he really wanted of me.

“And you’d just love that, wouldn’t you!” I pressed on. “Keep me dependent on you for every little thing so you can feel needed and important again. Don’t think I haven’t noticed how obnoxiously attentive you’ve been in the last couple of weeks. You’ve been eating this up like some kind of starved glutton.” And then I scoffed at the memory of his out-of-pocket praise. “All that admiration for my “unrivaled endurance” feels like a damn joke now when all you’ve been doing this whole time is

prolonging my dependence on you. Admit it, Darren, you hate that I don't need you."

Even though my voice didn't shake, the look he was currently giving me could have rivaled an earthquake with the way it left me secretly trembling inside. If I thought I was dealing with a predator before, I was definitely dealing with one now. And he was pissed.

Darren moved steadily through the water until I was backed into the pool wall, his eyes pinning mine with the promise of a painful reckoning. Sometimes obtaining the truth required a sacrifice, and when it came to Darren, I always had to pay with my body.

I clutched the floating inner-tube to my chest like it stood even a millisecond of a chance in walling me from him. When he stopped in front of me, he slowly stood from the water, the depth coming to just below his shoulders, telling me we were at the five-foot marker.

Without the inner-tube, the water would be over my mouth and nose, and I'd have to figure out how to swim without working legs. And Darren capitalized on that.

Grabbing the tube, he ripped it from my hands, tossing it over his shoulder and well out of reach.

"What the hell!" Panicking, I immediately grabbed the wall of the pool to keep myself from sinking under, but Darren grabbed my wrists and yanked me away from it. "What are you doing?" I nearly shrieked as he stopped at the ledge at the floor of the pool where it dropped to thirteen feet, essentially dangling me over the edge as he kept my shoulders up above the surface.

"So you think you don't need me, huh?" he growled as he tightened his grip, the darkness in his eyes making me regret every word I said. "Let's see if there's any truth to that." And then he extended his arms and let go.

I felt myself start to sink almost instantly, internal panic seemingly weighing me down faster. I clumsily forced my arms and legs to move to

keep myself afloat, but the awkwardness of my legs made it difficult to maintain the coordination needed to stay upright. My body started to tilt as the exhaustion I was already battling mixed with dread became overwhelming, and soon, my nose was underwater.

My arms flailed as sharp muscle cramps ate away at my abdomen and calves, my determination to resurface thwarted by weak, heavy, and uncoordinated limbs. A single panicked kick sent a shock wave of pain straight to my hip, causing me to shrink in on myself as I sank deeper and deeper. Even as I tried to get my legs to work, they just wouldn't cooperate with my hips feeling so tight and my body nearly depleted of energy.

Before I passed the ledge at the bottom of the pool, I felt Darren grip both of my wrists and wrench me up toward the surface. I sucked in a huge breath of air as my wet hair coated my face.

"Still think you don't need me?" he asked again, his voice laced with venom.

"Stop—" That was the only word I managed before he released me again and sent me plunging back underwater.

Keeping my knees tucked so I wouldn't accidentally kick again, I stretched my arms above my head to swim back to the surface, but I was so damn tired that my body felt utterly useless.

Fear gripped my heart as I wondered if Darren was really going to let me drown just to prove a stupid point. But I didn't have to wonder long as he reached down and gripped my wrists again, yanking me above the surface.

"Yes, I need you!" I shouted as water sloshed down my face, giving him the answer he clearly wanted.

My chest heaved as I sucked in gulps of air, my eyes blurry from the chlorine as I cringed in his hold.

"Let me make something absolutely crystal clear for you, my fierce little queen," he began, his voice dark and lethal. "You will *always* need me.

Everything that you have, everything that you are is because of me and me alone. *I gave it to you. Without me, you'd have nothing. You'd be nothing.*" He gripped me even tighter, certain to leave bruises behind, and jerked me closer. "I'm the only one who will provide you with everything you need to breathe, to live, to fight, and you thrive because of it. But I can just as easily take it away. So the next time you want to try to convince yourself that you don't need me, I want you to take a look around and remind yourself the only reason you're even seeing daylight right now is because of *me*."

I gaped at him, my shoulders hunching as I struggled to find the words to respond. He was putting my vulnerability on display for both of us as if I needed the reminder. And God, I fucking hated him for it.

"Is that clear, or do you need more clarification? Maybe another example?" he snarled.

"C-clear," I practically sputtered.

"Smart girl."

Darren then pulled me to his chest, and I wrapped my arms around his neck and shoulders, clutching him tightly with the desperation he clearly wanted me to embrace.

Resting the side of my face on his shoulder, I held him and focused on calming down now that I knew his lesson for me was over. His hands reached down to pull my legs around his torso while his other arm snaked across my back, keeping me pressed against him. He then turned around and started walking us out of the pool.

I felt fucking pathetic, but then again, that was the point he was trying to make. He wanted me to understand how much I needed him to get me through this because he was the only one with the power to allow for it in the first place.

He wanted me to realize I needed him to *let me* recover. Because it would not happen unless I had his express permission. Like he'd said

before, he could keep me chained to the bed for the rest of my life if he wanted to.

I also needed to remember that Darren always got what he wanted without fail. And while I was never afforded the same, he was right about one thing—he eventually fulfilled my needs, whether he intended to or not.

As much as it cost me, my needs of the day were met. Because now I had my answer.

And it terrified me.

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BRICK BY BRICK

It was hard for me to let the pool incident go, my pride taking a hit so big it was practically mounted on Darren's wall. The smug bastard clung to it all week until I finally finished the first phase of my pool therapy. The second phase was slightly more challenging.

Strapped in another sporty bikini, I stood almost waist-deep in the ocean this time, the heavy waves knocking into my unstable body. I felt stronger than I did last week, my legs feeling less heavy, my hips less wobbly, but I still had a long way to go.

Instead of leading me, Darren stood at my side, his arms folded across his naked chest as he walked beside me through the water. Each step I took was met with a wave strong enough to knock me off balance, and that was the entire point. I had to teach my body how to withstand resistance again.

Sid, his staff, Camaro, and my bodyguards all walked along the shore, watching my progression through the unyielding water. My anxiety was through the roof as I stressed over whether Darren would let me drown again. I glanced over at Camaro, knowing she'd save me if he wouldn't. That beautiful dog was my heart and soul.

I made it maybe ten steps before a wave knocked me off balance and sent me straight down into the water. Before I could sink too deeply, Darren's hand caught my arm and pulled me back up to my feet.

At first, I sighed with relief but then groaned in annoyance. If he weren't here, I wouldn't have to worry about being left to drown on purpose. I could just wear some damn child floaty wings for all I cared if it meant he'd fuck off for the day.

"Ya know, for someone who's in the middle of a war, you sure do suddenly have a lot more time for me than you ever have before," I grumbled. "Don't you have people to murder or something?"

He smirked, gripping my arm to steady me against the waves. "What's the matter, princess? Are you sick of your husband's company already?"

YES.

I scowled internally, wishing he would find someone else to annoy and terrorize for a little while. The man could suffocate anything without even needing to touch it.

"While you do make a very adorable cheerleader," I replied as I pushed through the water, "I figured you probably have more important things to do."

"Like murdering people?"

Or selling them.

"I'm sure it's on the to-do list."

"It tends to be," he confirmed playfully. "But I employ plenty of people who are more than capable of stepping in when I need them to. Besides, my interest is vested in your recovery, whether you want to believe that or not."

I almost scoffed. Just because he had a "vested interest" in my recovery didn't mean it was honorable. Because he'd certainly been interested in sabotaging it.

Ignoring his contradictory statement, I looked on beyond the water when a curiosity I'd long had but never voiced suddenly hit me.

"I'm actually kind of surprised you live on such a wide-open beach."

Darren arched a brow, tilting his gaze at me. "Why do you say that?"

I shrugged. “Seems like a major security risk, having such a large opening into your property. Wouldn’t it be easy for someone to just drive a boat right in and start blowing everything up?”

Darren chuckled quietly as we continued to walk against the rushing waves, my hips straining with each step.

“Why is that funny?”

“Because what you just suggested would be virtually impossible.”

“Enlighten me.”

Placing his heavy hand on my shoulder, Darren stopped me and pointed toward the trees that lined the shore. “You see those trees there? They’re equipped with defensive heat-seeking missiles. They can destroy any passing vessel within a mile of this shore, or they can annihilate any incoming projectile before it gets too close to the sand.”

Well, that seemed intense. How had I never noticed them before?

“Okay. What if they swim up in the dead of night and sneak on the property instead?”

Darren practically snorted as we continued our pace. “I have at least twenty-five soldiers monitoring the property at all times, inside and out. Not to mention the drones and the fact numerous explosives are buried underground and scattered throughout the grounds. If anyone did try to breach us, the only thing it would cost me would be my perfectly manicured lawns.”

That made me pause. I’d been walking over active bombs this entire time?

“I suddenly don’t feel so comfortable playing fetch with Camaro in the yard anymore.”

Darren chuckled softly, taking my hand in his and bringing it to his mouth to kiss my knuckles. “You have nothing to worry about. They’re activated by a code, not pressure. It’s perfectly safe, I promise.”

I grumbled, his words doing nothing to soothe my unsettled nerves. But what was worse was the fact that Darren had ensured that his turf was no place to stage a battle with his enemies. His estate was just one giant boobytrap.

“I guess that explains why Matt hasn’t just attacked you here since he knows where you live.”

“It would not be a very smart move,” he affirmed, his voice taking on a dark tone.

“So then what is he waiting for?”

Darren’s jaw tensed at my question, his gaze darkening as he looked down at me with suspicion. I was pushing it. The pause was enough to make me drop the question and continue walking, but after a few moments, he indulged me.

“It’s difficult to engage in a war when I’ve cut off half of his resources,” he answered.

I frowned. “What about the other half?”

“Insignificant.”

I furrowed my brows at that. “So then what are *you* waiting for?” I asked, turning to look up at him. If Matt was weak, then why wouldn’t Darren take advantage of that and finish him before he could find new resources?

Darren sighed as we turned around to walk back toward the house.

“It’s not realistic, but I’m actually hoping he’ll eventually come to his senses and realize his pursuit of Daniel is hopeless. I honestly have no interest in engaging beyond reminding him of who he’s up against. He knows he can only sustain so much retaliation from me before he’s annihilated.”

I nodded, knowing full well there was more than he was letting on. He was at war with a man he had once trusted, and he didn’t want to have to

kill someone he had considered a close friend. I could understand why he was waiting.

“I can understand not wanting to kill someone you once considered a friend.”

Darren scoffed, rolling his eyes at my assessment. “There’s no such thing as *friends* in our world, Jaden. There are allies and enemies, nothing else,” he pressed, his voice firm. “I don’t want to have to kill Matt because it would be a massive pain in the ass that I’d rather avoid. There are better ways to spend my time and money than on a fucking war over his bitch cousin.” He chuckled to himself. “Actually, it would be easier for me to just annihilate his whole family and remove his obligation entirely. You don’t have to answer to the dead.”

I arched a brow at his disturbing morbidity. “You know, it’s a little off-putting how easy it is for you to consider wiping out entire families as the more *convenient* option.”

He shrugged, a smile of amusement tugging on his lips. “It’s second nature when you’ve done it as many times as I have.”

I scowled at the implication. “I know. You certainly didn’t think twice about it when you went after *my family*.”

I could feel the instant glare from his eyes like I’d been slapped by it. Ignoring his reaction was a mistake when he grabbed my arm as I tried to continue. Yanking me back, I kept my face passive like I hadn’t just beaten the bear with an entire fucking tree.

“I’m sensing a tone of ungratefulness over the fact that they’re all still currently breathing,” he growled.

“Except one,” I countered.

The video of my uncle’s death was still a vivid memory in my mind and it made me sick just thinking of it.

“Actions have consequences, Jaden. I thought you understood that by now.”

I matched his energy, my lips forming a tight line as I felt my confidence swell into complete idiocy.

“Yeah, they do, don’t they? I’m curious what action I’ve committed that has you still looking for my mom and brothers.”

I purposely left Jason out of the bunch. I wasn’t brave enough to even mention his name in front of Darren. I might be a lot of stupid, but I wasn’t *that* stupid.

He didn’t react to my accusation. He just cocked his head and stared down at me. “So you prefer not to know what happened to them? If they’re even safe? Or *alive*? ”

At least he confirmed that he was still looking. Jason was clearly doing a damn good job keeping them hidden from him. He should be proud.

“You told me to forget them, remember? And I did because apparently you’re all the family I need,” I said sweetly, dragging my finger down the middle of his bare chest.

He could easily taste the sarcasm in my words, but at least the first part was true.

“Such a devoted little wife,” he practically purred, his eyes turning cruel enough to send a chill up my spine. “But I have a feeling once I bring them back to you, you’ll appreciate my efforts.” He then returned us back onto our path toward the house.

“What would you even do with them anyway? Keep them as pets?” I shot back.

A ghost of a grin slid up his face, that dangerous look in his eye making my stomach clench.

“I don’t know,” he answered casually. “I guess that’ll depend on how well you behave.”

I groaned at that, not surprised. “See, that’s exactly why. You’re just going to use them as leverage over me.”

Darren practically snorted. “As if I even need to resort to leverage anymore,” he said darkly. The subtle threat and insult lingered in the air, and it made me want to throat punch him for it.

I sighed, letting the defeat in my voice ring high enough for him. “I’d rather you just leave them where they are. I don’t want them to be subjected to this life. It’s too dangerous.”

“What makes you think they would be?” he asked, genuine curiosity in his tone.

I furrowed my brows in confusion.

How could they not be?

“By association?” I exclaimed like it was obvious. “That’s all it takes. Your world is cruel and violent. I don’t want them getting sucked into it.”

Darren hummed in acknowledgment. “We can cross that bridge when we get there.”

Not if I destroy that bridge first.

I groaned internally, suddenly feeling drained. The man was exhausting, and I didn’t want to waste any more energy sparring with him. No matter how much he enjoyed it.

We continued to walk through the water until we made it back to the dock, my therapy ending for the day. As much as I wanted to stay, I didn’t push or complain when Darren lifted me in a beach towel and carried me back into the house.

A few days before, I managed to convince him to put a lounge chair out on the balcony so I could get more fresh air and sunshine. Instead, I got a round daybed with a canopy that fit neatly in the corner of the balcony.

Now that I was walking in water, Sid encouraged me to use my crutches instead of the wheelchair if it was for shorter distances. I could tell Darren didn’t like it because I was still a fall risk, but if Sid said I could do it, he wouldn’t object. My bones had healed, so I wasn’t that fragile anymore.

So after rinsing off the salt water and changing into a comfy maxi dress, I set my crutches against the brick wall of the house and laid out on my new daybed with Camaro next to me, pretending to read a book.

After everything Darren had told me this morning, I couldn't focus on anything else. He wasn't exaggerating when he said this place was a fortress. And that complicated things. A lot.

If Kayla did make it out, I had no idea what she did next. If she ran away with the money from my ring and created a new life for herself, which would probably be the smartest decision. I couldn't blame her if she wanted to leave all of this bullshit behind and never look back. Especially after tasting all her newfound freedom.

But on the small off chance she did look for Jason, if she was even able to find him, then I hoped she had managed to get him that cloaking device. She could provide him with plenty of valuable information and then disappear forever. There was no need for her to stick around if she didn't want to.

If she did all of that, then there *might* still be a future for me, one I could actually live with.

But if she decided to stay and assist beyond her recollections, then she and Jason would spend the next several months likely planning a suicide mission.

Or...shit...for all I knew, the two of them could fall in love and just completely forget about me. Now wouldn't that be a plot twist?

Either way, if they wanted to attack Darren, then they sure as shit couldn't do it here. This meant the only way I was ever leaving this property was if Darren let me, and in my current predicament, that wasn't happening anytime soon.

But if there was ever a chance of sabotaging the system, then I needed to learn that system as best I could. I needed to learn exactly how the bombs

were triggered, where they were located, and if I could disable them and the defense missiles.

God, that would fucking take forever...

The thought alone was exhausting. But if I was being honest with myself, none of it was possible until I got my ass up and walking again. I needed to focus on that first. I wasn't any good to anyone in this condition.

I still cannot believe I got shot during a fucking training exercise.

But at least it came with a silver lining and halted Darren's family planning in its tracks for at least another six months.

Speaking of family...

I didn't want to consider the other issue of Darren still hunting down my family. I knew the only reason he was still doing it was because of Jason. It wasn't just a matter of control anymore. It was about pride and ego.

Jason had thwarted his efforts for so long, I doubted anyone could compare. It was another challenge Darren would obsess over until he conquered it. He wouldn't stop until they were found.

While I knew exactly what he would do to Jason if he ever did find them—the thought sent shivers down my spine—but what the hell would he do with my mom and brothers? Bring them here to live with us? Put them up in some other compound? Make them work for him?

The fact that he didn't even know was unsettling. It felt like they'd be another *inconvenient family* he wouldn't want to be bothered with. But if they could be useful to him somehow, then they would serve a purpose. And what he would use them for could only spell disaster for me.

He was lying to himself if he thought he wouldn't use them as leverage. He wouldn't be able to help it. Fuck, he could even use me as leverage against *them*. What the fuck would that look like?

And what would he do when my brothers came of age? It's not like he would just let them go off into the world so they could pursue their lifelong

dream of zoo-keeping or whatever the fuck they wanted to do with their lives.

He'd probably decide for them, place them in an environment he could control while still putting them to good use. The thought alone infuriated me. Stealing my future was one thing, but stealing theirs was a crime I was not willing to stand by and witness.

I would not watch them come home in body bags because they were caught in the crossfire for simply existing in Darren's world. I couldn't let my mom live with that as their potential future.

And what about my mom? What the hell could Darren possibly do with her? What purpose would she serve? I couldn't think of anything. She'd probably end up wasting away in the shadows, forced to watch the lives of her children deteriorate little by little until the day she joined my dad in the afterlife.

Fuck, I was going to make myself sick if I kept thinking about it. The what-ifs haunted me, and Camaro was starting to sense it as she whined beside me and rubbed her face into my lap.

I ran my hand through her fur, playing with her ears as I tried to calm the knots forming in my stomach. If Darren found them, any hope of escaping this life would be over, and I would never think of it again. Because I wouldn't be able to leave them behind.

Which was why my only hope was to dismantle this world from within while I still could. The walls were already starting to crumble, the solid foundation Darren had so carefully crafted was slowly breaking down, and that leaky roof was so close to collapsing I could almost feel the sunlight behind it.

I had successfully separated Darren from two of his greatest allies. His youngest brother and his closest friend. He now had a war in each hand to juggle, and from what I remember, wars were hella expensive. But it wasn't

enough yet. He needed to lose territory. Miss gainful opportunities. Exhaust his resources. And alienate his remaining allies.

One little brick at a time.

I didn't care how heavy the sledgehammer was. I'd keep swinging it, even if all I got was a bit of red dust in my face. At least I still had the strength and the stubbornness to keep swinging.

I just hoped the day never came when I didn't...

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PAPER CUTS



I gripped the steering wheel too hard, my white knuckles ready to burst through my skin if I didn't ease up.

"You worry too much."

I turned to glare at my brother sitting in the passenger seat, looking far too comfortable.

"I told you to stay home."

"I'll be fine," he said, tugging on the sleeves under his suit jacket. "Matt would be a fool to pull something here."

"It's the first time you've been out in months. Foolish? Yes. Unlikely? No."

He rolled his eyes and opened the car door. "Let's go before these assholes grow a brain and change their mind."

Groaning, I stepped out of the driver's seat and joined Daniel's stride toward the club where we were set to meet. Four members of our security team fell in line behind us, giving us the numbers as they flanked our sides.

It was just after midnight, and the place still had a line of people wrapped around the building. Stepping up to the bouncer at the door, Daniel

gave him our names, and he immediately moved aside to let us through, much to the line's disdain.

Inside, the music boomed throughout, and the dim lighting mixed with neon body paint on every half naked dancer created the wild atmosphere I usually aimed to avoid.

But with deals like these, the best place to meet was always in a very loud, very crowded but still private area. The feds could never hear shit, and they preferred not to strike in crowded places with too many civilians at risk of rogue bullets.

This club wasn't very big inside, but it would provide enough cover for tonight.

A blonde woman appeared at my left, her black stilettos and hot-pink dress matching the decorum a little too perfectly.

"This way, gentlemen," she said with a smile, waving us to follow her.

She led us around the dancing crowd toward a private booth where Luis Montero waited next to his cousin, Theo. Both men stood as we approached, the guards surrounding their booth looking slightly on edge the closer we got. I kept my smirk to myself.

"The Davis brothers!" Luis called enthusiastically. "I'm glad you guys could finally make it. Please, sit."

Daniel and I took both outside seats of the booth, crowding the cousins toward the middle and keeping an easy out for ourselves. The rest of our guards stood just outside the booth, their eyes focused on the ocean of people in front of them.

"What are you drinking?" Luis asked, beckoning at an approaching server.

"Vodka tonic," Daniel answered, eyeing me from across the table.

"Rye and ginger," I said, causing Daniel's lips to snicker.

Over the years, I'd developed a strong taste for ginger that I just couldn't quite shake.

After the server left, Luis relaxed into his seat while Theo remained just as stiff as he observed Daniel and me from across the table.

“So let’s get right to it,” Luis said. “I understand you’re in need of a new middleman.”

“Word has it you slaughtered the last one. And his family,” Theo commented.

Daniel smirked. “Yes, well, dismembering our brother tends to have that effect on us,” he retorted.

“Well, good thing we’re not in the business of murdering our business partners,” Luis chimed in. “Just moving their product for them.”

Our drinks were then set down on the table, the server quickly scurrying away and out of sight.

“How soon can you move it?” I asked, folding my hands over the table.

“Depends on how much we’re talking.”

“About 1,200 pounds,” Daniel answered.

Luis let out a slow, low whistle before he turned to look at Theo, who just shrugged.

“Once we secure the logistics, maybe as soon as next week,” Theo stated.

I nodded, satisfied with his timeline.

“Now, what do—” Gunshots rained over his voice, the sounds of screams and panic instantly overtaking the music. The crowd scattered like ants, which made it difficult to locate the source of the damn gunfire.

And then a break in the crowd revealed the last fucking thing I wanted to deal with. The same fucking thing I had warned Daniel about.

Matt moved through the dispersing crowd, a gun in his hand, flanked by eight more gunmen.

“Daniel fucking Davis!” he roared over the chaos.

God-fucking-dammit.

Moving quickly, I lifted my leg and shoved the table of our booth down to the floor, ducking just as bullets flew over our heads. Crouching behind for cover, I drew my Sig while Daniel, Theo, and Luis followed suit.

The rest of our guards scattered around the booth, ducking for cover as they began to return fire. Matt and his men quickly hid behind the bar while the rest of the screaming crowd pushed their way toward the exits.

My eyes caught Daniel's, knowing damn well he could see my "I told you so" face.

"What the fuck is going on?" Luis shouted over the gunfire.

"Disgruntled ex-business partner," I answered, cocking my gun and turning to take aim at the bar.

When the gunfire finally died down, I took my opportunity.

"What are you doing here, Matt!" I shouted.

Silence followed as everyone waited for an answer on what the fuck he was thinking coming here like this.

"You fucking know why!" he shouted back, the anger in his voice wild and unrestrained. "Give him up already!"

I shook my head, scowling at my brother for causing this goddamn mess. "Never gonna happen, Matt."

"Then I'll end you both!" he roared, reaching over the bar and firing.

I felt a spray of something wet splash against the side of my face as more gunfire ensued. Jolting to my left, I saw red beginning to pool into Daniel's shirt.

"Fuck," I growled, reaching for him to quickly find the source of the bleeding. "Where are you hit?" With Luis and Theo returning fire over us and bullets flying everywhere, I couldn't hear shit.

"My chest," Daniel groaned, a tight grimace across his face.

Fuck!

Yanking off his jacket, I ripped the tear of his shirt so I could see the entry wound but found no exit wound. Bundling his jacket, I pressed it

against his chest as tight as I could.

“Fuck!” Daniel roared as he lifted his Glock and started immediately shooting around the table.

“Stop!” I shouted, grabbing his hand to lower his gun. “Hold this before you bleed to death, you fucking moron.”

He groaned as he reached up with his other hand to press the jacket against his wound. He wasn’t much good in this fight now. We needed to get him to Sid before he bled out, but we weren’t going anywhere with bullets spraying all over the place.

The heavy metal barrier bolted to the underside of the table wasn’t strong enough to hold back this much gunfire. We needed to move quickly before its integrity gave out.

I pulled out my phone and texted Scott the code for immediate backup. I’d sent him on a nearby errand earlier, but he knew he was always on call, and he was always eager to engage.

Pocketing my phone, I peeked out from the table and fired three quick headshots, dropping three of Matt’s gunmen. Two more of ours hit the floor, evening the numbers on each side. But if we didn’t get out of this position, none of it would matter.

“Luis, we need to move now!” I shouted through the chaos as splinters of the table shattered around us.

“Agreed,” he snarled, taking out another one of Matt’s men. He glanced behind him, nodding behind the booth. “If we can get over the booth, there’s a back exit! But it’s on the other side of the room!”

Fuck.

“You and Theo take the table! I’ve got Daniel!”

Grabbing my brother around the waist, I pulled him up while Theo and Luis lifted the table to keep us covered.

“I’m not a fucking invalid, Darren,” Daniel growled at me.

“Shut up.”

I tossed his ass over the booth just as I felt a piercing sting tear right through my side. Ducking behind the booth, Theo and Luis followed, dropping the table behind them. Staying low, I peered around the side of the booth to find the rest of our guards had scattered throughout the room.

“We need to fucking end this before there’s nothing left of my club,” Theo growled, raising his arm to fire three more shots and ducking back down.

“What we need to do is end Matt right here, *right now*,” Daniel grumbled as he slumped against the back of the booth. *Shit*.

“Is this seriously going to be the cost of doing business with you two?” Luis shouted angrily as he reloaded his gun.

I rolled my eyes. “Don’t act like this isn’t par for the course, Luis. You were involved in your own shoot-out just last week.”

He grumbled under his breath as he turned back around to continue firing, but his agitation was just as valid as mine.

I wanted to avoid this, but after tonight, I knew I could no longer wait for Matt’s sanity to return. But I had one last shot to change his mind. One last ace in the hole. I pulled out my phone and sent Matt his final chance to back down.

With a slight break in the gunfire, I shouted Matt’s last hope of survival.

“Kayla is alive!”

Five long hard seconds followed as I waited for my reveal to sink in.

“Ceasefire!” Matt finally called out.

When silence befell, Matt raised his gun and slowly stood from behind the bar.

“What the fuck did you just say?”

I followed suit, raising my gun and standing off at an angle. “Kayla’s alive, Matt. And I can help you find her.”

He glared at me. “Bullshit. How the fuck could you possibly know that?”

“She was seen at a pawn shop in Arizona. Not too long ago. I saw the security tape myself.”

“Prove it!” he snarled.

“Check your fucking phone!”

Matt kept his aim as he pulled out his phone, tapping through the screen. I watched his brow rise, and his eyes lit up the second he hit play.

“Drop the vendetta, Matt, and we can go get her back. Together,” I offered, hoping it would be enough to finally end this shit. But I knew damn well it wouldn’t be.

When he finally raised his head, his eyes were crazed.

“Your lying bitch of a wife said she was dead!” he roared, making me squeeze my gun a little tighter.

“She was mistaken, asshole!”

He shook his head, turning his eyes back to his phone. “No! She knew. She knew, and she fucking lied!”

“Do you want my fucking help or not?” I shouted back. “You’re running low on resources, Matt. I can give you what you need to find her.”

He scoffed, his lips turning into a sneer. “I don’t need your goddamn help. I’ll find her on my own!”

I glared back, his final warning. “Not if I find her first.”

His brow rose, fury washing over his face. “Now you wanna go after what’s mine?” he snarled. “Then I’ll add yours to my list. Lying whores don’t deserve to breathe!”

Big. Fucking. Mistake.

I didn’t even reply. I just pulled the trigger, sending a bullet straight through his stomach. He could spend the rest of those precious minutes he had left of his miserable life bleeding out in fucking agony. You didn’t threaten what was mine and expect to live afterward.

Matt fell against the back of the bar while all hell broke loose. Scott suddenly burst through the door of the club with another six of our men

piling in beside him, guns blazing in all directions.

I crouched back down to check on Daniel, who was barely conscious, while Scott handled the remaining gunmen. The gunfire didn't last more than a few seconds.

"Medic!" I called as soon as it was clear.

"He was never going to go for that," Daniel groaned, his eyelids dropping as I lifted him to stand.

"No shit. Stalling is an art form. You'll master it one day."

Two soldiers then rushed over and took Daniel from me, hurrying him out of the club with me close on their heels.

"I have no idea what the fucking drama is right now, but I want it the fuck out of my club!" Luis called after me as I followed my men out.

I tried not to roll my eyes. "I'll pay for the damages."

"You're goddamn right if you want this contract to sta—"

I stopped to turn and glare at him, my gaze hard enough for him to step back and shut his mouth.

"I'll be in touch," I said and moved back to the exit.

Daniel was rushed into the far back of the SUV as they worked to stop the bleeding while I quickly moved into the seat in front of them. Another soldier got behind the wheel while Scott climbed into the front passenger seat.

"Drive!" I ordered, not even waiting for the car doors to close.

The car sped off back to the estate, and all I could do was fucking fume over the fact that if my brother died, I would kill Matt all over again.

"Sid is prepping now," Scott said as he turned around from the passenger seat.

"Good," I replied, some relief finally sinking in.

His eyes then shot to my torso.

"You catch one too?" he asked, nodding at me.

Looking down, I noticed the left side of my shirt was soaked with blood. Lifting it up, I found one hell of a bloody graze had ripped right through my skin. Seeing it now brought back the searing fucking sting of being shot.

“Ah, just a paper cut,” Scott commented and turned back around.

Rolling my eyes, I lowered my shirt and tried to relax in my seat. Daniel would be fine. He was tough, and Sid was good at his job. There was no reason for me to panic now that we were on our way back.

Even with my ears still ringing, and my head pounding, all I wanted to do was collapse in bed with Jaden in my arms. Blood and grime be damned.

It was after one in the morning, so she would be fast asleep, which was probably for the best. It would give me enough time to clean and sew myself back up before Jaden could annoy me with questions she had no business asking but would do so anyway. I could just avoid her entirely if I wanted to. Keeping her bedridden certainly had its advantages.

Scott pulled out his ringing phone and brought it to his ear, listening intently for a few seconds.

“You’re sure?” he asked as he turned back to look at me.

“What the fuck now?” I growled.

“They haven’t found Matt’s body yet.”

Oh, come the fuck on.

I groaned internally and pinched the bridge of my nose to relieve some of the tension pulsing in my head.

“Have them check the security footage. Find out where he went. The fucker is bleeding out of his gut. He couldn’t have gotten far.”

Scott nodded, turning back around to relay my orders while I rubbed the stress from my eyes. Hopefully, Matt crawled out into an alley and died by a dumpster or something. That would be befitting for him.

When we were finally back at the house, I helped escort Daniel down to the infirmary and allowed Sid to take over. When I knew my brother was in

the clear an hour later, I stepped back out into the hall and headed upstairs for my bedroom. I really needed to get out of these clothes before the blood dried.

Opening my bedroom door, I stopped short, surprised to see my wife sitting up in bed, wide-awake with her tablet in her hands and the bedside lamp on. Her narrowed eyes immediately shot to me, her body stiffening as she completed her assessment of my sudden appearance.

Goddammit.

“You’re supposed to be asleep,” I nearly growled, closing the door behind me.

She stared back at me for a second and then cocked a brow. “I’m supposed to do a lot of things,” she replied casually. “But we both know I’m not very good at it.”

I leveled her with a hard glare. “It’s nearly three o’clock in the fucking morning, Jaden. Why aren’t you sleeping?”

My ass was fucking exhausted, but I’d also just been in a serious gunfight not more than a few hours earlier, unlike her. Even still, her body needed rest, and by the looks of it, that clearly wasn’t happening.

Jaden just shrugged and turned her eyes back to her tablet.

I shook my head at her. “I’ll have Sid up your sleeping aids,” I mentioned as I crossed the room and removed my jacket.

I could feel Jaden’s eyes following me, her scrutiny burning a hole into my back as I unbuttoned my shirt.

“So,” she started, her voice laced with subtle amusement. “Who kicked your ass tonight?”

I shook my head, hiding my smirk from her. She was such a bold little brat, always ready to taunt me, always eager for a little confrontation. No one talks to me the way she does and lives long enough to take their next breath. Except maybe Scott.

Jaden had more courage in one little fist than all of my soldiers combined, and she was subjected to my fury more than any of them. After everything she had endured, it wouldn't be surprising for her to shrink away into herself and become a meek little mouse afraid to voice even a whisper.

A mouse like *Katherine*.

But not my fiery little redhead. You could burn her over and over again, and she'd rise from the ashes every time, ready for another round.

And I fucking loved that about her.

"I'm not sure you can claim an ass-kicking if you didn't survive the encounter," I replied as I headed into the bathroom to shower quickly. I needed to wash away the blood and clean my wound before sewing it up.

When I was finished, I slipped on a pair of sweatpants and pulled out the suture kit from the closet. Looking back down at the wound, I noticed it was at an awkward angle, which would make holding the edges together more complicated.

Groaning, I turned toward the wall-length mirror to get a better look at what I was dealing with. I wish I'd just had one of Sid's assistants handle it while I'd been down there.

And then I remembered I had my own little assistant sitting up in bed right now. Grabbing the kit, I left the closet and headed for my side of the bed. Jaden's eyes instantly followed my every move.

"Here, since you're awake, you can help me with this," I said as I sat down and faced the headboard so she'd have better access to my left side.

She looked at me curiously, her gaze bouncing back and forth between the gaping wound and my face as I prepared the kit.

"What exactly do you want me to do? Kiss it better?" she snarked, a playful smile tugging at her lips.

I shook my head. "I want you to hold out those little paws of yours."

The scowl on her face from my taunt was adorable as she begrudgingly complied. Grabbing the heavy-duty antiseptic spray, I gave each side of her

hands a good spritz to disinfect them, then did the same to my own.

“Rub that in,” I told her.

She did while I secured the threaded curved needle between the teeth of the needle driver.

“Why didn’t you just have Sid stitch you up?” she asked as she inched closer to get a better look at the clear graze of a bullet through my side.

I considered whether I should tell her about tonight, about Daniel getting shot, but at some point, she would probably end up finding out anyway.

“Because he was busy removing a bullet from Daniel’s chest,” I answered.

She quickly glanced up at me, her eyes immediately searching for answers she had no right to.

“And how did that get there?” she asked, her voice taking on a hint of caution.

I cocked a brow. “The same way most bullets get there.”

She paused, her chin dipping into a slight nod as she mentally retreated from her line of questioning.

“Well, I’m glad for you that he’s okay.”

My gaze sharpened, catching her subtle remark about being happy for *me*.

“And what makes you think he’s okay?”

She shrugged. “Because the last time one of your brothers died, you completely destroyed the dining room,” she explained, eyeing me carefully. “And this room currently remains unscathed.”

I felt the corners of my mouth tug. “Maybe I already destroyed a room downstairs before I came up.”

She snickered, shaking her head. “I’m pretty sure I would have heard it. Or even felt it.”

“Maybe,” I murmured and directed my attention back to my damn gunshot wound. “The only thing I need you to do is line the edges of the skin and hold them in place while I sew. Think you can handle that?”

She shook her head. “I don’t know. I’m not very familiar with rocket science.”

Ignoring her sarcasm, I watched her tentatively reach out and gently press her fingers along the wound to lightly pinch it together. While her touch was something to be coveted, the slight pressure caused the wound to burn internally.

I had endured pain far worse than this before and on multiple occasions, but I’d bear it all again if it meant my wife’s hands would never leave my body.

But even while I didn’t flinch or react to her ministrations, Jaden’s eyes still caught mine, looking for any signs that I was in pain. She wouldn’t find any.

“You’re not going to hurt me,” I assured her. “Just keep everything still.”

“You can’t tell me that doesn’t hurt like hell,” she quipped.

Ignoring her nonsense, I carefully inserted the needle through my skin and began working on the first stitch.

“When I was younger, maybe around thirteen years old, once a year, my father would have me and my brothers tortured for three days straight.”

I could feel her eyes widen with alarm as she watched me pull the thread through.

“We never knew when it was coming. Most of the time, we’d wake up from a blackout and find ourselves strapped to a chair or hanging from the ceiling. Sometimes chained to the wall. We were never in the same room, but we could easily hear each other through the walls.”

I listened to her heavy swallow as I tied the first knot and started the next stitch.

“Do I even want to know what was done to you?” she asked, her voice low with apprehension.

I smirked, the memories of those days coming back with a vengeance.

“Probably anything you can imagine. Beatings, drownings, whippings, stabbings, a gunshot wound or two, and definitely broken bones. The psychological torture was even worse. We were starved, blinded, electrocuted, sleep-deprived, and severely dehydrated. Some days, we weren’t even sure if we would survive.”

She shuddered; her obvious discomfort at my upbringing was an amusing reaction to witness.

“Waterboarding was probably the most desired affliction if there was one. It was the only opportunity you’d have to drink any water, even if you were choking on it.”

“Jesus.” Jaden frowned, her eyes moving back to my wound, watching me tie off another knot. “Why?” she finally asked, her eyes searching my face while I remained focused on carefully pulling the needle back through my skin.

“To build stamina,” I told her. “To remove the concept of fear if we were ever taken as prisoners. And also, to teach us the most effective methods of torture. What better way to know than firsthand experience?”

Because of my father, I knew exactly how it felt to have every single one of your fingernails removed. What it was like to have flesh cut from your body. How agonizing it was to have something severed and then reattached.

Glancing back at her, I could see her brow furrowing as her eyes began to gloss over. Was that concern?

“You sound like you’re grateful for the experience,” she mumbled.

I shook my head as I pulled the needle through and tied off another stitch.

“I never enjoyed them, obviously. But I knew what my father was trying to do, and I understood his reasoning. He wanted us to be able to withstand anything. To become unbreakable. And it worked. Eventually, I started to look forward to each year's latest challenge.”

Her brow arched, her fingers beginning to lose the pressure I needed to keep the edges of the shredded skin lined up properly.

“Keep your hands in place, Jaden. I’m almost done.”

Correcting herself, she turned her head back to my side, but I could tell her eyes were glazing over as she imagined what I had endured every year until I turned twenty.

“Darren,” she said softly.

“Hmm?” I hummed as I tied off the last stitch.

“You understand that your father was incredibly deranged, right? You know that’s not normal parenting? That what he did was psychotic?”

I grinned as I turned to place the suture tools back in the kit and pulled out the gauze and medical tape.

“You might consider it deranged in your world. But in ours, it’s considered necessary,” I stated as I cut the gauze into the right shape and size. “Your job as a parent is to ensure the survival of your children. And in our world, surviving means a lot more than just knowing how to file your taxes.” Her mouth formed a tight line as she considered my words. “You were taught how to avoid homelessness. I was taught how to avoid death,” I continued, holding the gauze over my wound. “And then I was taught how to become it.”

I handed Jaden the medical tape, and she took it robotically, her eyes still glazed over as she began to rip off a good length.

“But it wasn’t all just about pain and torture, Jaden. Afterward, we learned how to treat our injuries once we could maintain consciousness.”

She visibly grimaced. “Please stop talking,” she snapped as she finished taping the gauze to my side.

“We’d learn how to remove bullets from our bodies, splint broken bones, and sew each other back together. It was actually quite the brotherly bonding experien—”

“Stop. Talking.”

Jaden leveled me with a glare that told me she wasn’t enjoying my childhood story. I chuckled at her clear distress as she handed me back the tape. Taking it out of her hands and dropping it on the bed, I snatched her wrists together and yanked her to me. A quiet gasp escaped her lips as her body stiffened, but she didn’t fight my hold.

“Look at me,” I ordered, my tone dark with purpose. She bit the inside of her cheek but lifted her chin to meet my eyes. Hazel pools of sadness, anger, and fear stared back at me, the glassy exterior reminding me of a look my mother used to wear all too often. “The point I’m trying to make, my little queen, is that there is nothing my enemies could do to me that I haven’t already survived. So when I tell you that this little scratch on my side is nothing more than a paper cut to me, you’ll appreciate why.”

She said nothing as I released her and turned my attention back to packing up the rest of the suture kit. Jaden immediately moved away to lie on her side against the pillows, her knees curling into her chest and her eyes cast low. Shutting the lid, I set the kit on the nightstand, turned off the light, and climbed into bed. Once I was situated, I reached over and pulled Jaden to me, locking my arm around her small frame and pressing her against my uninjured side and chest.

Her body was stiffer than ice while her fist clenched tightly against my abdomen.

“You’re upset,” I stated.

“Yes.”

“Why?”

She was silent for a moment, and I gave her the time she needed to voice her thoughts.

“Did your grandfather do the same to your father?” she asked. “When he was growing up?”

Ah, the dreaded legacy question.

“Yes,” I answered.

She shivered against me, and my initial instinct was to pull her even closer.

“And do you want to continue that practice?” Her voice almost shook, like she was afraid to know the answer. But Jaden already knew. She knew from the moment I first told her.

“Yes.”

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PREMONITION



*S*omeone was screaming. No. Multiple people were screaming. Where was it coming from? Everything was so damn dark and cold. I couldn't find my way. But the screaming kept getting louder, more erratic, sharper. What was happening to them?

I tried to follow the voices, stumbling my way through the dark, catching myself on a cold concrete wall. I clung to it, scaling the wall until the screams became so loud my ears rang with horror.

“Jaden!”

I bolted at the sound of my name, racing through the shadows as my heart pounded in my chest, fear crippling my fortitude.

“Jaden, please! Help!”

I’m coming. I’m almost there!

And then a door finally appeared at the end of the shadows. It rattled violently in its frame, the thunderous noise making my stomach clench with pure terror.

“Jaden! Please!”

I lunged for the door, barreling through it like an animal, and burst into a room filled with my worst fears. My heart stopped dead.

My brothers.

Aaron, with blood dripping down the side of his swollen and bruised face, looked up at me from the chair he was currently strapped to. His chest heaved up and down as his eyes moved to his hand, which was covered in red. His middle finger was missing.

“Help us, Jaden.” Brennan’s strained voice came from my right. My heart plummeted as my eyes followed the chains that were currently securing his wrists above his head. He had burns all over his body, and a deep gash up the side of his leg.

They both looked like they’d been beaten to hell.

And then I felt a hand reach around my hip and yank me away into a hard body. Righting myself, I looked up to find Darren grinning down at me with a sinister look in his deep blue eyes. But then he moved his other arm into view and revealed a small, rosy-cheeked toddler with brown hair and dark blue eyes. Darren bounced him in his hold, the two exchanging smiles before Darren turned back to me.

“Soon, it’ll be his turn,” he declared proudly.

I shot up with a gasped scream, my instincts telling me to strike out, making my elbow connect with something hard as I hurled myself out of bed. My knees hit the floor after a single step, but my brain was on total autopilot survival mode, the instinct to flee my only objective.

My heart was ready to burst through my chest as I managed to quickly crawl across the room and lean my back against the solid wall, grounding me to reality. I couldn’t catch my breath, my ears were ringing, and I felt my entire body shaking like a fucking Chihuahua.

Breathe, Jaden. Breathe.

Pulling my legs up, I held my head between my knees to try to take slow, deep breaths. Five breaths later, I felt warm hands gently wrap themselves around my wrists, thumbs softly grazing against the back of my hand. Even squatting low to the ground, Darren’s body still managed to

tower over me, blanketing all of my space and making me feel so damn small and utterly trapped.

“You’re okay, Jaden,” he said softly. “It was only a dream.”

But it wasn’t a dream.

It was a premonition. The future.

Fuck.

When I finally felt calm enough, I raised my head and connected my eyes with my enemy.

Aside from the clear redness marring his cheek, his face remained passive, the stone-cold features unwavering as he looked me over like I might be hurt elsewhere. When he was satisfied, he released my wrists and placed both hands along the sides of my face and tilted it upward.

“Better?” he asked.

I closed my eyes as I sucked in a slow breath. “Yeah.”

And then I felt myself being lifted into his arms and carried back to bed. I could see the sun was starting to rise as its light escaped through the curtains, so it was still early.

Climbing back into bed, Darren pulled me onto his lap and locked his arms around me, pressing my head against his shoulder.

“Talk,” he ordered.

I blew out a puff of air instead. I didn’t want to talk. I didn’t want to tell him shit.

“Not yet,” I pleaded with a groan. “It’s too early.”

He sighed heavily, a low growl emanating from his chest.

“I thought you had gotten past these nightmares,” he accused.

I bit the inside of my cheek. It was true that my mind was finally coming to terms with what I had endured in the basement. I couldn’t remember the last time I dreamed of those horrors, though they still plagued my inner peace and influenced my actions.

But this dream was a whole new can of worms I was not willing to dissect with him. If anything, he'd probably just validate them instead.

"You know I'm always full of surprises," I offered innocently.

He groaned, squeezing a little tighter. "Predictably so."

Before anything else could be said, his phone rang, temporarily saving me from his interrogation.

Reaching over, he grabbed his phone and brought it to his ear.

"Yeah," he answered.

I could only make out an unintelligible voice on the other end, but the more they spoke, the more Darren's fingers dug into my arm.

"Then he's still alive," he replied gravely into the phone. "I'll be down shortly."

He then ended the call and kissed the top of my head.

"I have to go," he said, releasing my body and quickly slipping from the bed.

Whoever it was that was still alive, they had my thanks for saving me from what would be a very heated argument followed by a callous victory lap.

Apparently, Darren's non-ass-kicker did survive the encounter...

Darren quickly changed into a suit and headed for the door in record time, his demeanor that of all business and lethal determination.

"You can expect a visit from Sid later," he warned, giving me a single glance before he opened the door and shut it behind him.

I released a breath I didn't realize I'd been holding, relief flooding my lungs as I fell back against the pillows. But that relief was quickly replaced with dread as the images of my nightmare came back with a vengeance. My stomach clenched at the memory, the anxiety building in my blood.

I couldn't believe what Darren had revealed last night. I still wasn't convinced I hadn't dreamed the whole thing up.

To think that Warren Davis had his own children tortured. TORTURED. Every single year! FOR THREE DAYS!

What kind of parent did that?

What kind of person ordered the torture of a child, let alone their own?

On a yearly basis!

Darren's father was clearly a psychopath. There was no other explanation. And so was his grandfather. An entire lineage of psychopathic, bloodthirsty monsters...and Darren wanted to continue that line.

Fuck that.

I reached down my abdomen until my fingertips grazed the puckered scar where a bullet had simultaneously saved and sabotaged my life at just the right time.

With the destruction of one ovary, I was just one away from stopping that madness right in its tracks. A carefully calculated puncture at just the right angle could permanently free me from ever having to bring a child into Darren's evil world.

It would spare my would-be children from ever having to suffer the same fate as their sadistic father.

The only thing that had me pausing was what Darren would do to me if I was successful in my objective, even if it was by another happy accident. I could probably expect to live the rest of my life in the basement while Darren found some other poor soul to bear his children. If I had learned anything in the years I had been with him, he would find a way.

He would *always* find a way.

If there was a God, she'd make the damn man infertile.

I sighed in disappointment.

If a child being born to this family was inevitable, maybe it would be better for me to be there. Perhaps it would be better for it to be mine because at least I would have standing to protest whatever "training" Darren would subject them to. No one would respect my objections to a child that

wasn't biologically mine. But the real mother? She held sway. It may not be very strong or effective, but she had a greater claim to it than anyone else. Which meant it had to be me.

Fuuucccckkkkk.

I didn't even bother trying to leave the bed. I just stared up at the wall for God knows how long while Clive and Owen scowled at my refusal to acknowledge them. You'd think they'd appreciate the silence for once.

I sniffed the air when Carla brought in my breakfast, but I just let it sit there, too deep in thought to care about anything else.

"You'd better fucking eat something, Jaden," warned Clive.

I clucked my tongue. "Nah."

A collective sigh of annoyance made me smirk, but I wasn't trying to be difficult on purpose. My stomach was just too full of knots and dread to fit anything else in it. Contemplating becoming the mother to a very powerful sadistic man's child was enough to disrupt any woman's appetite.

"Fine, then Camaro's gone for the day."

"Bye, girl," I said sweetly with a wave as I saw them lead her away out of the corner of my eye. Truthfully, I didn't think I had the energy for her anyway right now.

"First, you're not sleeping, and now you're not eating?" Owen commented. "Sorry, is your dumb bitch juice not to your liking this morning?"

I couldn't help but snort. They always knew the right words to say.

"Did you guys know that Darren's father used to have him and his brothers tortured for three days straight every single year while they were teenagers?"

And just like that, crickets. Absolute crickets.

"No? Hmm, okay then," I murmured, my eyes suddenly fascinated with the ceiling.

"I did." A different voice came from the doorway.

My eyes glanced to my left, finding Sid closing the door behind him.

“Oh look, my best buddy is here,” I teased, sitting up against the pillows.

Sid gave me a no-nonsense glare before he turned and addressed Tweedledee and Tweedledum. “Gentlemen, would you give us a moment, please?”

Groaning, the two fuckheads left the room and shut the door behind them while Sid took a seat on the nearby chaise.

“Okay, out with it. Let’s not pretend you don’t know why I’m here.”

I rolled my eyes and sat up straighter. Might as well get it over with and get him the hell out of here.

“You said you knew about Darren being tortured as a child?”

He nodded solemnly. “Yes.”

“Were you there?”

“Toward the end, yes.”

I looked away. The shit he must have seen them endure.

“Darren just told me about it last night.”

“And it upset you,” Sid stated.

“Well, no shit, Sherlock. That’s a normal *human* reaction to something as horrific as that,” I snipped, leveling him with a glare.

“Unlike Darren’s?” he asked, tilting his head to the side.

I could feel my face dropping with disgust just thinking about his response.

“He … appreciated it,” I murmured, shaking my head in bewilderment. “It was one thing to hear him describe his torture as a child. It was another to hear him *praise it*.”

Sid nodded. “Agreed. But we can’t change what was done to him, and we can’t convince him to condemn it. So what else is there to do?”

I shot my eyes back to Sid. “Prevent him from continuing it.”

“Ah,” he said with a nod. “So that’s what you dreamed about.”

I lowered my head, wishing I could get the image of my brothers out of my mind. But their screams just wouldn't stop echoing.

"It was my brothers," I replied. "It was happening to my brothers."

Sid said nothing, his eyes telling me to continue like he knew there was more. So I finished.

"And then Darren held up a toddler and declared it would be his turn soon."

Sid sighed, his eyes now traveling anywhere but mine—like he hoped the answer might be written on the wall somewhere. But we both knew there was no answer for this. Darren would do as he pleased, no matter what anyone else thought.

"It's not just a dream, Sid," I continued. "It's the goddamn future if Darren has his way." And we both knew Darren always got his way.

A heavy silence overtook the room, its weight crushing my heart with each passing second. Sid didn't speak. For once, it seemed he had no words of wisdom to bestow.

When he finally did speak, it broke my heart in half.

"I wish there was a way for me to offer you hope, Jaden. But unfortunately, I just can't. My advice to you is to do what you've always done. Accept and adapt."

I felt my breath catch in my chest, my lungs choking on a despair I had no chance of fighting. My throat tightened, and I felt the onslaught of tears building up behind my eyes as they fell to my lap. If I was forced to have Darren's children, he would torture them into monsters. And nothing could be done to stop that.

My ass.

"You should go," I muttered quickly, swiping away my stupid tears.

I paid Sid no more attention as he silently stood and walked toward the door. But then he paused.

“For what it’s worth, Jaden, if there’s anyone strong enough to endure it, it’s you. Your children will be very lucky to have you as their mother.”

But incredibly unlucky to have Darren as their father.

I said nothing as he walked out and left me alone. Left me alone to do the one and only thing that could save this sinking ship. The one thing I was best at.

Plot.

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REMINDER



I could not believe that fucking cockroach might have actually survived. I should have just put a bullet through his skull and ended this goddamn joke of a war. At least then I'd know the fucker was actually dead and not just missing. But the signs would show themselves eventually, and I'd have my answer.

At least Daniel had survived the ordeal. He was still recovering in the infirmary but was bitching to be released every fucking hour. He was lucky to be alive and never seemed to appreciate his own vulnerable mortality. We might be damn tough to kill, but we weren't invincible. And he needed to remember that before it got him killed. Thankfully, Sid was only too happy to have him sedated for another day.

"Alright, thanks," Scott said as he hung up the phone and stopped the car at a red light. "He was sighted on a traffic cam."

I sighed and rolled my eyes, unsurprised by the development. Because of course he fucking survived. It was no longer speculation anymore.

"Where?"

"Four blocks from the club. A black van picked him up and took off."

I groaned in annoyance. “It seems neither he nor my brother are willing to die to end this stupid fucking feud,” I commented dispassionately.

Scott side-eyed me with a smirk, but we both knew the only one bound for an early death was Matt. If he were smart, he would maintain the illusion of being “dead” and disappear under a rock somewhere. But he wasn’t, so this would continue until I ended it.

And I had officially decided to end it. A new squad had already been directed to hunt Matt down and destroy what was left of this conflict.

Up until this point, I’d been holding back, impatiently waiting for Matt to realize he couldn’t win this. I’d even given him the opportunity of an olive branch that was fucking Kayla. But in all honesty, I knew that branch was ash before I’d even picked it up. If I were him, I wouldn’t trust me either. And now my efforts toward peace were over. The gloves were finally coming off, and blood would rain down on us all.

Scott sighed as he proceeded through the green light. “It doesn’t matter. Matt’s family will retaliate anyway.”

“Yeah, that’s why I’ll have to kill those fuckers too if Matt doesn’t back off. I can’t have them saving his life every time I put a bullet in his body.” I’ll have to do the same thing to Matt that I did to Jaden—isolate and eliminate.

“We’re starting to stretch our resources pretty thin. We may have to call in a favor if you still want a team to continue looking for Jaden’s family since we pulled that one to find Kayla.”

I couldn’t suppress my frustration at the truth of that. My hope was that finding Kayla would be significantly easier, which would then eventually lead me to Jaden’s family. Assuming Kayla was still by herself, she lacked the resources to keep herself undercover. She was bound to fuck up at some point, and that fuck up would lead me to the rest of the flock. I’d just have to continue my unbeatable streak of patience.

“I’ll think it over.”

Scott glanced over at me, tightening his grip on the wheel before turning his eyes back to the road. “What do you actually plan on doing with Jaden’s family once you finally have them? You’re sure they’re really worth the headache?” he commented, caution in his tone.

I paused as a fantasy of ripped limbs and bloodied bones formed in my head.

“As long as they refrain from causing me problems, they will live with Jaden and me, where I can keep them contained. Their futures will depend on their actions, as well as my wife’s.”

He cocked a brow. “And her ex?”

I felt my jaw clench as I thought about each little thing I would do to him. And it brought a smile to my face. “I’d give it three days. Maybe. We’ll see how long he lasts.”

“You mean how long you can hold out.” Scott chuckled, but all I could think about was dismembering the fucker piece by piece for the next decade.

“When I’m done, I’m going to rip his fucking skull out and display it on my desk as a paperweight.”

He snorted. “I’m sure Jaden will love that.”

“It will serve as a damn good reminder for her. One way or another, I will always get what I want.”

“Of course, you do,” Scott concurred. “I’m sure making her watch will cement that lesson in *real* good.”

I shook my head. “I’m not going to make her watch, actually.”

Scott cocked a brow as he glanced over at me. “No?”

“No. The threat of forcing her to watch the recordings of it will be far more beneficial in the long run.” I had a feeling Jaden would do just about anything to avoid having to watch even a millisecond of the numerous clips I planned to make.

Scott hummed in acknowledgment as he pulled into the motel parking lot. After he parked in front of the lobby, we exited the SUV while a second SUV pulled up behind us, five more of my men piling out and following us inside. A middle-aged woman with short brown hair and too much Botox greeted us at the front desk, her smile slowly fading as recognition triggered her sudden silence.

“Go get him,” I ordered, my tone less than enthusiastic.

She blanched but said nothing as she turned away from her post and disappeared down the hallway. Turning away, I observed the shabby state of the motel lobby that I owned. From the dingy windows to the yellow-stained vinyl walls, the atmosphere consisted of stale cigarette smoke and cheap perfume. The upkeep was less than ideal, but I didn’t care to micromanage a place that had been performing exceptionally well up until two weeks ago.

The hurried, uneven footsteps of a man who had too much to drink stumbled down the hallway and sputtered to a stop beside the front desk. His round cheeks were flushed, with yellow teeth peeking out from behind thin lips that hid under patchy blond facial hair. Bloodshot eyes tried to focus on the number of people in the lobby, only slightly improved when he pushed his greasy long hair back out of his face and behind his ears.

“Mr. Davis,” he practically gasped as he tried to center himself. “We weren’t expecting you.”

I looked him up and down, my mouth forming into a scowl at the state of his unruly appearance. “Naturally,” I replied, then turned toward the door. “Let’s take a walk, Ricky.”

“O-oh, I’m actually kind of in the m-middle of something right n-now,” he muttered sporadically. “Could we do this another time?”

I turned back around to level him with a glare that caused all the blood in his face to drain away.

“Right, s-sorry, of course,” he stuttered as he finally found his feet.

Ricky followed me out of the lobby, ushered into place by my guards who kept him close behind me while Scott walked at my side. Rounding the corner to the back of the motel, I clocked the idling SUV parked nearby and headed for the old rusted door that led into a nondescript utility room. Behind the water heater was another door that led to the basement level.

We opened the unlocked door and descended the steps to enter an underground communal area where several young women had gathered. Three of them sat at the kitchen table, two were feeding their toddlers, and the other five sat on the leather sectional in front of the large-screen TV. I suspected the other six were busy doing their jobs. Someone was going to have to fill them in later. I wouldn't want them to miss this incoming memo.

Most of the women ignored us without a second glance as we passed them in favor of the doorway at the end of the hall. Stepping into the office, my guards closed the door behind us as I moved to stand behind the computer.

“Pull up the account,” I told Ricky, nodding at the computer screen.

He sucked in a heavy breath before swallowing it down and making his way over to the desk, plopping his ass into the chair. When he finally had the account up, I leaned over his shoulder, making him even more visibly uncomfortable.

“Scroll down,” I ordered and watched for the specific transaction to come into view. “Stop,” I said, then pointed at the screen. “Explain that.”

Three hundred thousand dollars had been withdrawn from the account two weeks prior without my authorization to a car wash company just down the street—a company that Ricky’s girlfriend had recently purchased.

“I-I don’t know. I didn’t authorize that,” Ricky exclaimed. “I didn’t even know money had been moved.”

“You didn’t know?” I pressed. “You mean, you haven’t been monitoring the account?”

“I-I guess I missed it.”

I cocked a brow. “You guess you missed it? Ricky, I don’t allow you to run this operation with the exception of being sloppy. This should have been caught, addressed, and brought to my attention the very same day.”

“You’re right, I a-absolutely should have done that. I’m s-sorry I didn’t. I’ll pay better attention from now on.”

I rolled my eyes at the groveling. “It’s not just the lack of oversight. It’s the carelessness of leaving the account open for your girlfriend to steal from me.”

Ricky’s brows furrowed in confusion as he visibly paled again. “Wait, what?”

“We already saw it on the security cameras. She was here while you were checking the account. Then when you left the room to go handle the fight in the hallway, Britney took that opportunity to send herself a little early Christmas bonus.”

Ricky’s face went from white to green in an instant. “Oh, my God. I’m so sorry. I’ll contact her right now and get this fixed. I promise, I’ll get the money back, I swear.”

“Oh, don’t worry. I’ve already taken the liberty of correcting the problem. Come and see,” I said, motioning for him to follow me back into the hallway.

Returning to the communal room, two more of my men stood beside a fifty-gallon metal drum they had carried inside while we were in the other room.

“Everyone gather around,” I ordered to the rest of the women in the room. “There’s an important lesson to be learned today.” Tentatively, they all rose from their seated positions and flocked around the drum. “I’d like you all to understand what happens when you fuck with my business.” Nodding, the lid to the drum was opened.

Audible gasps and cries shot through the air as the surprise was revealed. Britney’s bludgeoned and severed head was piled at the top of the

rest of her severed limbs, blood and grime covering every inch of her exposed skin. The scene was already grotesque enough, but I think the smell really sold the show.

“Oh God,” Ricky murmured as he came face-to-face with what was left of his girlfriend’s body.

Britney had been a decent recruiter at first, promising each one of these girls who were more than down on their luck a better life than the one they were living.

She’d find them on the street, befriend them, earn their trust, then slowly bring them into the fold. She promised them a place to stay where they would be safe and cared for, where they could earn a living and eventually get back on their feet.

It was an easy sell, so easy, we didn’t even have to keep them locked up—because they simply had nowhere else to go. They were convinced they’d be arrested for prostitution if they went to the police, and not only that, but they would be putting their own family’s safety in jeopardy.

We took great care in ensuring there were no other alternatives for them, that leaving would be a grave mistake, and they were far better off here than out there.

“Let this be a reminder of what happens when you bite the hand that feeds you. We give you housing, food, drugs, security, even protect your kids from CPS, and all we ask in return is that you earn your keep while keeping your mouth shut. Is anyone else having difficulty with that concept?” I said aloud, staring down each one of them. Through quiet tears and uneven breaths, they all shook their heads, cringing with fear as they eyed the woman in the drum. “Good, then we’re all done here.” Turning to Ricky, who was still eyeing the drum, I placed my hand on his shoulder to catch his attention. “Find a new recruiter before the end of the week,” I told him, then turned away to head back up the stairs, annoyed I had to waste my time here at all.

This was the simplest of operations to run, and Ricky was starting to outlive his usefulness. The motel was the easiest place for trafficking, and I had about a dozen of these setups all over the state. The automatic check-ins and check-outs, third-party reservation systems, non-mandatory registration and identification, and guest privacy allowed the buyers complete anonymity and allowed us to easily wash the money through the motel revenue.

With the location being right off the highway, the number of truckers we got on a daily basis was so highly lucrative that we didn't need to solicit much online, which would otherwise open us up to the potential problem of cops pretending to be buyers. So long as we kept up appearances, we had a very booming business.

I sighed as my phone vibrated in my pocket for what felt like the tenth time in the past hour. I pulled out my phone and a grimace formed on my face. The caller ID displayed the name of the last person I wanted to deal with right now. But at this point, it was inevitable. I was honestly surprised he'd waited this long.

"Hello, General," I answered, keeping my tone low but polite as Scott and I stepped outside. Scott instantly turned his head in my direction, all his attention now focused on the conversation I was about to have.

"Davis," he replied, the disdain in his voice abundantly clear. "I think it's time we have a chat."

Straight to the point. As always.

"When."

"Tonight. Ten o'clock. You know where," he said and hung up.

I rolled my eyes at the dramatics and pocketed my phone, preferring to just ditch the old man and ignore the summons. But if he wanted to put his nose where it didn't belong, then I'd have no problem reminding him of the roles we were all expected to play.

"Was that who I think it was?" Scott asked.

“Tonight at ten o’clock,” I confirmed with a nod.

“This should be interesting. I’ll alert one of the units.”

The meeting would be a huge waste of time, but I would indulge the old man, if only to remind him how insignificant he was to me. He’d been a decent resource in the past, but I had long outgrown his usefulness. He knew this, but he still liked to throw his weight around every once in a while to convince himself he still had sway. Tonight, I’d make sure he’d never question his relevancy in my world again.

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A COMPLICATION

Exiting my car, I stood outside the remains of a familiar nearly burned-down warehouse. Listening carefully, I watched for anything and everything to catch my eye, noting if anything seemed out of place. We'd always agreed to meet alone, and while I had five of my soldiers on standby not too far away, I intended to abide by the agreement. We were just here to talk after all.

As I headed into the warehouse, the heavy, rusted door creaked when I pushed it open, revealing musky air and dark shadows inside. The place looked like a bomb had blown up inside it, which wasn't too far from the truth, but it still held a purpose for meetings such as these.

My footsteps echoed slightly as I clocked the older man standing in the dim moonlight that filtered through the large hole in the ceiling, his back to me. I would have called him foolish if he had been any other man, but he knew he was safe, so being a condescending old prick was a privilege he could afford. Until now.

"I hope you didn't request my presence to waste my time with nonnegotiable terms, General," I declared firmly as I closed the distance. "I have a great deal of things to tend to."

In response to my tone, he sharply turned around to face me, the wretched, scarred face of a tired, aging man leering back at me. His

signature scowl was a permanent fixture on his face that only deepened as his steel gray eyes practically skewered me. It was nothing personal. The man hated everyone, including his nephew.

“Then I’ll make this brief, though it’s less than you deserve,” he growled, stepping around some of the scattered rubble. “Surrender your brother to me now, or you will surrender a hell of a lot more by the time I’m through with you.” His voice was scratchy, dry, and irritating. The result of far too many cigars over the years.

“Ah, so you were the one who picked him up last night,” I asserted, my eyes catching his admission with the curl of his scowl. “Very intuitive of you to watch out for your nephew like that, given the stupidity of his actions.”

“Compared to the stupidity of your brother’s impulsive actions?” he retorted quickly. “Matthew wasn’t the one who carelessly started a war.”

“He may not have started it, but he certainly escalated it when he threatened my wife last night. That alone is a death sentence.”

He scoffed, shaking his head. “Your petty grievances do not interest me,” he snarled. “You will hand over your brother and right what has been wronged.”

My gaze narrowed at his false show of confidence. “If that is your only demand, then allow me to be even more brief than yourself. No.” I then turned away and headed back for the door. At least it had been a predictable waste of time.

“You dare turn your back on me!” he shouted. “I could bury you in the deepest, darkest cell a hundred feet below the surface to rot in for the rest of your life for the crimes you’ve committed! You would never see the light of day!”

I stopped in my tracks and turned to show him the sneer on my face at his little threat. “As true as that may be, General Rainer, given the numerous war crimes you’ve committed around the globe and your

connections to multiple criminal empires, you'd be buried right there next to me. We could even be cellmates."

He grunted at my rebuke, but it was only a bluff. He knew his hands were just as filthy as mine, and I had the mountains of dirt to prove it. Leverage was always the most formidable of weapons.

"So I should just have you *both* killed then, is that it?"

I shrugged. "Only if you want to spend your prison sentence alone."

The hardness in his eyes became piercing as he stared me down, the clear rage emanating from his round body making his face turn red.

"Enough! You know our laws. Your brother knew what he did, and what must be done to right it. Unless you want a war on your hands the likes of which you've never even dreamed of, you'll deliver him to Matthew no later than tomorrow evening."

"The way I see it, General, is that your niece is the reason my youngest brother is dead. As far as I'm concerned, what Daniel did was an act of revenge, an act he was more than entitled to."

"If Regina wasn't the one who pulled the trigger, then as far as I'm concerned, she had no hand in Dominic's murder!"

I chuckled at that, shaking my head at the audacity of the old fool. "I've wiped out entire families who have had less involvement than she did for the very same reasons. Regina is not exempt from the consequences of her own actions just because *your* dying brother guilted Matt into accepting an impossible task."

"Regina was innocent!" he bellowed back, spittle dotting his lips.

"That girl has never been innocent," I argued sharply. "You forget I also had cause to kill her myself when she tried to secretly murder my wife on our honeymoon."

The general shook his head, waving his hand through the air dismissively. "A minor lapse in judgment," he muttered. I rolled my eyes.

“As was my agreement to this useless meeting. I will not surrender my brother,” I pressed, the hard tone in my voice barely disguising my rage. “From this moment on, any move you personally make against me or my family will be met with the release of every concrete block of evidence I have that will permanently sink you to the bottom of the hole you’ve been digging yourself in for the last decade.”

He scorned my warning, sputtering all over himself at my threat.

“You really want to fuck with the abilities of the US military?!” he roared. “I could just as easily leave instructions with my best and most trusted soldiers. Even if you did succeed in putting me away, that doesn’t make you safe from my reaches and influence. I know the locations of many of your operations. I could have them wiped out in a single night.”

I sneered at him then. “I invite you to try. You may have a decent supply of dirty soldiers loyal to you, General, but my supply is endless. And they don’t play by the same rules.”

The general’s lips tightened, his eyes bouncing back and forth as he considered his growing lack of options. He finally took a step forward. “If Matt fails, he will lose my protection, and by association, so will you,” he continued to argue, his voice growing anxious.

I shook my head at his clear desperation, as if I’d sacrifice my brother to protect such an inconsequential interest.

“If Matt is still relying on you to cover up his mistakes, then he obviously hasn’t learned from them. And your *protection* by association is not worth the life of my brother, especially when I have *several* of my own shields still in place. You are not the only paid player in this game, General, and you have long outgrown your usefulness to me.”

We stared each other down for several seconds, the tension building in the air as the two of us refused to yield. He should have fucking known better. The audacity for him to think I would actually bow to his ridiculous demand and give up my last living brother was a sure sign the man was

losing his touch. If he needed a reality check, I would happily oblige in blood.

General Rainer's face continued to redden as his stance remained rigid and tense, his hands clenching into fists at his sides. I stood relaxed with my hands in my pockets, waiting impatiently for him to concede his pointless bullshit demands.

"Fine, Darren. Have it your way. But there will be consequences."

I smirked at him. "At this point, General, I hold no ill will toward any of you. Matt already took a bullet from me for his threat against my wife, so I'll consider that to be his one and only warning. I'll even overlook the bullet he put in Daniel's chest as a sign of good faith. But make one more move against me or mine, and I start killing you all."

I ended the conversation there and turned to exit the building, my steps as sure as the words I spoke. I hated admitting it, but Matt's uncle would be a formidable opponent should he become one. He was not an enemy I wanted on my ass, given the global influence he had due to his ranking in the US military, a very esteemed position that he'd held for a very long time.

The man had plenty of loyalists on his side, and while they may come in handy for this trial, it wouldn't mean shit against the hard evidence I had on him. He was truthfully more of a psychopath than I was. He'd order entire villages wiped out under the guise of harboring terrorists just so he could take whatever resources they had and sell them to the real terrorists. It was genius really. But unfortunately for him, well documented.

I had spies everywhere, my reach spanning beyond the limits of the law or borders. And that was the one thing my adversaries always forgot right before they met their downfall. And I intended to deliver.

After driving home, I stepped through the doorway and stood in the foyer for a moment, noticing the silence of my home. Even with the guards

stationed inside, there wasn't a single creak in the house. After tonight, I probably wouldn't be stumbling upon this kind of silence for a long time.

Walking into my office, I moved straight for the bar, ignoring Scott's presence as he sat at my conference table, staring intently at the screen of his laptop. I poured myself a glass of whiskey, swallowing back the dark liquid and letting it burn away the irritation growing in my blood.

"That bad, eh?" Scott commented.

With a sigh, I grabbed my glass and walked toward the table to take a seat across from him.

"The General is going to make a move," I informed him, pinching the bridge of my nose to release the tension growing. "We need to be ready."

Scott hummed his annoyance, rubbing his tired eyes as he brought his dark gaze to mine. He knew just as well as I did the pain in the ass it would be dealing with the stubborn old man should he truly become a problem. And we both knew it would be foolish to assume otherwise. So we needed to act first.

"What do you want to do?" he asked.

I rolled my shoulders as the domino effect played out in my mind. A very calculated domino effect.

"We need to find out where his most trusted soldiers are stationed when they're operating outside of the US." The General's type of men tended to pray upon impoverished, vulnerable rural governments to influence them into their favor and self-interests.

Scott arched a brow. "And then?"

I smirked, taking another sip of my whiskey.

"And then we liberate the locals."

Scott nodded, the ghost of a smile lingering on his lips as his eyes went back to the laptop screen. This wasn't our first rodeo. And Scott had a particular fetish for international influence and disaster.

Unfortunately for him, he wouldn't be able to direct anything in the actual field since there couldn't be any ties that would lead back to us. He'd have plenty of other chances, though.

"If things are about to heat up the way I think they are, then I'll need to speed up the training of the new recruits," Scott said as he began typing something.

I nodded in agreement. We were going to need all hands-on deck very soon, and we couldn't afford to have failures among the ranks. No weak links. This meant, as much as I wanted to hold out just a little longer, I had to stop stalling with Jaden and let her finally walk again. It would be detrimental to keep her bedridden when things were about to escalate, and I couldn't risk leaving her so vulnerable anymore.

It was time to get her ass moving again, and knowing her, she'd be all too eager to jump straight into the fire. I'd still have to keep it controlled so she didn't overdo it and send herself right back to where she started. She'd still hate me for it, but that had never concerned me before. She'd learn to be grateful for what little steps I did grant her. Even if they were still just baby steps.

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STEP UP



I felt hot. Really hot. My breathing was heavy and my blood was rushing like crazy. What was going on? I groaned in confusion as a burst of pleasure shot straight through my clit and made its way up my body, making it bend and shudder of its own volition.

Fuck.

Opening my eyes, I pushed my messy hair out of my face to find my knees spread wide to accommodate the broad bare shoulders of a beast in action.

“Oh God,” I moaned, throwing my head back against the pillows as Darren’s tongue turned me into a goddamn puddle. “What are you doing?”

His only answer was the single finger he easily slid inside me, rubbing gently against my inner walls, pumping in and out at a leisurely pace. I felt my back bending as wave after wave of pleasure rushed through me, my hands gripping the bedsheets in desperation. Darren was slow and methodical, like he was reacquainting himself and taking his sweet-ass time with it.

“Fuck,” I gasped as he pressed a second finger inside, his mouth sucking on my clit until it grazed between his teeth, making me jolt from

the sudden tick of pain. But his tongue returned and teased the sting away while his fingers rubbed against my G-spot, his thrusts becoming more vigorous with each moan I gifted him in kind.

By the time he inserted a third finger, I was coming. So. Fucking. Hard. All over his hand, and all over his face.

A growl of approval rumbled from his chest as his heavy arm clamped down over my hips to keep me still. He never let up, his hands and mouth laying waste to my pussy with vigor, commanding my orgasm like he owned it.

My cries of ecstasy rang throughout the room, rewarding him with the only praise he'd ever get from me. Wordless, but unequivocally clear. And it was enough for him. For now.

When he rose from between my legs, a devious smile crept up his face as he dragged his stubbled cheek along my inner thigh.

“Good morning,” he murmured softly, placing a soft kiss against my skin. I was still catching my breath, trying not to glare at him for the sexual ambush. I didn’t get much time to recover before he was crawling up my body, the dark hunger in his eyes making my stomach clench. “I have a proposition for you,” he drawled, trailing light kisses up my torso.

His lips stopped at my breasts, taking one of my nipples into his mouth and sucking. On a whimper, my back arched again, my hands gripping his shoulders while his tongue slowly swirled over the hardening bud. His hand moved for my other breast, gripping and kneading, rubbing his thumb back and forth over my nipple until it too hardened for him.

I could feel Darren’s steel cock resting over my pelvis, the heat of his skin practically searing mine as he purposely bumped it against my clit. It was painfully obvious what he wanted, and I was honestly surprised he’d held out as long as he had.

When his mouth finally released me, I was breathless all over again, my focus shot to absolute shit as his hands took mine and laced our fingers

together, pressing them into the pillows.

“This means you have something to offer me,” I whispered, trying to regain my composure. “Something I’ll want.”

“Mm-hmm,” he hummed deeply, lowering his face to gently rub his nose along mine.

“I’m listening.”

He pulled away just enough for me to catch the fire building in his eyes, that hunger growing into a dark and dangerous inferno. A sly grin was my only warning before he pushed himself inside me, making me gasp and tense as he filled me up to the brim.

“Oh fuck,” I huffed in shock.

Darren groaned with pure satisfaction, his eyes flashing with a dark and possessive look as he hovered above me. His hands released mine to roam down the sides of my body, leaving behind a wake of heat over my skin.

“Fuck yes,” he whispered under his breath as he seated himself all the way inside me.

My hips rose as my body stretched to accommodate his size. It had been months, and it certainly fucking felt like it.

“Relax, Jaden.”

I took a deep breath and slowly exhaled, letting my hips fall and focused on relaxing my muscles, somehow allowing him to slide in even deeper.

“If you can make it through this,” he said, his smooth voice laced with a subtle warning, “and show me how much you want it, I’ll amp up your recovery program and get you walking on your own again.”

I tried not to freeze in place at his words, but he’d just offered me the *only* thing I’d wanted for the past six weeks. Walking in the pool and the ocean was nice and all, but I had been ready to hit the ground running a long time ago.

“Today?”

“Today,” he confirmed with a nod.

There was nothing to consider. I could take him all fucking day if I had to. I was getting out of this goddamn bed. *Today*.

I didn’t even bother with a verbal answer. Just wrapped my hand around the back of his neck and pulled him to me, pressing my lips to his in a rough kiss.

On a growl, he deepened the kiss, his tongue entering my mouth just as his cock slid out and back in on a powerful thrust.

Darren swallowed every one of my moans as he moved inside me, his lips traveling along the side of my face and down my neck, where his teeth grazed against my skin.

Running my hands down his back and arms, I could feel his muscles tensing beneath my touch. With every thrust he made, my body moved with his, easily following his lead as waves of pleasure began to build in my core.

“Fuck,” he grunted as he straightened and wrapped his hand around my neck, holding tightly as he began to plow away at my pussy.

My nails scratched along his skin as he cut off my pulse and air supply, my body far too enamored with his cock to give a single flying fuck about it.

I could feel my walls clenching, an eruption building with each hard thrust he made, until he switched angles and zoned in on my G-spot.

I screamed as the orgasm overtook me, the release of my throat allowing it to last and last as the oxygen and blood flow crashed through my depleted system.

I hadn’t even recovered yet before Darren was dragging me by my hips toward the edge of the bed.

“Wait,” I gasped as I tried to catch my breath.

Please don’t break me. Please don’t break me. Please don’t break me.

Darren smacked the underside of my ass in warning. “I’m not done with you yet,” he snarled as he pulled my knees up toward his hips. “Wrap your legs around me. If you drop them, the deal is off.”

I grimaced at that.

Well, what the fuck.

Standing over the bed, Darren leaned forward so I could obey his command and lifted my legs to hook my ankles together at his back. It felt easy enough at first, but when he started to really fuck me, I found myself immediately struggling to hold on.

Darren rocked back and forth, my legs clinging to his every move as he pushed my wavering strength to the brink. But I refused to let go. Even as his cock coaxed another orgasm into existence, the pleasure building, making it harder and harder to hold my legs up.

Desperation forced my hands to my knees to keep them in place, the growing strain becoming too much as the tension increased. But Darren refused to allow me the assistance and tore my wrists away to pin them against the bed above my head. I groaned in frustration at the unfairness of it, the fear of failure amplifying the tremors running through my limbs. If he would just make us both come already, I could make it through this.

“Darren, please,” I begged, giving him the desperate, sexy little whine I knew he loved, pressing my chest into his so he could feel my eagerness. I pulled out every stop, giving voice to all my cries, all my moans and whimpers, anything to egg him on and end my suffering.

And the bastard saw right through it.

Placing my wrists in one hand, he used the other to clutch my jaw, holding it tightly as he turned it to face him, all the while tormenting me with deliciously slow, hard thrusts.

“Who do you belong to?” he growled down at me, the dark edge of his voice sending another surge of liquid heat to flood around his cock.

I struggled to find the words until he switched angles again and hit me right where it counted, drawing an outburst of uncontrollable cries for mercy. The man was a goddamn architect of sadistic proportions, building up my need just so he could torture me with it. Each thrust made my entire body ripple with an undeniable need that instantly begged to be quenched.

“Oh God, you!” I shouted, squirming under him like some kind of feral animal. I could feel my ankles slowly pull away from each other, my strength failing me. But my need to come grew to such a magnitude it overshadowed everything else. “Fucking you! Please, Darren, please! Fuck!”

An evil grin slid across his face, the victory gleaming in his dark eyes reminding me of just how powerless I was compared to him. Always at his mercy. Always under his control. Never out of sight. My very existence was dependent on his every whim.

Tightening his grip on my jaw, he jerked my face to the side, brought his mouth down to my ear, and snarled.

“*That’s fucking right, Jaden.* You are mine. Every goddamn broken inch of you.”

And then he reared back and slammed into me, making me scream, fucking me so hard and so good I lost all sense of time and breath. I couldn’t even feel my legs anymore, all my focus wrapped around the steel rod pistonning between them that shoved me straight over the edge, headfirst.

I came hard, all my muscles locking up as the orgasm crashed through my body like a storm, electrifying my blood and setting my lungs on fire. My pussy squeezed Darren’s cock for everything he had until he had no other choice but to let go.

With a deep groan, he emptied himself inside me, pumping the final remnants of his release and creating little spasms of pleasure until he finally ceased.

I could barely breathe. My chest shuddered up and down as I struggled to suck in oxygen and attempted to bring my heart rate back down.

Holy fuck, that was intense.

When Darren rose from my body, I looked down to find my legs were still wrapped around his hips, barely, but they were still there. I huffed a short laugh of relief and let my head fall back against the bed, satisfied with my success.

Noticing my disposition, Darren looked down and patted my knees like he was giving me a congratulatory applause. And then he chuckled softly.

“I wouldn’t get too cocky just yet. You still have one more test to pass.”

I lifted my head and stared back at him in disbelief. “You said—”

“I know what I said,” he interrupted quickly, and then pulled away from my body, causing my legs to immediately drop to hang over the side of the bed. “You just have to show me now.”

My brows knitted together in aggravated confusion. “What?”

“Stand up,” he ordered, his tone wrought with a sinister kind of playfulness I knew very well. Another dangerous game to play.

Angered by his newest request, I pushed off my elbows until I was in a sitting position and arched a brow.

“Now?” I asked incredulously. He couldn’t give me a few moments to catch my breath and let my legs recover a little?

“Right now,” he demanded, slowly backing away from me.

Yeah, smart move, asshole.

I didn’t bother hiding the tortured scowl on my face as my pussy burned from the rough treatment it had just endured, Darren’s hot cum leaking out and saturating the sheets under me.

“Moving the goalpost, I see?” I accused, my eyes narrowing at him.

He tilted his head and gave me a knowing smirk. “Only by a single... step,” he retorted, giving me a quick wink at his little pun.

I glared in response, then quickly averted my eyes to the floor in front of me. Of course the son of a bitch would test me after having intentionally drained all the strength and energy from my body. It was a callous move but completely on brand for him.

Ignoring his smug demeanor, I scooted myself closer to the edge of the bed until my toes finally touched the floor. Testing the muscles, I moved my legs back and forth along the bed, making sure I could at least move them without issue.

“I don’t have all day, Jaden,” Darren warned, impatience coating his stern voice.

“Shut up,” I snapped, my own aggravation a dangerous component to add to the mix.

Moving closer, I planted my feet firmly on the floor, purposely pushing my toes at the wood to test my strength. And then I took a deep breath.

Fuck it, Jaden. It’s now or never.

Gripping the edge of the bed, I leaned forward and pushed myself up, forcing my body to rise until it stumbled into a standing position. Releasing my breath, I kept my knees slightly bent as I shot my arms out for balance, my ass already beginning to teeter from side to side.

Fuck, my legs were tired, but even though they wobbled slightly, I was officially standing on my own. I lifted my head to reveal the triumph on my face, loving the fact that it was my turn to be smug. But the look on Darren’s face told me the test wasn’t over.

He gave me a slow clap of applause, a wolfish grin sliding up his face. “Good job, Jaden,” he praised me and stopped clapping to point at the space in front of him. “Now, come here.”

My eyes lit up in shock, my gaze bouncing from Darren’s to the floor to measure the amount of space between us. There had to be at least nine or ten steps for me to reach him. The pressure made me wobble slightly, my

footing readjusting quickly to stabilize my balance. Fuck him for setting me up like this.

“This is bullshit,” I snarled at him.

“Come on, Stumbelina,” he taunted, his fingers waving me forward. “You wanted to walk, so *walk*.”

I sighed loudly in aggravation, glowering at him to the point I imagined his head exploding all over the place.

“I hate you so much right now,” I growled, turning my gaze back to the floor.

“Yeah, yeah, I know. Now, let’s go.”

Groaning, I bent my knee just a little and lifted my foot a single inch off the floor, shifting my weight forward and placing it back on the ground. I wobbled but repeated the step with my back leg, and then again, and again, ignoring the tingling growing in my calves and the aching soreness of my pussy still dripping cum down the inside of my leg.

Even with all the aquatic therapy I had been doing, it didn’t compare to this. My legs just didn’t have the strength thanks to the muscle atrophy from wasting away in bed for three months, not to mention the occasional sciatic nerve pain.

I really shouldn’t rely on the current state of my legs any way since they had just been exhausted, thanks to Darren’s antics. The fucker really was trying to sabotage me.

“Stop looking at the floor, Jaden. Keep your eyes on me.”

I glanced back up at Darren, hating him while he just stood there with his arms folded across his chest, an expectant look on his face.

I glimpsed back down, unable to withstand the intense focus he was giving me.

“I’m scared I’ll fall if I don’t watch where I’m stepping.”

“I’m not going to let you fall,” he assured me. And while I believed him, it didn’t make me feel any better.

My muscles were on fire, the weight of my legs still so damn heavy as I lifted them one at a time and slowly made my way to Darren. The closer I got, the worse the pain was, the grimace on my face impossible to hide, but I pushed on.

It was damn near impossible to keep my eyes on him, his sight so intensely trained on me that it disrupted my focus. Every time I glanced down, he'd practically growl at me, making me stumble slightly.

When I was just a single step away, my legs finally gave out, my body nearly falling into Darren's, but my knees never hit the floor. His arms had reached out and quickly caught me, then yanked me up into his arms and slammed his lips against mine.

His arms tightened around me, pressing me into him as he kissed me deeply, coercing my mouth to open wider so his tongue could claim mine. I could still taste myself on him, the memory drawing heat back to my overstimulated pussy.

He didn't even miss a beat when his arm slid under my ass and lifted me higher, pushing his hips between my thighs. Usually, my legs would be wrapped around his waist by now, but they were just too heavy and hung loosely on either side of him.

He didn't seem to care as he held my weight up, my arms slung around his neck as my lips sparred with his. When he finally pulled away, hope fluttered in my chest.

“Good girl,” he praised softly and then carried me back to the bed. I sighed with disappointment but also relief that I had made it that far, grateful that I could rest now.

Setting me down against the pillows, I let myself relax and sink back into the bed, eyeing Darren with suspicion.

“What’s next, backflips?” I teased, watching him pull the covers back up and over my legs.

He smirked. "Maybe tomorrow," he replied as he finished tucking me in and rose back to his full height. He looked down at me curiously. "How do you feel?" he asked.

I swallowed back my anger and focused on the fact that I had actually walked without assistance instead.

"Like I have a lot of work to do," I answered honestly.

My muscle atrophy was worse than I thought, and there was only one person to blame for that. But now that he was finally going to let me walk again, I would get my revenge by recovering faster than anyone could have possibly expected. I swore to myself that in no less than two weeks, I'd be fucking running circles around this place.

Darren nodded and then folded his arms, looking down at me with a serious look. "I want you to rest until lunch," he said sternly. "After you've eaten, you can get to work." Pursing my lips, I nodded in agreement, but the trepidation pumping through my muscles left me with a sense of unease.

Darren then leaned down and wrapped his hand around the back of my head, planting a light kiss on my forehead.

"You did well, Jaden," he said and then stepped away to head into the bathroom, the shower coming on a second later.

I sat there for a moment and considered what had just happened. I walked. And it fucking sucked. But Darren seemed determined to see me through it, his sudden change in attitude a slight beacon of hope that I was finally on my way back to my old self.

And I was going to make one hell of a comeback.

DANGEROUS GAMES

Breathe in. Breathe out. Breathe in. Breathe out.

Air left my lungs in slow gusts, the burn expanding in my chest as my leg muscles strained under my own weight. My thighs ached as they fought against the force of gravity with each step I took, but the anguish was worth it as I clenched the water balloon in my hand.

Raising my arm, I chucked it ahead of me and waited with high hopes to hear it splatter all over one of my intended targets.

“Missed me!”

An exaggerated snort followed. “That’s three for three, Jaden. You should be ashamed,” Clive commented.

Carla scoffed. “Don’t listen to them, Jaden. They don’t know what the hell they’re talking about.”

I ignored her as I took another three steps up the main stairway, exhaling slowly through the tightening tension in my calves. It didn’t help that I had just completed a hundred lunges about thirty minutes before this.

“Just a few more steps and they’ll be in sight, Mrs. Davis,” Theresa, my physical therapist, encouraged me.

“Right! Then you can really nail those bastards,” Carla added enthusiastically.

I nodded as she handed me another water balloon from the bucket she was carrying, my gaze returning to the top of the winding stairway where Clive and Owen continued to taunt me.

Almost halfway to the top, I threw the water balloon, holding my breath as I waited to hear it break against something.

“Ah, that one grazed my arm!” Owen shouted excitedly.

“Getting closer!”

Three more steps and a deep leg stretch later, I could finally see the top of Clive’s head. Taking the water balloon from Carla, I leaned over into the angle of the stairway and hurled it upward, the splash actually sounding promising this time.

“Well, now my shoes are wet,” Clive announced dispassionately.

Owen laughed obnoxiously like he was genuinely enjoying himself.

“Serves you right!” Carla shouted up the stairs, causing Theresa to giggle quietly to herself.

Another three steps and I was finally beyond the curve of the stairway, both of the blindfolded faces of my bodyguards now in view. Clive was stationed a few feet beyond the top of the stairs while Owen was slightly further back, the pair of them patiently waiting like they were standing in front of a firing squad.

“I’d take wet shoes over bunny slippers any day,” I retorted, ignoring the burn in my thighs as I chucked the next water balloon. It landed squarely in the middle of Clive’s forehead, the water drenching his face and soaking the top of his white dress shirt. “Bullseye,” I stated smugly.

“Nice throw, Mrs. Davis!” Theresa cheered beside me.

Clive groaned as he shook the water from his face, a red mark blooming on his skin from the impact.

“You do realize you didn’t have to wear the slippers, right? You could have just stayed barefoot.”

“I know that, Owen,” I replied lightly, flipping the next water balloon in my hand as I stopped at another third step. “But I’m a good sport, and now it’s your turn to show the same enthusiasm.”

My next throw landed in the middle of Owen’s chest, his body jerking slightly as he absorbed the surprise impact.

“Nice one!” Theresa praised again. “How are the legs?”

My knees were feeling wobbly, and my sciatic nerve pain was starting to compete with the acidic tightness of my muscles, but it was well worth it if it meant I got to exact a little consequence-free revenge against my joker bodyguards.

For every third step I made up the stairs, I got to chuck a water balloon at them from my position. They were allowed to dodge them, of course, but that was a little difficult to do while blindfolded.

Darren’s version of petty revenge for Clive and Owen’s bunny slipper prank was just as unsurprisingly creative as it was motivational.

“Legs are doing just fine,” I lied, not wanting Theresa to disturb my fun with another breather break when I only had six more steps to go.

Clive exhaled a laugh. “She’s lying, you can hear it in her voice.”

“Shut up, Clive,” I warned before tossing another balloon at his face.

Despite the blindfold, he dodged it last second, allowing the balloon to soar right past him so that it landed against the side of Owen’s neck.

“Ack!” Owen griped as he cringed into himself, the water soaking into his shirt that was now completely drenched from the first balloon.

“Well, I’m sure she can hold out for another few steps,” Theresa replied with a wink.

Smirking, I took two more water balloons, released a deep breath, and climbed my final steps, hurling the balloons until I finally reached the top.

“Have you had your fun yet, Jaden?” Clive asked, his suit pants now sporting a large wet spot at his hip while Owen’s face looked like a glossy tomato.

I glanced down at the bucket Carla was holding to find eight more water balloons inside. Darren had named this the bonus round.

“Almost.”

Five minutes later, both of my bodyguards were drenched from head to toe with various puddles of water surrounding them. Thankfully, the staff had removed anything that could have been damaged should I miss my targets, but seeing all the water and broken pieces of balloon everywhere, I felt a little guilty for making such a mess.

At least it was a fun mess to make.

“That was some excellent work, Mrs. Davis,” Theresa chimed in. “Those stairs never stood a chance.”

“Absolutely agreed!” Carla added.

I tried not to roll my eyes at their corniness, instead choosing to focus on the fact that I had completed the stairway challenge. My muscles burned and my joints wobbled, but regardless of the aftereffects, Darren had agreed that if I could climb a flight of stairs in one go, then I could officially graduate from physical therapy.

It had taken me three weeks to get here, and while I still had more muscle to rebuild, my independent functionality had irrevocably been reclaimed.

“Thanks, Theresa. I really appreciate all your help getting me here.”

“It was my pleasure, Mrs. Davis. Your dedication to your recovery has been truly inspiring. I’m glad I got to be a part of it.”

As long as I kept my grimaces to myself, she would have no reason to question her professional assessments. Regardless of how badly I wanted to collapse to the floor right now, maintaining appearances was paramount to keeping my independence.

“Well, if you three are done with today’s thrilling exercise, we’re going to go change,” Clive announced as the two of them pulled off their

blindfolds and headed to their quarters down the hall. “We’ll find you after our meeting with the boss.”

“Okay, this was fun!” I shouted after them before turning back to Theresa.

“If you need anything else, or have any questions or want some extra assistance, just give me a call,” she said. “I’m going to go report the good news to your husband. I’m sure he’ll be very proud.”

I couldn’t stop the sarcasm in my tone even if I wanted to. “Oh yeah, I’m sure he’ll be ecstatic.”

“I suppose I’ll start cleaning up this mess,” Carla said with a sigh. “Jaden, you should go rest those legs of yours.”

“Good idea,” I agreed.

As Theresa went off to find Darren and Carla started collecting balloon fragments, I headed toward my den where Camaro was currently napping on her pillow in the corner of the room.

Deciding now was a good time to finally collapse, I laid on the floor next to her and stretched out my legs. They felt like they were currently made of jelly, but I knew the feeling would pass if I gave them the break they needed.

Ever since Darren had finally rescinded my stupid training wheels, progress for my full recovery had been consistent and well-maintained. My muscles were slowly recuperating, my strength and balance returning, my coordination and flexibility back to their previous ability.

I still wasn’t exactly in fighting shape yet since I hadn’t started impact training, but at least I could walk a full flight of stairs again.

My mood had skyrocketed as the days passed, and I rubbed it in Darren’s face every chance I got to make sure he knew how well I was doing. He couldn’t refute my success, even if he wanted to, and for the most part, he’d been pretty supportive lately, even if he secretly wished he could keep me bedridden.

But this whole week, he'd been extra broody and short-tempered, snapping at just about anything and it was getting on my nerves. That usually meant he had too much stress building up and he would need an outlet soon or someone would get killed.

And there was usually only one way for me to resolve that.

Ugh. Good thing I'm limber again.

After about a thirty-minute rest and stretch session, I somehow felt good enough to run a damn marathon. Camaro had also woken up and was nudging my knee for attention. I smiled as I ruffled her ears and kissed the top of her boney head.

"How about we go for a walk? Maybe through the trees? We haven't been down that path in a long time." At the word 'walk' Camaro immediately jumped to her feet with a confirming bark. I chuckled at her excitement. "Okay, let's go."

Making our way through the house, we headed out into the backyard, the salty ocean breeze catching my hair while the sun, in spite of the grey clouds building in the distance, shined brightly overhead.

"Come on, Camaro," I said, turning and heading for the tree line, picking up my pace quickly into a light jog.

I made it maybe ten feet in before an electric shock struck through my body, eliciting a sharp yelp of pain. I instinctively stumbled back, disbelief and fear punching me in the gut at the familiar agonizing sting of electrocution.

What the hell?

I paused, my eyes darting in every direction, wondering if Darren had intentionally activated my shock collar or if I had unknowingly breached a boundary. My shock collar hadn't been activated like that since my time in the basement when Darren used it as a tool for punishment and manipulation rather than a deterrent. My body shuddered with anxiety at the memory.

Shaking it off, I took a tentative step forward and felt my collar vibrate with heat, the only warning sign alerting me that I was approaching a boundary. But why would Darren ban me from going into the woods? I'd never been banned before. And why wouldn't he tell me beforehand?

Instantly pissed off and wanting an immediate answer, I stormed back up the property and made my way toward Darren's office. I knew he was having his weekly meeting with Clive and Owen, so I wasn't worried about bypassing the guards at his door and marching right through.

"Mrs. Davis, wait!" they shouted after me.

Three sets of angry eyes landed on me at my sudden interruption, but while Clive's and Owen's remained unfazed, Darren's flashed with concern.

"Sorry, sir, she just burst through," explained one of the guards as he followed me in to stop me. Darren lifted his hand dismissively, and the guard immediately retreated, closing the door behind him.

"What's wrong?" Darren asked me, his eyes scanning my body up and down.

"Did you reduce my boundary line of the property?" I asked, my tone accusatory.

Clive tsked at my question. "Ouch," he muttered quietly.

Darren paused for a moment, his gaze locked on my neck like he was making an additional assessment.

"Yes," he finally answered.

I frowned, though I really shouldn't have been surprised. "Why?"

"Because I don't want you going through the woods right now."

"Since when?"

He furrowed his brows, the warning glare in his eyes an unfriendly reminder of my place here.

"Since you regained the mobility skills of a toddler. The last thing I need is you wandering too far and finding stupid ways to hurt yourself. Like tripping over shit or climbing fucking trees, for example."

I leveled him with my own glare, deliberately mocking the absolute nonsense that just came out of his mouth.

“I didn’t know toddlers could do handstands,” I deadpanned, reminding him of my recent accomplishment the day before.

Darren continued to stare at me, unimpressed with my revelation.

“You have got to be kidding me.”

His gaze sharpened, daring me to challenge him further. “I am not.”

I sighed, rubbing my temples to ease the tension in my jaw. “Darren, we’ve been through this already. We agreed that you can’t keep babying me like this.”

He tilted his head. “That’s odd because I recall an entirely different conversation where we agreed that you would accept my recovery plan without complaint.”

“That was before I was recovered,” I emphasized.

“You’re recovered when I say you’re recovered. And no amount of whining will change that.”

I had to stop my jaw from hitting the floor. I was this close to hurling something at his head.

“I literally just completed the stairway challenge. That was the agreed upon criteria to graduate from physical therapy, remember?”

“Finishing your physical therapy program does not automatically mean you’re fully recovered, princess.”

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath to avoid acting out my frustration, because I was this close to doing something stupid.

“That still doesn’t justify the surprise shock I just received a moment ago. You could have just asked me to stay out of the woods or at the very least warn me.”

Darren scoffed, his lips tugging at the corners of his mouth. “Like you said once before, you’re not very good at doing what you’re told. I know when you need to learn things the hard way to remember my rules.”

“So you’re worried I might trip over a fucking stick but have no qualms about the harms of electrocuting me?”

“Watch your mouth, little girl,” he snapped, the anger building behind his gaze instantly inflamed. “Your collar is currently on the lowest setting. A minor zap won’t kill you.”

I groaned loudly in annoyance. “Darren, I can’t take this anymore!” I nearly shouted into the air. “I’ve been trapped in this house for months, and I need a change of scenery before I lose my damn mind!”

Darren shook his head, the warning emanating from his body telling me I was close to getting my ass beat if I didn’t shut up.

“Enough, Jaden,” he barked. “Be grateful for the margins you are permitted. Like I said, you’re recovered when I say you are, so I suggest you stop mouthing off before I shrink the boundary even more.”

I glared back at him, my gaze holding his in a battle of wills I didn’t have a chance of winning. And because he knew this, he quickly dismissed me and turned his attention back to Clive and Owen.

I’d been cooped up inside the house for months, forbidden from training, barely allowed outside, and left to the dullest moments of my life, rotting in bed all day. I was going stir-crazy and needed to get the fuck out before I went on a domestic murder spree.

“That’s not what you said last time,” I snapped.

Darren’s eyes shifted back to mine, the promise of a swift demise hitting me like a ton of bricks if I didn’t stop. But I already had two servings of dumb bitch juice today so...here we are.

“Last time, I decided when I was ready.”

He slowly shook his head at me, a lethal fire burning behind those dark irises of his. “Careful, my mouthy little wife. Last time, you weren’t recovering from a bullet wound.”

I practically snarled back at him. “No, just the broken bones my doting husband so thoughtfully gave me.”

An evil sneer crept along said husband's lips, chilling my blood instantly.

"Exactly," he growled, the warning tone hard to miss.

Sensibility finally smacked me in the face at the subtle threat, my last reminder that Darren was not a man affected by guilt or remorse. What he was affected by was the enjoyment of bringing my worst nightmares to life, and I was dangerously close to reliving one. Again.

Fuck.

Taking victory in my silence, Darren grinned.

"Clive, will you please escort Mrs. Davis back upstairs to her little den before her doting husband breaks those same fucking bones again?"

Darren's eyes pinned mine as Clive stood from his chair, and all I could do was stare back with as much defiance as I could muster, which turned out to be very little.

"Come on, Camaro," I sighed, motioning for her to follow me.

"Camaro stays," Darren ordered, his attention now focused on whatever the fuck was on his desk. I stopped in my tracks and practically snarled at him.

"What?"

"You fucking heard me, you little brat. Now go. I'll deal with you later."

If there was an order created for Camaro to go piss on his rug and chew up his chairs, I would have given it to her. Instead, I begrudgingly told my best girl to go lay in her bed in the corner of Darren's office while Clive ushered me out the door.

"Is it possible for you to go just one day without pissing him off?" Clive scolded as we headed for the stairs.

"Not really. It's kind of my thing," I replied with a shrug.

Clive rolled his eyes as he impatiently escorted me back up the stairs, practically carrying me up each one.

“I can walk these now, in case you forgot,” I argued, pulling away from him, but he just gripped me tighter.

“Just shut up, Jaden. I don’t have the patience for your pride right now.”

I scoffed at his dismissal. “You had plenty of patience for it when you ate all those water balloons earlier.”

“That’s different. I was ordered to.”

I shook my head as we turned the corner toward my little J-den. Clive just clearly didn’t understand or appreciate how much Darren enjoyed being challenged by me.

As dumb as it sounded, it was actually a win-win for both of us. I lashed out whenever I felt inclined, and Darren got the pleasure of punishing me for it.

As much as he loved my submission, it was the act of fucking me *into* submission that he truly lived for. And then suddenly his mood would improve to a much more favorable temperature.

Hence, the dumb bitch juice.

Once I was inside, Clive abruptly slammed the door behind me, his footsteps thundering down the hall as he headed back downstairs.

I shook my head at his exit strategy. He was so fucking dramatic sometimes.

Blowing out a breath of irritation, I sank down into my couch and got comfortable. It only took about three minutes of staring out the window before I found my eyes struggling to remain open. The exhaustion of today’s final therapy session was suddenly catching up with me.

Lying my head back against the throw pillow, I propped my legs up on the cushions and closed my eyes. I had lay there like that for about fifteen minutes, close to falling asleep when the cuffs of my wrists were suddenly drawn to the cuffs at my ankles.

My eyes snapped open.

“What the fuck!” I screeched as I found my knees bending so my ankles could comfortably reach my wrists.

When my right wrist connected with my right ankle and my left wrist with my left ankle, I sat up with my knees tucked to my chest, my legs having no other place to stretch out unless I leaned all the way forward.

Oh, come on, not this shit.

Heavy footsteps vibrated through the floors, loudly informing me that nap time was now over. The door to the room was abruptly shoved open, an angry Darren barreling through and slamming the door closed behind him. When his hard gaze locked with mine, I felt my gut shrivel, but I remained steadfast.

“The fuck is this?” I asked, gesturing to the cuffs with my chin.

He scowled, anger blaring from his eyes. “What the fuck did you just say?” The threat in his tone was all too promising.

I furrowed my brows. “I said, what the *fuck* is this?” I repeated, adding some spice to my tone.

He tilted his head. “I thought that’s what you said.”

Darren then rounded the couch and snaked an arm around my middle to haul me up onto my knees, shoving my face into the couch cushion. After yanking my skort down, my ears caught the lethal sound of his belt being ripped from the loops of his pants.

Ah, fuck.

Only a second went by before I heard the sharp sound of the leather cutting through the air, followed by the loud smack it made against the skin of my bare ass. It took an additional second for the pain to finally register, that horrible sting cutting into my flesh and making me gasp aloud.

Darren didn’t even pause between strikes, just continued a constant stream of agony I had no hope of escaping. Each lash was harder than the last until I finally screamed the way I knew he wanted me to.

“There it is,” he drawled, dark satisfaction dripping from his tone.

I sucked in a breath, my chest heaving up and down as my tears began to soak the couch cushion beneath my face.

“Darren, come on. This is a bit mu—” Another strike cut me off, mid-sentence, another scream echoing from my throat.

“Why am I doing this, princess?” he asked, his voice soft, low, and deadly calm.

Panting, I tried to calm my breathing so I could answer him.

“My attitude.” Strike.

“What else?”

More panting, the obnoxious flow of oxygen clouding my brain, but at least the lash was half the strength of the others.

“I was argumentative.” Strike.

“What else?”

I bit my lip, trying to come up with more crimes.

“Cussing.” Strike. Strike. Strike.

I cried out, hating myself for every fucking tear the couch cushion below me was collecting. My legs were shaking, and my heart rattled in my chest.

It had been a long time since my ass burned like this, like it had been torched with hellfire. It was bound to happen sooner or later, regardless of the severity of my offense.

The last four months required Darren to treat me like a fragile little fawn, something he was not accustomed to. He didn’t buy me so he could pamper me with gentle caresses and tender kisses.

I was an outlet. I was a drug. I was the very thing his darkness relied on for crucial release. And he had gone without for too long. He was bound to have withdrawals, so overindulgence was expected. But I was still the one who had to pay the price for it.

When he was finished, Darren set the belt down, sighing with a satisfied hum as he gently ran his hand over my thoroughly abused skin. I tried not

to flinch as his hand traveled lower and lower until his long fingers ran along the seam of my wet pussy.

Darren groaned with approval as he dragged the wetness with his fingertips all the way to my swollen clit, causing my whole body to clench with need while I fought back a moan.

“There’s my good girl,” Darren murmured as he rubbed my traitorous arousal over my clit, forcing a needy whimper from my mouth.

I shouldn’t feel the shame that came with my body’s response to Darren’s punishing dominance. It wasn’t my doing or my fault. He’d trained my dumbass body to respond this way, trained it to get off on his discipline, to need it, to crave it, and to ensure a warm, wet vessel would always be waiting for him at the snap of a finger.

There was no breaking that conditioning, no matter how hard I tried. My pussy had been trained like Pavlov’s dogs, salivating at the mouth for my orgasmic reward for taking my beating like a good girl.

Like he said, I was built for endurance.

Fear spiked in my belly as I heard Darren flip a knife open, but the blade was thankfully only used to slice through the stretchy fabric of my skort and then immediately discarded to the floor.

My body shuddered as the sound of Darren’s zipper caught my ears, his cock quickly breaching the entrance of my pussy, pushing in deep and then quickly pulling back out.

“Ah!” I cried out, tugging uselessly at my restraints.

He fucked me from behind, my wrists and ankles still awkwardly trapped while my bruised ass took another beating from Darren’s hips.

My blood rushed as my orgasm began to build, my body already primed and on edge thanks to his belt. But just before I could fall over the edge, Darren grabbed my hips and pulled me back until I was sitting on his lap. The reverse cowgirl position felt awkward as I had to rely entirely on him

to keep me from falling over, but Darren didn't seem all that concerned as he began to bounce me on his dick.

"Ah fuck!" I moaned as the position was so much deeper now, and my ass burned from the new contact.

Reaching around, Darren gripped my throat and hauled my back to his chest until my head was leaning against his shoulder. The position stretched me so much farther, exposing my clit for his other hand to easily pinch between his two fingers. I jolted, my core clenching as I came all over Darren's cock, a wail of pleasure escaping my lips.

A single breath later, he grabbed my hips and spun me around to straddle his front. With his hands wrapped around my hips and ass, he continued to bounce me on his cock and sent me chasing the coattails of my orgasm. A few hard and brutal thrusts later, Darren came, a deep groan rolling up his throat as he held me still.

I was panting, my chest heaving as I tried to come down from everything, my head hanging low. Hoping to alleviate some of the burning pressure against my ass, I tried to lift just an inch, but the slightest movement had Darren pinning me back down.

"Where do you think you're going?"

I shook my head. "Just an inch north," I answered innocently.

An evil smirk curved in the corner of his lips, his hands snaking back to press his fingertips against the agony of his handiwork.

"Hurting?" he asked suggestively, his tone dark and playful. The tone that left a nervous flutter in my chest.

I gritted my teeth and tensed my shoulders as he cruelly played with my abused skin, running his short nails steadily up and down my ass.

"I gathered that was the point."

"Do you have anything else you'd like to complain about? Now would be the time."

“Well, now that you mention it,” I said, taking in a few breaths, my hair hanging loosely over my face. “We could address the impending stir-crazy that’s headed your way.”

Darren tsked. “Sounds like a personal problem.”

I huffed a short laugh. “My problems are your problems.”

His fingers squeezed harder into my skin, causing me to hiss behind gritted teeth. His cock was still unbelievably hard inside me, further adding to my discomfort as I tried to shift.

“And you think being a little brat is the best way to solve those problems?” he asked, a warning in his voice.

I smiled through the pain. “Let’s not pretend how badly you needed that just now. You’ve been a dick all week, so you’re welcome. Now pay a bitch for her services.”

Darren chuckled darkly, the deep rumble making my skin break out in goose bumps. He couldn’t deny that if it were anyone else, he would have been so bored by now, because they would have been dead inside.

Yet here I was, day in and day out, challenging him at every turn, ready for the rumble and tumble, and then getting back up for round two a week later.

He claimed I needed him, but the truth was he needed me far more than I ever would. Any rich asshole could provide me with a life of luxury, but I was the only one who could give Darren what he truly desired and actually survive it. He needed to give credit where credit was fucking due.

Painfully slow, Darren dragged his fingertips from my ass and back to my hips, my jaw clenching to keep from whimpering at the pain. And then one hand shot out and snatched my throat, squeezing hard and yanking me closer. His other hand reached up to tuck my loose hair away from my face, and I finally had the strength to meet his gaze.

“You play a dangerous game, little girl,” he growled.

I nodded slightly at the truth. “Your favorite one,” I choked out.

But I knew that eventually this game we played so often would turn deadly, and only one of us was going to walk away alive.

With a snarl, Darren jerked me closer and slammed his lips against mine. He kissed me savagely, his mouth claiming mine while his tongue plundered inside. I surged forward, seizing the opportunity to rise on my knees as far as I was allowed, and pressed myself into him.

It wasn't long before I found myself flat on my back, Darren's mouth assaulting my neck as he began to fuck me all over again.

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THE CHASE

The cool ocean breeze blew through my hair as I stretched out on the blanket I'd laid out on the grass. Hiding away from the hot sun, I stayed in the safety of the shade provided by the trees near the "forbidden" tree line.

I sat comfortably in a front split, waiting for Camaro to return with the Frisbee in her mouth that I'd been throwing for the past ten minutes. She was so damn good at catching it, so I made a point of trying to throw it as hard as I could to see how far it would make it before she caught it.

"Good girl," I praised, rubbing the top of her head and tousling her ears. "Go get it," I teased and whipped the Frisbee back into the air, smiling as Camaro barked and raced after it.

Switching positions, I shifted into a middle split and leaned forward until my forehead was resting on the blanket. I was happy to find that my flexibility had returned so much faster than anticipated, and my muscle atrophy improved steadily each week.

Taking in a deep breath, I lifted my head and reached my arms out to fold them under my chin, stretching my back as I watched Camaro race back with the Frisbee between her teeth.

She was maybe fifty feet in front of me when a sharp whistle sounded from behind, changing her trajectory entirely with a muffled bark.

Frowning, I turned my head to watch my dog race toward the direction of the whistle, my frown deepening when I saw her present the Frisbee to Darren's open and waiting hand.

Taking the Frisbee in stride, he continued to head my way as he smiled down at Camaro, wearing noticeably casual clothes this afternoon.

With a grey form-fitting T-shirt and dark jeans, Darren's laid-back vibes were deliciously noticeable but so damn misleading. I knew better than to trust them. Still, I couldn't help but desire the comfort of that kind of disposition, even if it was just an illusion.

When he was a few feet away from the blanket, he taunted Camaro with the Frisbee, making her jump up and down with an excited bark. He then flicked the Frisbee into the air so swiftly, I nearly lost track of it before I saw it disappear from my visual completely.

I grumbled under my breath at how far he was able to throw the damn thing, wincing as Camaro took off after it. She was going to be gone for a while.

Darren then turned his gaze down at me, taking in my unmoved split position, a warm grin on his face.

I cocked a brow at him. "I hope my dog doesn't get lost," I commented.

He released an easy sigh as he lowered his body to the blanket, laying on his side with his elbow propped up. "I'm sure she'll find it eventually."

Yeah, in a tree, maybe.

Darren then reached out and lazily dragged his finger down the length of my bare leg, sending shivers up my spine that I had to fight to keep from revealing.

"How are you feeling today?" he asked, his eyes following the trail of his fingertip.

I hummed a little in consideration. "I don't know, you tell me."

On a whim, I sat up, placed my weight on my hands, and carefully lifted my hips into the air. My arms strained under my weight as I shifted my legs

all the way up until I was balancing entirely on my hands.

It had taken me another two weeks since the Stairway Challenge to master it again, but now it was as easy as breathing.

Bending my knees, I held the zig-zag handstand for a good ten seconds before easing myself back down onto the blanket in a sitting position. I then turned back to Darren for his appraisal, raising my brow expectantly.

He nodded with approval, then rolled onto the flat of his back, linking his fingers behind his head. “Let me know when you can hold it for sixty seconds.”

I huffed a breath of annoyance, then noticed Camaro finally running back with the Frisbee in her mouth.

“And what happens when I can? Will you consider me recovered then?”

Darren snorted. “No.”

Scoffing, I stood and practically yanked the Frisbee from Camaro’s teeth before whipping it back into the air. It didn’t go as far as Darren had thrown it, but it went farther than my last throw had.

“Then what the hell is it going to take, huh?” I griped, plopping back down on the blanket. “I haven’t left the house in six months, and it’s making me crazy.”

“Yes, you mentioned that before.”

“Yeah, well, it hasn’t improved.”

“I’ve noticed.”

“You’ve noticed, yet you continue to ignore it like my mental health has no bearing on my physical health.”

He groaned quietly. “Do we have to argue every time we have a quiet moment together?” he snipped, his hard eyes locking with mine. “I was hoping to enjoy at least five minutes of peace before your claws came out.”

I glared down at him. “Happy wife, happy life, Darren. Haven’t you ever heard of that before?”

He sighed heavily, his eyes closing for a moment as he lay there quietly. Camaro returned with the Frisbee, but instead of dropping it within my reach, she laid on the grass several feet away, likely tired from all the chasing.

After a few silent moments, Darren rolled back onto his side, propping his elbow up to rest his head in his hand. His features softened for a moment, the ghost of a boyish grin gracing his lips. I narrowed my gaze in suspicion, bothered by how easy it was for a single sweet look from him to be so damn disarming.

The comforting illusion completely contradicted the hard and violent man I knew him to be. But that was the thing I had to always remind myself of—it was just an illusion.

“Okay, Jaden, I’ll make you a little deal,” he offered, his voice light with amusement. “I’ll give you one challenge, and if you can successfully complete it within the allotted time...” He hesitated, like the next words out of his mouth were actually painful to speak. “I’ll let you drive one of my vehicles of your choice.”

I paused in utter disbelief, my eyes swallowing up his facial expressions to see if he was actually pulling my leg or not. And then I decided he had to be.

“Yeah, right,” I retorted. “You won’t let me leave the house in the *back seat* of a car. You expect me to believe you’ll let me leave in the driver’s seat? Come on.”

He frowned at my dismissal. “I’m serious,” he deadpanned. “Driving is an easy non-physical activity that will allow you to leave the house without requiring you to actually be out in public.”

While he had a point, I still had a feeling he was being fictitious in some way.

I narrowed my eyes in consideration. “For how long?”

He cocked a brow. “How long what?”

My breath came out in a quick huff, blowing a stray strand of hair from my face. “How long do I get to drive? For all I know, you could be offering me only five minutes.”

His stoic gaze met mine as he considered the term. “Half hour,” he finally relented.

I shook my head. “One hour.”

Furrowing his brows, he sharpened his gaze.

“Out of the question.”

I tried not to roll my eyes. “Sorry, but fifteen minutes out and fifteen minutes back is not enough to entice me into whatever game you want me to play with you. You’ll have to do better than that.”

I then lay back and placed my folded hands at the back of my head, waiting patiently for him to cave. If he truly wanted me to play, he knew the stakes would have to be worth the high probability of me failing. I wasn’t going to play a losing game if the reward wasn’t even worth my efforts.

He sighed, and I knew I had him. “Fine, forty-five minutes. Take it or leave it.”

I rolled over with a smile, matching his position. “Okay, now where? I don’t want to drive for forty-five minutes in just a residential neighborhood.”

He smirked, shaking his head slightly as his eyes took on a playful glint. “What do you want, princess?”

I grinned. “I want freeway access.”

He huffed a laugh, rolling his eyes. “Of course, you do.”

Like I was going to waste this opportunity just to drive Miss Daisy around. I wanted to put one of those bad-boy engines to work.

“So we know your terms if you win. Now you need to hear mine,” he said, his tone playfully dangerous, a devilish twinkle in his eye. I leveled my gaze, waiting for him to lay down the nuclear bomb. The man could literally make me do anything he wanted. He didn’t have to resort to bets

like this. Which meant he had something rather interesting in mind. “If I win, you have to babysit Ella alone for eight hours.”

My face immediately dropped.

“I’m sorry, what?”

Had I even heard him correctly? That was not the winning spoils I expected him to pursue.

The grin clawing up his face was almost disturbing. “You heard me.”

“You want me to babysit a toddler? By myself? For that long?”

“Yes.”

I stiffened in disbelief, my brows practically raised to my scalp. “Why?”

“Why not?” he explained with a shrug. “What? Are you afraid of a toddler?”

I scoffed. “I’m not afraid of a toddler. I’m afraid of accidentally *damaging* a toddler.”

He cocked an unimpressed brow. “I think you can handle it.”

“What about Katherine and Daniel? Would they even allow me to babysit their daughter? I’m pretty sure they get to decide who watches their kid.”

Darren shrugged. “Daniel has already agreed, and Katherine trusts you.”

I looked away from him and stared off into the distance to think. Clearly, this was just another devious attempt to warm me up to the idea of motherhood, as if spending time with a toddler would cause my last working ovary to burst with maternal yearning. In reality, it would probably do the opposite.

I rolled my eyes internally at the thought. I had no objections to motherhood. I had objections to *forced motherhood*, especially to children bound for a violent life under the close instruction of their sadistic father.

But fine, I could handle hanging out with a toddler all day just to prove to Darren he couldn’t influence my biological desires, no matter how hard he tried. And Camaro would probably have a blast with Ella.

“We haven’t discussed what the challenge even is yet,” I reminded him.

“Do you remember where Team B’s base point was relocated to?”

I nodded. The base points moved frequently to keep the teams guessing. B’s was now just at the edge of the shore, about two and a half kilometers from here.

“If you can touch the pole before I pin you to the ground and fuck you, then you win.”

I stiffened, my pulse quickening as I cocked a brow at him, the image coming to mind being wild, dirty, and rough. But then reality hit, and my shoulders quickly sagged, a vicious frown forming over my brow as I let out an exaggerated groan.

Fuck, it was going to kill me to admit this.

“Not to stroke your ego here, but I have yet to manage that even *without* an injury.”

The grin he gave me made me want to punch him right in the throat.

“I’ll give you a ten-minute head start this time.”

Oh, how generous.

In truth, I would probably end up babysitting this kid anyway, even without the challenge. At least this way I had an opportunity to gain a little extra if I did somehow manage to win.

I frowned suddenly. “Hold on a minute, you just gave me all kinds of hell for wanting to simply jog through the woods, and now you’re completely fine with chasing me down in them?”

Darren rolled his eyes. “It’s been two weeks since then, Jaden. Do you want the chance to show me your progress or not? I have other things I could be focusing my attention on right now.”

I grumbled at his dismissal, but the idea of getting to drive even one of Darren’s many sports cars had me practically foaming at the mouth with want. But the realist in me knew damn well he would never willingly hand me that much control.

Negotiating with him was a total waste of time when he knew exactly what the outcome was already going to be. It was just another one of his illusions to make me think that I had even an ounce of influence in my life.

I sighed with disappointment. “Even though I know somehow you’ll ensure I lose, I’m still willing to give you a literal run for your money.”

He grinned something wicked, making my stomach clench in anticipation. Yeah, I was definitely going to lose.

“That’s my girl.”

Darren then leaned back, raised his wrist to his view, and pressed a button on his watch.

“Ten minutes … starting…now,” he said.

My eyes widened with alarm. “What, right now?”

He wanted to do this right this second? I was barely warmed up.

“Right now.”

Fuck.

Springing to my feet with a groan, I took off straight for the trees.

“Camaro, stay,” Darren ordered as she grumbled and shuffled to a stand.

She was such a good girl, but it was definitely best that she sit this one out.

Given my current status, it would take me about fifteen minutes to get to the base point from here on foot. It would probably take Darren only five to catch up to me before I made it. And that was assuming I didn’t tire or trip over anything.

I kept myself at a steady jog, not wanting to dispel all my energy for when Darren eventually caught up to me. I needed to save some of it for the eventual fight that was coming my way.

Catching me wouldn’t be enough this time. He had to pin me down, meaning I still had a fighting chance. It was slim, considering this would be the first time we fought since my injury, and my body would be rusty, but whatever. I’d still get a punch or two in.

I didn't have much semblance of time out here, but the further I got, I had to assume it had been at least eight minutes. I could feel my pace starting to slow, my hips straining as I pushed my muscles a little more than usual.

God, this fucking sucks.

After another minute, my stride turned into a power walk, which was bad news since Darren was probably already headed my way. If I pushed myself, really pushed myself, I could make it to the base point in five minutes from here. And five minutes was all Darren needed to catch up to me.

Fuck it, Jaden. Just push it.

Ignoring the ache in my hips, I picked up my pace and sprinted through the trees, running hard and keeping my stride. My lungs and legs were on fire as I forced oxygen through my system, but I could feel that I was close. And then panic spiked in my stomach as my ears caught the distinct sound of branches cracking behind me.

My heart fluttered. Darren wanted me to know he was coming.

Fuck.

I didn't dare look back and instead allowed the adrenaline to rush through my body, giving me the extra burst of energy I needed to hopefully finish this.

The ten-foot silver pole was finally in sight as I tore through what was left of the distance, my feet pushing hard into the uneven ground beneath me. I almost allowed a flicker of victory to spark in my heart when I was actually close enough to reach out with my arm. But before my elbow had even straightened, a hard band of steel wrapped around my middle and hauled me right off the ground.

Growling, I went with the momentum but swung my legs low to wrap my feet around the back of Darren's knee and sent us tumbling straight to the ground. We rolled into each other until I found myself looking down at a

wild-eyed Darren, a wide animated smile on his face. We both paused for a moment, long enough for me to realize he was flat on his back with me on top, straddling his hips while his hands clutched my wrists in each hand.

I cocked a brow. Now, how the hell did we end up here?

My eyes glanced ahead of him, locking on the pole that we were only twenty feet away from. Tugging on my wrists, Darren kept them trapped, but in that second, I lifted both of my knees up and pushed my legs out right into his upper arms, kicking hard. His grip loosened just enough for me to slip through and bolt from his body.

But I made it only a foot before his hand struck out and snatched my ankle, yanking me back down to the ground. My hands kept me somewhat upright as I caught myself in the grass, turning my head over my shoulder to swing my other leg out, aiming for his head with my heel. Darren easily ducked under it, but as he lunged forward, I was able to twist myself around and lift both knees to press my feet into his hips, preventing him from fully pinning me.

With all the strength I had left in my legs, I pushed as hard as I could and sent him flying over my head. He landed behind me with a groan, a smile cracking across my face as I shot forward, the pole nearly within my grasp.

I reached out, and my fingertips were inches away when Darren's arm wrapped around my hips. He yanked me hard away from the pole and slammed me down into the grass. My fist struck out, clocking him right in the mouth, but he didn't even react as his fingers hooked into my skort and thong and ripped them down my thighs.

Vaulting my upper body forward, I connected my elbow with his jaw, the blow naturally doing absolutely nothing to deter him from his objective. His other hand then shoved down on my chest, pinning me in place as he finished tugging my clothes down my legs.

I tried to keep my knees together as best I could while wrestling with his arm, but he had no issue yanking them apart and pressing his body between them. In a last-ditch effort, I wrapped my legs around his torso as tight as I could, barricading my now exposed pussy against his body and blocking his entry.

Darren chuckled as he moved for his zipper, his fingers pinching the underside of my ass and making me jolt. Reaching out as far as I could, I grabbed at his other hand to keep him from freeing himself, clutching onto his thick fingers.

Sighing, he swatted my hand away before wrapping both my wrists in one giant palm above my head. Secured, he went back to his zipper and released his cock from the confines of his jeans. And then, ever so gently, he placed his hand just above my pelvis and carefully pushed down.

I groaned loudly as I struggled to hold my position, my hips unable to match Darren's strength as he pressed down until my pussy was finally low enough for his cock to reach.

When my knees finally gave out, Darren surged forward, his cock spearing into my wetness with the force of a hungry victor. I cried out as my pelvis tilted to meet his thrust, my back arching as a kind of primal pleasure was forced onto me.

Darren growled as he hovered above me, his hand around my wrists tightening enough to bruise as he began fucking me into the dirt like a wild animal.

“Oh God,” I murmured under my breath, moaning the way I knew would spur him on. Releasing my wrists, he went for the edges of my shirt and ripped it apart to expose the sports bra underneath. He then gripped the little zipper and pulled it down, allowing my breasts to spill out.

“Fuck,” he growled, his palms covering each mound as he continued his onslaught on my body. He kneaded my breasts, thumbs caressing over my nipples, causing me to hiss with need.

I could feel my core clenching around him as more heat spread through my blood. His hands traveled down my body to grip my hips and lift them off the ground, adjusting his angle to hit me just where I liked it.

“Ah!” I cried out as my hands reached down for purchase in the grass. My mind was lost to the rush of ecstasy that coursed through my veins, lighting everything on fire.

“Fuck, do you have any idea how wet you are?” he growled. “I should hunt you down like this more often.”

Darren increased his pace, fucking me harder until I was crying and coming all over his cock, euphoria clouding all of my senses. I hadn’t even come down from the high before Darren was flipping me over onto my hands and knees.

Holding tight, he surged back into me, keeping me in place as he rocked into my body, his steel cock driving me fucking insane. Wrapping his fist in my hair, he yanked me back, forcing my gaze to focus on the pole in front of me. The one I had failed to reach in time.

“You were so close.” He snickered, the smile on his lips caressing my ear.

I stretched my neck, clicking my tongue. “I’ll just steal one like I did your bike,” I spat through gritted teeth.

I couldn’t stop the chuckle escaping as Darren growled and instantly hauled me back by my hair until his chest slammed into my shoulders. One hand exchanged my hair for my throat while the other slipped low to pinch my clit, causing me to jerk in his hold. All the while, his dick never missed a beat.

“Ah!”

His hand clutched tightly around my neck, squeezing just enough to make my hands reach up to grip his forearm. He pounded into me from behind with such force, such delicious agony, I could barely catch my breath as my fingernails clawed angry red streaks down his arm.

When I came a second time, my entire body tensed as a violent wave of pleasure washed over me. At that, Darren shoved my face into the ground, fucking me through my orgasm right into the dirt as he finally came, a primal snarl ripping from his throat.

Sated, he fell over top of me, blanketing my body with his while keeping most of his weight on his elbows that were planted on either side of my head. A few seconds passed between us as we both tried to catch our breath, his cock still buried deep inside me.

“Better luck next time,” he jested, the taunt making me want to elbow him in the ribs. But I couldn’t move if I wanted to. He was fucking everywhere, his large body covering mine so easily, I felt trapped beneath him. Like a damn rabbit in the jaws of a wolf.

Glancing up, I could only see the underside of his chin and some grass as he hovered over me. A throat punch would be so easy from this angle.

“Oh, believe me, there will definitely be a next time,” I replied gravely.

VICTOR



A week had gone by since I'd run Jaden down in the woods. And while she tried not to sulk about it, I could still see the lingering aftereffects of her defeat.

As much of a hard-ass as I was on her, I understood her disdain for her regression since the accident. But the chase had been just the motivation she needed to keep working, to push even harder.

And I had to admit I was ready for her to finally get back into fighting shape. I was starting to miss the physical conflict, but it would mean sacrificing my obsessive desire to keep her dependent on me. I couldn't have both, no matter how much I wanted it.

But it became that much harder when I watched her flick that goddamn spider off her shoulder like it was nothing. I felt my entire world tilt for a moment, unsure how to react. Jaden was terrified of spiders, and I had lost count of the number of times I had killed them for her over the years—the only time she ever saw me as her hero.

When did she stop being afraid of them? How the hell did that even happen?

It was just one less thing she needed me for, and it made me fucking snap in half. I ended up prolonging her recovery even more, much to my own detriment, but I couldn't accept that level of independence. Not yet.

But I needed to face reality. After my meeting with the general, play time was officially over. It was time to get Jaden back on her feet, and she was only too eager to make it happen practically over night.

And thank fuck for that because my urge to fuck her harder, longer—to make her scream was well past its prime, and I was ready for my due. So when I noticed she had been spending the majority of her time in her gym, I didn't disturb her. We were now essentially on the same page as far as her recovery was concerned, and I didn't want anything to disrupt her progress.

Now that Miguel had finally shown his face, things were heating up again, and I needed a stronger outlet than my fist to fuck my rage into. The fucker was a mousy little shit, afraid to come out of his hole and handle his business, but I'd find him eventually. That, or I'd just make him come to me. Doing things on my own turf always had its advantages.

"You seem distracted," Scott commented as we circled each other in the caged ring.

I cocked a brow, a smirk forming in the corner of my mouth. "Like that's going to help any of you."

Scott then struck his fist out, almost colliding with my jaw before I shifted my chin an inch to the right, dodging his blow. All at once, my two other additional opponents, Greg and Andrew, quickly engaged, following Scott's lead.

Ducking low, I veered out of the way, using my momentum to lift my leg and slam my foot into Greg's ribs, kicking him straight to the ground. Andrew advanced then, swinging his fist out, but he was a bit slow.

Catching his wrist, I twisted it around, trapping his arm in place to bring his torso down and slamming my knee into his nose twice. The second he

went limp, I whipped him around to toss him on top of Greg just as he was starting to rise to his feet.

Scott lunged at me then, knocking me into the barriers of the cage. His fists struck my side twice, the blows hard enough to make me shift out of the way before he could do more damage. Twisting my hips, I swung my elbow out, clocking him along his orbital socket, causing his face to jerk to the left.

Just then, Greg was back on his feet, but the second he lifted his arm to strike, I kicked my leg out to catch him square in the gut and then again at the back of his knee, sending him doubling over. Andrew then lunged at me from the other side, forcing me to maneuver Scott in his direct path so he took Andrew's kick straight to his back.

I stepped out of the way and let Scott take his fall, kicking Greg in the head again before Andrew began lashing out with a series of punches and kicks that he couldn't even hope to land. Snatching his wrist midair again, I turned my body and hauled him forward and over my shoulder, slamming him down onto the ground just as Greg landed a kick at my chest.

"Where are we with finding Kayla?" I asked Scott as Greg slammed his shoulder into my gut and knocked me back into the cage.

Wrapping my arm around his neck, I lifted my leg to slam my knee into his stomach three times and then tossed him away from me while dodging Andrew's latest attack to my face. Lifting his leg, he kicked out, making me shift to the right so his foot hit nothing but the cage. A swift strike to his jaw sent him fumbling to the ground.

"Facial recognition picked her up at the Tucson International Airport two days after she sold the ring," Scott answered. He then swung his fist out, nearly clipping my nose in the process before I tilted my head to the side. "She boarded a plane to Luxembourg. The path went cold there."

I scowled. "The fuck would she go to Luxembourg for?" I asked as my fist connected with Greg's chin.

Scott shrugged as he allowed Andrew to surge past him so he could swing an elbow at the side of my head and miss.

“She has no connections there that we’re aware of,” he answered as I trapped Andrew in a headlock and hook-kicked Greg across his face, knocking him out completely. “Could just be a place she’s passing through, though. We’ve been reviewing security footage of all the train stations, but facial recognition hasn’t picked her up yet.”

I clutched Andrew’s neck tightly in my arms, cutting off his air supply while he struggled to break free. “Put out a missing person’s report throughout Europe. We might get lucky that way,” I said as I yanked Andrew down to his knees. When his body finally went limp, I tossed him away, piling him right next to Greg.

“Will do,” Scott said with a nod and then attacked. He and I exchanged a series of strikes and counterattacks until we were both winded, neither one of us willing to end the fight until the door to my gym loudly slammed shut. The echoing sound caused Scott to glance over, giving me the opportunity to grab his arm and haul him over my shoulder, slamming him onto the ground with a hard thud.

Turning to the source of the noise, I found Jaden standing in front of the door, her hands on her hips and her eyes staring me down.

Someone has an agenda.

“Need something, sweetheart?” I taunted.

Scowling, she folded her arms across her chest. “Yeah, I want my rematch,” she stated. “Right now.”

My lips curled as pride swelled in my chest. “Are you sure about that?” I asked as I turned and helped Scott up off the floor.

“Oh yeah,” she replied confidently. “I’ve devised a new strategy I’d like to test out.”

“Really?” I asked as I stepped out of the cage, moving toward her. “Now, that’s intriguing.”

“I thought you might think so.”

“And what exactly are you prepared to sacrifice when you find it doesn’t work?”

She shot me an irritated glare, not caring for my teasing dismissal.

“I suppose I could watch Ella a second time,” she offered with a shrug.

I considered it for a moment as I stepped into her space, towering over her small frame and forcing her head to tilt back to meet my heated gaze. The thought of chasing her down and fucking her tight little body into the ground again had my dick pressing painfully into the seam of my sweatpants.

Decided, I shook my head at her offering. “This isn’t double or nothing, little girl. You’re going to have to do better than that to entice me into chasing you through the woods.”

She arched a brow, no doubt her bullshit meter blaring alarm bells in her head. She knew damn well I didn’t need any further enticing besides the opportunity itself to chase her down and fuck her in the dirt like an animal. But that didn’t mean I wouldn’t make her beg me for it.

“Fine, what else do you want that you couldn’t possibly already wrench from me?” she asked with adorable disdain.

The corners of my lips curled as I slowly dragged the tip of my finger down her temple, reveling in how soft her pale skin was. “I want you...to initiate.”

Her brows knitted together in confusion, her voice carrying an edge of caution. “Initiate what?”

“Sex.”

Jaden’s gaze sharpened as she paused for a moment, her features stoic while she clenched her jaw. Her glossy hazel eyes hunted for the scent of suspicion, staring up at me with obvious skepticism. And then she rolled her eyes.

“And here I thought you were going to request something difficult.”

I grinned at her boldness, loving how dismissive she was while covering up the fact that she was secretly panicking inside. I'd never cared about her initiating before, only because we only ever fucked when I wanted to. But now, I wanted to see what she looked like when she chased her own desire.

"And I want you to do it before the week is over," I added. That would only give her four days to find the courage, but I had faith she would find it somewhere. "But if you fail to meet that deadline, your privilege of ever negotiating with me again will cease to exist." I wouldn't tolerate her nerves delaying what I was owed for even one second.

She huffed out a breath, the scowl growing on her face, becoming more adorable by the second. "Fine, but if I win, I want the Ferrari," she demanded.

I chuckled softly, my chest warming with eager anticipation. "Of course, you do."

Truthfully, I didn't give a flying fuck what she wanted or what she was willing to sacrifice. Jaden was going to lose anyway, but she seemed to think she had some kind of winning chance if she was willing to engage with me again. She must have had something good up her sleeve. Otherwise, she wouldn't enter a losing battle just for shits and giggles.

Either way, if my hot little wife was up for round two, then who was I to deny myself?

"Alright, hotshot, let's go," I said, directing her out of my gym.

A wicked smile spread across her face as we walked through the house and out to the backyard to the tree line. I couldn't wait to wipe it off her face when her pussy was stuffed full with my cock.

"You're only getting five minutes this time," I told her once we stopped at the tree line.

Alarm flashed across her pretty hazel eyes for only a second before she quickly recovered.

"That's fine," she said, cracking her neck and rolling her shoulders.

Grinning to myself, I lifted my wrist to start the timer on my watch. “Good luck, little girl,” I taunted before pressing the timer. “Go.”

Jaden took off into the trees, her sprint noticeably faster than a week ago. I couldn’t deny that she had been working very hard ever since I finally gave her the green light to do whatever she wanted to regain her former glory. The results were impressive in such a short span of time. I hoped I wouldn’t derail them when I finally caught her.

Adrenaline began to pump through my veins as the timer counted down the final ten seconds, the thrill of the chase lighting my primal urges on fire. When the alarm finally sounded, I stormed off into the trees, intending to catch Jaden quickly instead of toying with her like I had last time.

It only took me seven minutes before I finally had her in my sights. She had conveniently requested the rematch right when I had finished training as if she could catch me at a disadvantage. The idea was cute, but it would never make a bit of a difference. I could be bedridden with the fucking flu, and I’d still own her ass.

With me closing in on my pretty little target, I noticed Jaden’s speed was actually spanning more ground than she had last time, which was a good sign. But whatever new “strategy” she had planned was enough to pique my curiosity, my speed slowing down just enough to give her time to put the base point within her sights.

At the sound of my advancement, Jaden kicked up her pace, closing the distance between her and her target. Deciding to end the charade, I pushed just a little harder until she was nearly in my grasp.

The pole was only maybe ten feet in front of her when my arm reached out to swipe at her waist. But just as my fingertips graced her hair, Jaden ducked low and somersaulted hard onto the ground, rolling right out of my reach as I raced past her.

Spinning on my heels, I shot around with just enough time to see her tumble the rest of the way to the pole until she essentially crashed right into

it, catching it with her hands and holding tight.

Did Jaden seriously just fucking trip?

Concerned, I came to a full stop, worried that she might have actually hurt herself. But what I saw instead could only be described as the biggest victory smile I'd ever seen plastered all over her beautiful face.

Her chest was heaving up and down, her breath coming in quick pants as she clutched the pole like letting go would disrupt her triumph and turn it all into an illusion. A soft chuckle escaped her lips, a wide-toothed smile reaching her eyes as she finally lifted her gaze to mine.

“Ha!” She laughed, still catching her breath.

I couldn’t help but return her smile, pride flowing through my veins at her little victory.

“Fuck, that really hurt,” she muttered under her breath, rolling her shoulder. I sharpened my gaze as I subtly looked her over for any visible injuries, but the only thing I could see was the blazing ray of triumph bursting in her eyes. And it was just too fucking adorable.

Could I have caught her sooner? Unquestionably, yes.

Was I impressed by her ingenuity and execution? A thousand percent, yes.

Was I still going to fuck her like she’d lost? Absolutely.

With steady strides, I made my way over to her, giving her a slow clap of applause for her successful efforts.

“Very impressive, Jaden,” I praised her, watching the light in her eyes brighten tenfold. I knew any kind of praise from me was like a drug for her, but this had been well-earned. “At first, I thought you just conveniently tripped, but you actually made a very calculated and clever maneuver at the perfect timing. Well done.”

On shaky legs, she pulled herself up by the pole and stood tall. “Thank you,” she said proudly, glancing down to brush off the dirt and grass from

her clothes. I was half tempted to tell her not to bother since she was about to be covered in it again anyway.

Feeling my presence closing in, she lifted her eyes, her brows rising slightly as she took a cautious step backward.

“To the *victor* goes the spoils,” she reminded me, her eyes narrowed as she took another step back.

“Yeah,” I concurred, then snatched her by the throat. “You’re still getting fucked, though.”

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EARNED



I paced back and forth inside the walk-in closet, my agitation growing with every minute. It had been five days since I beat Darren at his stupid little challenge. Five days and he still hadn't made good on our deal. I'd finally secured myself a sure way to get the fuck out of this house, and he was holding out on me. I'd given him two whole days before I brought it up, reminding him of the importance of his word, but all I'd gotten was a promise of "soon." Whenever the fuck that would be.

I wanted to pester him about it more, but he'd barely been home the last couple of days. It was like the fucker was deliberately trying to avoid me so he could delay it.

I meant what I said before. I would steal one of those damn cars if I had to.

When it was time to head downstairs for breakfast, I stormed my way into the dining room, finding Darren already seated at the head of the table.

Plopping into my chair, I folded my arms against my chest and stared ahead, refusing to acknowledge him. From the corner of my eye, I could see that he had arched a brow as he stared at me.

"What's with the attitude this morning?" he asked, unimpressed.

I held my composure. “I’m still waiting.”

Darren rolled his eyes and sighed. “This again? Excuse me for not prioritizing your little joyride, princess, but I do have several empires to run and two wars to direct.”

I clenched my jaw. I didn’t give a flying fuck what his excuses were. I wanted our agreement honored just like he would if he were in my position.

“Sounds like just a bunch of excuses to me,” I mumbled.

“What was that?”

I closed my eyes and sighed through my nose, attempting to cool down my anger before it got me in more trouble. “Nothing,” I replied, dejected. “Just never mind.”

Darren’s tone was so grave, it could have cut steel. “Careful, little girl. Some of us have actual professions that require more time and attention than lounging around the house all day might.”

My entire nervous system instantaneously detonated, bursting into flames with an absolute, uncontrollable rage.

How. Fucking. Dare. He.

“Well, I guess you shouldn’t be writing checks your ass clearly can’t cash then, huh?” I retorted bitterly.

Nice impulse control, dumbass.

The heavy squeak of Darren’s chair against the floor had my stomach clenching in anger.

“Come here,” he ordered, pointing at the space in front of him.

Refusing to look at him, I huffed a breath and scooted out from my chair, keeping my arms folded tightly against my chest. It only took a single step for Darren’s arm span to reach me and yank my body the rest of the way to haul me over his lap.

Wrapping his arm around my waist, he held me in place as he lifted the back of my dress and smacked my bare ass so hard, the sound echoed off the walls.

I bawled and jerked in his hold as he smacked me again.

“You ever talk to me like that again, and you won’t have a working jaw to even speak with anymore.” His hand cracked down against my ass a third time, making me inhale with a sharp gasp, the pain radiating everywhere. “Do you understand me?”

I blew out a frustrated breath. “I just—”

He smacked me again so hard that an involuntary tear slipped from my eyes, a cry scraping up my throat.

“Do you understand?” he roared down at me, making me flinch internally.

“Yes!” I shouted back, my ass so inflamed I dreaded having to sit back down through breakfast. He spanked me again, slightly less hard this time, but it was enough to make me grit my teeth until my jaw ached.

“I don’t know where this sudden sense of entitlement is coming from, but it’s really starting to piss me off.”

I scoffed. “Excuse me for expecting you to honor our agreement. How stupid of me to trust your word,” I practically spat.

That earned me another hard swat, making me growl in agitation.

“Yes, you were very adamant during our negotiations, weren’t you? The what, the where, the length of time. You knew exactly what you wanted.” His hand came down again, the sharp burn making me whimper. “However, you failed to negotiate one very important provision,” he stated, rubbing his palm across my sore and stinging ass. “You forgot the *when*.”

I immediately stiffened, my mind circling back to the day we discussed the terms, trying to find the lies in his words. But I knew there were none because Darren never lied. I hadn’t even felt the need to consider the when. I was too damn excited over the rare possibility of it even happening in the first place.

What was worse was that I had the chance to renegotiate before the rematch, but I didn’t. My brain just automatically assumed it would happen

immediately like most pay-ups did.

Fucking rookie mistake.

I sighed in frustration and hung my head low in defeat. For all I knew, the when could be a fucking year from now.

“You’re unbelievable,” I murmured under my breath.

I groaned as he landed another hard swat, my ass scorching with fire.

“I’m also unbelievably fucking *busy* right now. So you will have to continue waiting until I have time to make those arrangements. Do you understand now?”

When I didn’t answer fast enough, he landed one final hard slap, making me jerk in his lap.

“Answer me.”

“Yes, I understand,” I spat.

“Good,” he seethed and wrenched me back up to standing. All the blood rushed from my head, making me sway. “Now sit your ass down and shut your mouth. I don’t want to hear one more fucking word out of you.”

I huffed an irritated sigh as I moved away from him and eased myself back into my seat. I clenched my jaw so hard as the pain from his hand burned along my skin, the pressure making me grimace.

I was being a petulant child, and I knew that, but that was only because my recourse could only come in the form of being a brat. If someone hadn’t honored an agreement with Darren, he had the ability to remedy that in any way he wanted—intimidation, blackmail, murder...

I didn’t have that luxury.

My only weapon was that of a bad attitude. So that was what Darren would get.

Breakfast passed by in an uncomfortable silence as we both ate quietly, but a reprieve came when Darren received a phone call that he had to step away to take. I’d finished my plate quickly before he came back, so I was able to quietly slip away.

I retreated back to my den, finding Camaro snuggled in her bed. Her head popped up as I closed the door behind me, a big yawn stretching her snout as she made her way to me. I decided to spend the rest of my morning pretending to watch movies while I stretched and sulked on the floor.

I couldn't believe he had the gall to call my enforced captivity "lounging around the house" as if my bullshit marriage to him allowed me to do literally anything else! And the fact that he called it "lounging" at all was insulting, considering how hard I had been working at my rehabilitation over the past couple of months.

What a fucking dick.

Just a few days earlier, I had been soaking up his praise like a destitute junkie, feeling so damn good about myself. Sometimes Darren could make me feel like I was on top of the fucking world.

And then there were days, like today, where he could make me feel like a foolish child. I hated how much power he had over my emotions when it came to my own self-worth. Apparently, all it took nowadays was just a few hard spankings and a single insult from him to annihilate it.

When did I become this weak and pathetic?

God, I was so desperate for a single drop of dopamine I was willing to act like a goddamn fool to get it. Fucking pitiful.

For the rest of the week, I avoided Darren like the plague, not wanting to cross paths with him and my unending petulance. I didn't need a repeat of that encounter. So when Clive informed me we were going out to dinner and that I had one hour to get ready, I was a little more than shocked. I was irritated.

As much as I always enjoyed finally getting out of the house, the thought of spending an evening with Darren in public was already exhausting, considering how much harder I had to work to "behave" around him. But what fucking choice did I have?

So I showered, did my hair and makeup extra special, and when I was ready to get dressed, I found a white cocktail dress with diagonal sequined rose gold stripes laid out on the bed. Matching white platform heels sat on the floor.

Though white wasn't exactly my color, it was a very pretty ensemble. After pairing it with some jewelry Darren had gotten me for Christmas, I was ready to go.

Or so I thought.

After six months of not wearing heels, my ankles were suddenly feeling less than enthusiastic about performing on stilts. Each step I took toward the door made me feel like a fucking baby deer walking for the first time. I'd never had to put so much focus into walking in heels before, and it actually sucked.

When Clive and Owen escorted me from the bedroom to meet Darren downstairs, I found myself holding my breath as I walked down the curved stairway. I was going slower than normal and gripping the banister a little harder than necessary. Thankfully, that wasn't where Darren's focus was trained as I carefully descended each step.

My nerves instantly erupted when I caught his heated gaze, my mouth going dry. That hard look of deep focus and scrutiny slowly worked its way up and down my wobbly body, gradually increasing my heart rate. But by the time his eyes returned to mine, lust and prideful possessiveness had replaced his assessment—the golden seal of approval.

I couldn't help but replicate the gesture, finding myself appreciating how well his body filled out the tailored midnight black suit he wore. The man was male perfection from top to bottom, and I fucking hated him for it. It was criminal that anyone could be that ugly on the inside yet could still be so goddamn handsome on the outside.

When I made it to the last step, Darren held his large hand out for me to take, a deceptively warm smile on his face.

“Do you know what today is?” he asked as I placed my hand in his.

Anxiety spiked in my stomach at his question, my eyes searching through his for some kind of answer. When I came up with nothing, I waved my white flag. I didn’t even know what day of the week it was, let alone a damn potential special occasion.

“Thursday?” I replied tentatively.

A knowing smirk crossed his lips as he pulled me down from the last step.

“Today is our first wedding anniversary.”

I felt my face drop at the answer. It had already been an entire year since the wedding? I’d been married to this asshole for a whole-ass year? Somehow it felt like an eternity.

“Well, I hope my anniversary gift is a calendar because I actually have no idea if today is Thursday or not.”

Darren’s smirk curved until it met his eyes. “It’s actually Tuesday.”

“Of course it is, silly me.” Ignoring my sarcasm, he reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a small velvet box. I frowned immediately. “That box doesn’t look like it fits a calendar. Unless it’s a pocket calendar?”

“You don’t need a damn calendar,” he replied. “Besides, as much as this is going to kill me, you’ll prefer this over anything else.”

He then handed me the box, his smirk disappearing entirely only to be replaced with something more cautious and almost irate. Ignoring his odd change in demeanor, I lifted the lid to find a bright red key fob, the word Ferrari etched down the middle.

My eyes lit up.

“Oh my God,” I whispered under my breath. No fucking way. “You got me my own Ferrari?”

His brows shot together as a scowl twisted his mouth. “Fuck no!” he answered sharply, crushing my exaggerated hopes in an instant. “That’s the key to *my* Ferrari. I’m finally honoring our bet.”

While I knew there was no way he'd ever buy me a car, the realization that I was finally going to get to drive *his* Ferrari left me stunned into silence. He didn't even wait for me to reply, just walked right out the front door, naturally expecting me to follow. His sudden absence woke me out of my shocked daze.

"Wait, really?!" I called, chasing him like I'd just hallucinated instead.

I paused when I saw the car was already waiting for us in the circle drive, its beautiful red paint glistening in the setting sunlight and beckoning me to absolutely shred her out of Darren's driveway.

"You coming, or was I wrong to give you this?" Darren asked as he stood by the car impatiently.

Excuse you, motherfucker, but I earned this.

It was becoming clear how much he absolutely hated this. It practically oozed from him. Which meant I had to ensure he didn't regret this when it was over. I wanted as many opportunities to drive all of his sports cars as often as I could.

Dashing to the driver's side in my stupid heels, my hands shook with excitement as I rounded the open door, wobbly legs ignored and forgotten. Gently lowering myself into the lush seat, I sighed with satisfaction before I reached up to close the butterfly door. It took a little more effort than expected as I had to use more strength than usual to pull the door down to close it.

"Are all Ferrari doors usually this hard to close?" I asked, genuinely curious.

"Only the ones with armored plates inside," Darren answered, already seated in the passenger seat.

I paused for a moment at that, thinking to myself how many times I had opened and closed car doors with him. I realized then that I couldn't even remember. I hadn't had much of an opportunity since most of the doors were almost always opened and closed for me by either Darren or a guard.

Either way, I supposed having armored car doors was a good thing, given his “profession” as a glorified crime lord.

With Darren already sitting in the passenger seat, the change in our dynamic was all too noticeable for us both, the hilarity of it being that my feet didn’t even come close to reaching the pedals. Nor could my hands reach the steering wheel.

Feeling around for the seat adjuster, I could see the smirk forming on Darren’s lips as the seat began to inch forward.

“Not a word,” I warned.

He rolled his eyes. “You don’t need to do that. The pedals and steering wheel adjust.”

“They do?” I asked, looking around for the switch. After Darren pointed it out, I held the switch until the pedals were within a comfortable reach, then adjusted the steering wheel. “That feature should come standard in every car. I’ve always hated how close I have to sit to the wheel just to comfortably reach it.”

Darren froze for a moment, a deep frown forming between his brows. “I swear to God, if a fucking airbag is what takes you out...”

I snorted over his words. “Relax. I’m an excellent driver.”

“You damn well better be, or this won’t be happening again,” he warned.

I frowned. “What do you think I’m going to do? Run us off the road?”

He tilted his head to the side, eyeing me like the explanation wasn’t obvious. “It’s been a long time since you’ve driven on public roads.”

No thanks to you, asshole.

I shrugged him off. “It’s like riding a bike.”

The scowl that formed across his face was almost comical. “This car is *not* a fucking bike, Jaden.”

I tried not to laugh at the offense he was clearly taking by my comparison.

“It sure isn’t,” I said approvingly, smiling with appreciation as I rubbed my hands along the soft leather of the steering wheel. “I’m actually really looking forward to driving by the water, so I hope you’re okay with that.”

He cocked a brow. “Is that your subtle way of alluding to a secret plot to drive us off a cliff and into the ocean?”

I bit my tongue to silence my immediate retort. Did he really think I was going to use this opportunity to kill us both? Although, at this rate, I just fucking might with the attitude he was sporting.

“I don’t much see the point in causing an accident that’s much more likely to result in my death than yours. Besides, if I’m going down, I figured you’d appreciate my thoughtfulness in ensuring you’re able to tag along with me since I know how much you hate me going anywhere without you,” I jeered with a wink. “So that idea is out.”

Darren’s gaze sharpened, clearly not liking the visual I just gave him. “You’re really not selling this,” he muttered.

I smirked and ignored his grumbling, focusing instead on adjusting the mirrors, lowering the seat belt guard, and extending the steering wheel closer for my reach.

“My God, are you finally comfortable enough to drive yet, or do I need to fetch a phonebook for your ass too?”

This. Bitch. I swear.

“Actually, you know what, I think that’s a great idea. Why don’t you go back inside and find me one? I’ll wait right here for you while you look.”

Darren shook his head. “Real cute,” he replied, his broodiness becoming a serious damper on my mood.

Once I did feel comfortable reaching everything, I looked at the steering wheel and my mind went completely blank. The car had paddle shifters, which meant there was no clutch to engage. I’d never driven with paddle shifters before.

“Lost, little girl? Too much car for you?”

I took a deep breath and slowly released it. “How do I shift?”
Darren reached over and pointed at each paddle. “Left is down shift.
Right is up. There’s no clutch pedal. It’s not needed here.”

No clutch pedal? This should be fucking easy, then.

“Think you can handle all that, or do we need to go back to driver’s ed?”

I turned to him with a blank face. “I’m gonna drive your ass back to charm school if you keep it up.”

Darren chuckled, taking one of my hands in his and holding it tight. “Then drive already,” he said with a smirk, kissing the top of my hand and then placing it on the steering wheel.

With that, I had no other reason to hesitate. Once I pressed the ignition button, the car roared to life, that powerful engine surging with energy and giving me the kick I needed to put it in drive and engage the paddles to move it to first.

Okay, this was easy. I could do this.

“Just take it easy for the first couple of miles until you feel comfortable. If you handle it well enough, we can give the freeway a try.”

I nearly rolled my eyes. Of course Darren would still be in control, even from the passenger seat. But that wouldn’t last for much longer once I finally had the open road in front of me.

Game fucking on.

DEATH WISH



My fucking jaw was aching from how hard I kept clenching it, a massive headache just waiting to rip through my skull. With the self-control of a goddamn Olympian, I somehow managed to force my muscles to relax instead of tensing up every time Jaden switched gears. Or switched lanes. Or every time she hit the gas.

It was literal fucking torture.

Not because she was a bad driver—she was exceptional, of course. Jaden handled the car with an ease I thought came way too quickly, but it shouldn't have surprised me. She was a natural at literally everything, annoyingly so at times.

No, my issue lay with myself in handing over this much control to such a volatile little human who could literally whip the car around and kill us both with the single twist of her wrist if she were so inclined. Though I knew she wouldn't.

She was having too much goddamn fun.

Completely in her element, Jaden drove with pride, comfortable in her skin with an air of effortless confidence that contrasted greatly with my

broodiness and rigid restraint. The only thing keeping me from ripping her out of the driver's seat was that gorgeous smile lighting up her face.

The last time I'd seen her this carefree and relaxed was when I'd allowed her solo time on the jet ski during our honeymoon. And while that had turned out to be a horrible mistake on my part, I'd hoped for a better outcome for this scenario.

You're a goddamn idiot.

Silencing my doubts, I quickly drowned them out with the overwhelming rays of sunshine still beaming from the driver's seat. Jaden looked fucking gorgeous in the dress I'd chosen for her tonight.

Watching her walk down those stairs left an ache in my chest that demanded instantaneous gratification. I wanted nothing more than to drag her back upstairs and fuck her well into the next day, but I'd already gone to way too much trouble to make this little outing happen, so here we were.

We were currently cruising down a road that ran alongside the ocean. Scott and two other vehicles followed us six car lengths behind with another one ten car lengths ahead.

With the sun setting in the background, the scene was picturesque. Jaden's fiery locks billowed through the wind, the grin on her face so serene and rare as she quietly sang along under her breath with the radio.

At least her taste in music was mostly tolerable, though truthfully, it wouldn't have made a difference to me. The opportunity to actually listen to her sing was well worth enduring any kind of noise she might have preferred.

But if I was really being honest with myself, it didn't matter if Jaden was singing, screaming, or moaning my name. Her voice alone would always be my favorite sound.

Against my better judgment, I decided to ride my discomfort out on our special day since my poor little wife wasn't going to know freedom like this

again for a very long time. Not with the atonement I still had planned to exact from her in the coming future for lying to me about Kayla.

Of course, that would all depend on how well Jaden could mitigate my anger once I actually had her confession. She could come clean and earn herself a small ounce of mercy, or she could lie and never know peace again.

I needed to stop delaying the inevitable. The sooner I got it over with, the sooner I might be able to forgive her and move on. But I'd been enjoying her rejuvenation too much after having her confined to our bed for so long, hungry for that spark in her attitude that always set me on fire.

If things went the way I expected them to, then that little spark would be nothing but a puff of smoke by the time I was finished with her. Jaden would retreat back to her more boring, reserved state for a few weeks while she discreetly licked her wounds from an imaginary safe distance. Once they healed, her confidence would replenish, and she'd be back to testing my patience again.

And I couldn't help but fucking love that about her.

My unbreakable little doll.

"I'm proud of you," she suddenly said, breaking my train of thought. The surprise compliment caused me to arch a brow at her.

"What?" I asked, pulling myself from my sadistic aspirations.

Jaden chuckled lightly as she pushed her windblown hair out of her face.

"I can tell this is absolute torture for you, putting this much power in my hands," she said, sliding her palms over the steering wheel. "Trusting me not to abuse or exploit it. I know how hard it is for you to relinquish that kind of control. And you're handling it really well. I'm proud of you for enduring it...for me."

My gaze sharpened at her explanation, an odd tug pulling at my chest in multiple directions. It wasn't every day I received backhanded compliments

like that. But it was even rarer when they came from her.

“There are better ways to say thank you, *pumpkin*,” I sneered, rubbing the back of my neck to release some Jaden-induced tension.

She hummed, a sly smile in the corner of her lips. “Yes, thank you, *pumpkin*, for keeping your word.” Smirking at her taunt, I reached across the center console to rest my hand on her inner thigh, my fingertips tracing small circles against her skin. “What are you doing?” she asked, her voice hitching.

“Focus on the road,” I replied, my fingers inching higher along her skin, enjoying the smoothness of her.

Jaden thought she was being clever, but I knew she was trying to rub it in my face that she’d won. That I had to relinquish this power because I’d lost. And while the idea of pulling the rug out from under her would feel very satisfying, I decided on a different path, one that would lead me straight to the juncture of paradise.

“Stop that,” Jaden snapped. I ignored her as I pushed the hem of her skirt up, my fingers slipping farther and farther up her leg. I almost laughed when her hand slapped down on top of mine. “Knock it off—”

“Put your hand back on the wheel,” I ordered, my voice hard with impatience.

Huffing dramatically, she begrudgingly removed her hand and placed it back on the top of the wheel, her knuckles turning white as she gripped it tightly. Continuing my leisurely pace, I grazed her skin back and forth, my touch nothing more than a whisper against her skin.

“Why are you trying to distract me?” she asked, her voice tight with agitation. “Do you want me to cause an accident?”

I grinned at her defense. “You find my touch to be that distracting?” I teased, baiting her with my arrogance.

“You’re willing to risk our lives if it is?” she asked, her hips stiffening the second my fingertips grazed the lining of her thong.

“I’ve managed without issue,” I replied, tracing the outline of the thin scrap of fabric separating me from my objective. “Are you implying that you’re incapable of matching *my* proficiency?”

The cutest little growl of irritation rumbled in her chest, drawing a chuckle from mine. She was so easy to provoke, especially knowing how much she wished she could match me in all things, but never would.

“I’m confused,” she snapped. “Is this my time or your time? Because the *very limited time* that I bargained for and rightfully won did not involve any encroachments from the *passenger* seat.”

I tsked as my fingers ventured farther until I found the damning evidence I’d been quietly inspiring, causing Jaden to freeze in her seat.

“Oh, my little queen,” I mused, curling my fingertips into the dampening fabric. “When are you going to learn that you don’t own anything?” She sucked in a breath as I pressed the fabric of her thong against the opening of her pussy, the slick wetness offering very little resistance. “Not your thoughts. Not your desires. And especially, not even your time. Because every millisecond of it belongs to me. Always has, always will.” Glancing back at the road, I was satisfied that Jaden kept the car at an even pace, following the street smoothly around each curve. I grinned as I felt her pussy suddenly clench as I added pressure against her clit with the heel of my palm. “Everything you think you have has always been mine, and it always will be. I just let you borrow it every now and then. So no, this is still very much *my time*.”

She huffed a breath as her shoulders slightly sagged. “And here I thought today was supposed to be *our* wedding anniversary. Silly me.”

I chuckled at her retort. She technically had a point, but our wedding anniversary would never hold the same significance as it did for other couples. Today was the day I had finally acquired her under a legal basis. It was my day of accomplishment, not the other way around.

“Yet you didn’t even know it was until I told you,” I replied smugly, saturating my hand in that delicious dampness I planned to feast on later.

“And whose fault is that?” she quipped, her lips folding into a tight line of irritation.

“We’re really clinging to that victim card today, aren’t we? If you really wanted to know what day it was, all you’ve ever had to do was ask.”

Her slender fingers slowly tightened around the steering wheel, her knuckles white enough to burst through the skin. “You know, for someone who was so concerned about me driving off a cliff earlier, you suddenly seem pretty comfortable with testing that risk.”

I chuckled as I continued to stroke my fingers along the lips of her pussy. “I suppose if we had to go, going together would be the best scenario, wouldn’t it?”

She scoffed and adjusted her hips. “Maybe for you. But a car accident isn’t exactly my preferred method when it comes to dying.”

“No? What’s your preferred method, then?”

She gritted her teeth. “I’ll tell you if you remove your hand.”

“You’ll tell me regardless,” I retorted, leveling her with a warning glare. “Lift your hips.”

Her brows furrowed for a moment, but she eventually complied, lifting her hips just an inch. Grasping the fabric, I yanked her thong away from her skin, tugging it down her legs until it was stretched between her knees.

Snapping apart each side of the flimsy waistband, I brought the torn silk up to my nose, breathing in her intoxicating scent. My cock hardened almost instantly, my mouth watering at the memory of her taste.

The thought of commanding her to pull over so I could fuck her on the hood of my car was tempting, but I planned on taking advantage of her full appreciation for today’s efforts when we got home.

“Well?” I coaxed, spinning her ruined thong in the air to wrap it around my finger.

Jaden glanced over at me, her features hardening with annoyance. “If I had to go, naturally, I’d prefer old age.”

I almost laughed, shaking my head at the thought. “As you should, but it’s such a slow and boring way to go.”

She frowned. “Oh, I’m sorry. I didn’t realize our deaths were supposed to be exciting.”

The thought of Jaden’s inevitable death left me with a deep cold emptiness I had no intention of ever fully experiencing since I did not plan to outlive her.

With my career choice, I doubted I would live long enough to have to ever see it. Though truthfully, death mattered little to me. When Jaden met her eventual end, I would find her again on the other side and rightfully claim her soul as eternally mine.

“Yours shouldn’t be,” I added, pocketing her thong in my jacket. “Old age is the *only* death I’ll accept for you. Mostly because I don’t expect to live long enough to see it anyway.”

“Why? Because you’re expecting to go out in a blaze of glory long before then, is that it?”

I nodded. “I wouldn’t want my death to be too easy.”

Her brows furrowed in the cute way they always did. “For who? You?”

“No,” I replied, shaking my head. “For whatever is trying to kill me.”

Jaden paused for a moment, her eyes flashing back and forth as she concentrated on the road. What I would give to crawl inside her head right now.

“So then you’d rather go the same way as your mom over your dad?” My eyes shot to hers, stunned at the brazen posture of her question. Catching my scorn, she swallowed and continued. “You’d prefer to be killed over an illness?”

I sighed at her recovery attempt, pondering on how I wanted to relay my preference in death. I’d considered my own mortality many times over the

course of my life, my father instructing his sons to make peace with death a long time ago. To get comfortable with the fact that death would be following us everywhere we turned.

I'd never feared it. As long as I was the smartest one wielding it, I had no reason to. But eventually, death comes for us all, and when that day comes, it had better come prepared.

"I'd prefer to be taken out by passion," I answered.

Jaden cocked a brow at me, her eyes sharp with intrigue.

"What is that supposed to mean?"

I smirked, my thoughts becoming more volatile with each passing second as the scenario played out in my head.

"I've obviously never been an easy man to kill, Jaden. But that doesn't mean others won't keep trying," I replied, cracking my neck to ease the growing tension. "I wouldn't want my death to be a fluke or an accident. I'd rather be pursued by determination—cornered by obsession—and outgunned by spirit. My death ought to be the hardest fucking thing anyone has ever managed to accomplish, which would merit a title they wear with pride. So for the one who actually succeeds, I'll make sure my death is well-earned for them."

Jaden was quiet for a moment as she took in my words. She then shook her head as she adjusted her hips in the seat, smirking to herself. "So you want to be a trophy kill," she stated thoughtfully, and then shrugged. "I'm sure you'd be a nice decoration on your killer's mantel."

I smiled at her condescension. "That's one way of commemorating me. Maybe they'll pass me down from generation to generation," I replied, chuckling to myself at the thought.

She hummed in response. "Afraid of being forgotten, are we?"

"No. I'm quite certain my story will live on for a very, very long time, regardless of how it ends."

She nodded. “You’ll live on even longer when the world eventually discovers the truth behind your wealth.”

I scoffed at that. “I would never live to see it, Jaden. And neither will you.”

I didn’t entertain those possibilities because they would never happen. My connections were too strong and wide for me to ever see the inside of a jail cell—as if one could even hold me. My arsenal of blackmail and favors was too great to overcome. If I went down, the whole world was going down with me. And the world damn well knew it.

“Turn into this next parking lot up on your left,” I said.

Jaden immediately pouted. “But it’s only been twenty minutes.”

“Relax, I’m not shortchanging you. We have dinner reservations. It is our wedding anniversary after all.”

She furrowed her brows but did as I’d asked.

“Pull over toward the back of the building.”

She huffed a breath, shifting gears as she slowed into the parking lot. “Can’t have the valet see a woman driving your car?”

I grinned. “Actually, I wanted to see if you can parallel park.”

She rolled her eyes as she slowly made her way through the parking lot. “What do I get if I can?”

“I’ll give you an additional ten minutes.”

She smirked. “You know, you don’t have to create easy bets to prolong our time. You can just say you like letting me drive.”

“Don’t get too cocky,” I warned. “Pull in right there.” I pointed at a spot near the back of the restaurant between the two parked SUVS of my stationed guards.

Jaden pulled up next to the spot and smoothly backed right in like she’d done it a thousand times. After putting it in park, she turned to me with a knowing expression and then theatrically flipped her hair over her shoulder with a dramatic sigh to boot.

“Nicely done,” I praised her, patting her thigh. I could endure another ten minutes on the way home for her if she was willing to remain this playful. It was too adorable not to indulge while I still could.

She nodded at the wall beside my car door. “I hope that’s enough room for you to get out. Or do you need to crawl over my lap?”

I cocked a brow. “Can you even *open* your door? You just might be the one crawling over *my* lap.”

She snorted and then turned to reach for the door. I chuckled as I watched her visibly struggle for a good ten seconds to lift the door on her side of the car, but she finally managed with a good hard shove with her entire body. I opened my door and stepped out with barely three feet of clearance, my body barely fitting through the small space to move around the car.

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HOME

Taking Jaden's hand in mine, I led her into the restaurant, silently noting how unusually unsteady she was as she walked. Maybe the heels were too soon?

When we stepped up to the hostess, her eyes widened for a split second before she regained her composure.

"Mr. and Mrs. Davis, wonderful to see you. Your table is ready as requested. Please follow me."

Jaden arched a brow as she walked beside me. It was a quiet little place on the water, with a back patio leading out to the beach. We were seated in the corner of the patio in a much more private setting, while a single menu was placed on the table. Clive and Owen were already stationed throughout the restaurant, along with six other bodyguards.

"Your server will be with you shortly. Enjoy your evening, oh, and of course, happy anniversary," the hostess said, quickly turning away to disappear back inside.

"This is really nice," Jaden commented as she looked around, eyeing the clear glass panels bordering the patio, the sharp, clean decadence befitting a seaside five-star restaurant.

"I should hope so. It's mine."

Her eyes slid back to catch my gaze, her head shaking with a short laugh as she relaxed in her chair.

“Of course, it is,” she noted.

A minute later, a server appeared at our table, a nervous smile on her face.

“Good evening,” she chimed. “My name’s Amanda, and I’ll be taking care of you tonight. Can I start you off with anything to drink?”

My eyes slid over to Jaden, raising a brow in her direction. “What would you like, *Mrs. Davis?*”

Her eyes narrowed to irritated little slits as she leveled me with a glare, but then quickly regained her composure when she realized I was actually allowing her to choose for once. Not one to squander an opportunity, she turned back to Amanda.

“Captain and Coke with extra lime, please,” she said, but her tone made it sound like a question, like she was subtly asking for my approval.

“And for you, sir?”

“Who’s bartending tonight?” I asked.

“Jimmy is, sir.”

I nodded. “He’ll know what to make.”

“Of course. I’ll be right back with those.”

When she left, Jaden side-eyed me. “Jimmy will know, huh? You come here that often?”

I shrugged. “Not nearly as often as you’d think. But as I said, I own it, so I make sure my expectations are known.”

“Sure,” she acknowledged with a nod and then glanced down at the menu in front of her. “Oh, there’s a fried perch dinner on here.”

I leaned back in my seat, noticing the slight curl of her lips at the discovery. I wasn’t much for fried foods, but I could spoil her for our anniversary tonight.

“Get whatever you want,” I said, pulling out my phone to silence Daniel’s third incoming call.

When the server returned with our drinks, she took our orders and promptly hurried away. Jaden then took the three limes rimming her glass and squeezed all three of them into her drink, the fresh smell of lime juice bursting into the air.

I cocked an amused brow. “Got enough limes, or do you need ten more?”

She shrugged a shoulder, unperturbed by my comment. “I like it the way I like it,” she stated bluntly, then nodded at my drink. “What’s that?”

I grabbed my glass tumbler and swirled the liquid around. “Sort of a personalized Old-Fashioned,” I answered before taking a satisfying sip. “Do you want to try it?”

“Sure.”

Sliding the drink across the table, I watched Jaden take a small tentative sip and immediately scrunch up her face. “That’s disgusting,” she griped, setting the glass back down. I chuckled at her reaction, taking my glass back.

“I’m sure I’d find yours as equally disgusting.”

She shook her head with a scoff. “Doubtful since mine doesn’t taste like flavored rubbing alcohol.”

I grinned, lifting the glass to my lips, enjoying the burn of my *flavored rubbing alcohol*. Until my phone rang again with another call from Dan.

I sighed and answered the phone. “Fucking what,” I nearly snarled. He knew I was busy with this, so he’d better have a damn good reason for calling me this much.

“Sam Larson has been compromised. The South Docks are swarming with feds.”

I rolled my eyes. “I’m aware.”

“What the fuck? How?”

“Who do you think set it up, genius?” Scott and I had been working on it all fucking week, which was why I hadn’t been able to take Jaden out until now.

“You deliberately compromised one of our own fucking docks without telling me? What the hell?”

Sighing, I stood from my chair and shot Jaden a warning glare to stay where she was before moving to a private corner where I could still watch her.

“In case you forgot, I don’t have to run my plans by you before I act on them.”

He groaned. “Well, what the fuck do you expect me to do? Now is not a good time to have the government sniffing around with all the shit we’ve got going on.”

“No shit. That’s why I got Sam to take the fall to keep the feds distracted for a while.”

He paused. “That’s a lot of labor you just cost us.”

“People are easy to restock.”

He scoffed at that. “You could at least give me a heads-up before you invite the FBI onto our doorstep.”

“You would know if you’d been around for the past week. Sorry you missed the fucking memo.”

“I’ve been busy,” he groaned.

“And right now, so am I.” Hanging up the phone, I slipped it back into my pocket and released a deep exhale. I rolled my shoulders, then my eyes tracked Jaden back to her seat, exactly where I left her.

She was quiet as she stared off at the beach, her eyes capturing the setting sun as the breeze blew through her hair. I could easily watch her just like this for hours, mesmerized by the slightest flicker of her angelic features.

It was why I made sure to fill this place with plenty of plain-clothes security, knowing I'd be too damn distracted to pay attention to anything else. This was our first public outing since she'd been shot, and I wanted to enjoy it without issue.

When our dinner arrived about ten minutes later, Jaden grimaced at her plate.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

She pursed her lips and sighed. “This isn’t real perch,” she answered, her voice slated with disdain.

I frowned in confusion. “What do you mean it’s not real perch? Of course, it is.”

She picked up one of the pieces of fried fish and took a bite. She then scrunched up her face and shook her head.

“Certainly not yellowtail perch.”

I furrowed my brow. “California has an array of perch species. What difference does it make?”

Jaden paused for a moment, then glanced back down to her plate, her eyes low with disappointment. “You’re right, it doesn’t. Never mind,” she murmured, then forked another piece into her mouth.

I wasn’t buying it.

“Why were you expecting yellow perch?” I asked, my tone demanding an answer.

Jaden sighed before casting her eyes back to the beach. “I just haven’t had perch in a long time, so my mind naturally went to yellowtail because that’s the fish I know from back hom—Michigan,” she quickly corrected. But it was too late.

My gaze locked with hers the second she said it, my chest constricting at her slip. The blood in my veins began to simmer under what I knew could only be a hardened expression, given the poorly concealed look of horror on Jaden’s face.

It was that same familiar fear shimmering in her eyes that always made my cock instantly hard and ready to burst through my pants. She had no idea of how fuckable she was when she was genuinely afraid like that. Especially when it was *me* she was afraid of.

Like chucking barrels of blood into the water.

“I’m sorry,” she backtracked. “I didn’t mean to say it like that.”

But the terror in her voice was already playing to my darker bases, enticing the predator with the promise of more mouthwatering amusement.

And it wouldn’t be denied.

“Come with me.”

Rising from my chair, I captured Jaden’s small hand in mine and pulled her to stand, leading her down a narrow outdoor passageway that the staff secretly used to get to the kitchen. After finding the little nook against the building, I yanked Jaden forward and slammed her back into the brick wall.

“Darren, I’m sorry,” she pleaded quickly, her voice regaining some confidence. “I didn’t mean—”

“Shut up,” I ordered, cutting her off as my mouth claimed hers.

Tentative and stiff, she whimpered against me, trembles running up her spine as her hands found purchase in my jacket, hoping for stability. The taste of lime and desire coated my tongue as it swept along hers, invading and conquering as it went.

My hands moved from her hips to pull the lining of her dress up, allowing me to slip two fingers inside her with ease, making me groan with approval. Jaden gasped, her mouth opening wide as her back arched, a hushed moan on her lips.

Conditioning her to become aroused from fear had been the greatest investment I’d ever made. Dry pussy just didn’t have the same appeal, and knowing how much I intended to terrorize her, it made the most sense in order for her to meet my needs.

“That’s my girl,” I praised, pumping my fingers in and out. “But I shouldn’t have to remind you of that.”

“You don’t,” she replied, her voice hitched and breathy. “Please. Not here.”

“Yes, here.”

“They’ll hear us.”

I chuckled, curling my fingers inside her, making her hips suddenly jolt. “You mean they’ll hear you.”

Jaden grunted as I pressed the heel of my palm against her clit, her walls clenching around my fingers as she absolutely ruined my shirt with her nails.

“Who do you belong to?” I growled, thrusting faster and harder.

She sucked in a sharp breath, her pussy writhing around my fingers. “You,” she moaned. “Fuck.”

On a sneer, I withdrew my fingers to appreciate Jaden’s decadent taste on my tongue, sucking off the heady evidence of her body’s undeniable need for me. A need I had commanded with just a single look.

“Yes, you fucking do,” I affirmed, and then lifted her ass to pin her against the wall.

Lowering my zipper, I pulled out my throbbing cock and speared right into her, drawing a sharp whine from her throat. Slapping my hand over her mouth, I fucked her hard against the brick wall, the thick coating of black paint her only buffer from the rough texture.

Wrapping her legs around my waist, she clung to my shoulders as I bounced her on my cock. Her mouth vibrated against my hand as it suppressed all those delicious noises I loved to hear her make.

“You better keep quiet if you don’t want anyone to hear you getting fucked within an inch of your life back here,” I snickered into her ear, picking up my pace.

Jaden's eyes closed as her back arched again, her muffled cries spurring me on to take her even more. I fucked her until it hurt, until tears began to well in her eyes and slid down her cheek, until she was crying into my hand, begging for reprieve. But her soft wet heat was just too damn good to slow down.

"I can forgive your little slip-up, princess, as long as you understand that *home* will always be right *here* with me. *Always* with me," I emphasized, thrusting hard and deep for good measure. Loosening my hand over her mouth, I wrapped it securely around her jaw. "Say it," I growled, my cock damn near ready to explode.

"Always with you," she repeated tightly, her hands clawing at my chest as black tears dripped down her face.

"Don't ever let me catch you mistaking that again."

Pressing my fingers to her clit, I stroked her the way I knew she liked, her pussy responding almost instantly. Her walls quickly began to seize around me, clutching my cock so tightly I gave into the pleasure and came with her, pressing us both into the wall as we came down from the rush.

Pulling out, I slid Jaden back down to her feet and tucked myself back into my pants. Her eyes then slid down to her exposed, abused pussy, my cum dripping down the side of her leg. Still catching her breath, her hand reached down to wipe it away, but I caught her wrist before she could.

"Don't even think about it," I warned, pulling her upright and tugging her dress back down over her hips.

Jaden glowered at me in disbelief. "You're kidding, right? I'm not walking back out there with your cum visibly dripping down my leg."

"Yes, you are," I said, straightening my shirt and jacket.

"Darren, come on," she protested, wiping the drying tears and smudged mascara from her face with both hands.

Taking her face in my hands, I wiped my thumbs under her eyes, sweeping the tears and ruined makeup she'd missed from her skin.

Stiffening, she looked up at me with uncertain eyes but wisely kept her objections to herself. When her face was clear of the mess I'd made, I couldn't help but smile as I admired her beauty, pride filling my chest at the fresh flush still lingering in her cheeks. She was just so goddamn gorgeous.

And so goddamn mine.

Leaning down, I pressed my lips to hers, kissing her deeply just so I could revel in her softness again. Whenever I fucked Jaden back into submission, her body always became so pliant, so willing to bend in any direction I commanded. And I loved to take advantage of it for as long as it would last.

Overruling my reluctance, I released her lips, then dropped my hands to her shoulders to turn her in the other direction.

"Move," I ordered, grabbing the back of her neck and directing her toward the end of the passageway, back to our table. But just before we were visible, she stumbled just enough so that her thighs rubbed together, smearing the droplets of my cum against her skin.

"Oh, you little brat," I tutted, righting her unstable posture.

"What? That wasn't my fault. I haven't worn heels in six months and my hip still occasionally hurts, you know. Sorry I'm not back to my usual coordinated self just yet."

"You'll pay for it later," I promised, steering her back to her chair.

We finished our dinner without any more complaints about perch or "home," watching the setting sun sink into the ocean.

Heading back to the car, I unlocked it and stood back for a small moment of entertainment.

"What are you doing?" Jaden asked, her brows knit with confusion.

I nodded at the driver's side door. "Go on," I prompted, the smirk on my face a telling sign of my intent.

Jaden shook her head, an exacerbated sigh filling the air. I grinned as I watched her grab the door handle with both hands and use her entire body

to wrench it up, lifting it with an adorable little grunt. When she turned back around, her unamused expression drew my praise in jest, my applause mocking her efforts to appease my stupid challenges.

“Satisfied?” she asked before moving to slide her perfect ass into the seat and then used all of her body weight to tug the door closed. I bit back my groan of annoyance as I rounded the car, knowing what I would have to endure next. With the engine started, Jaden gripped the wheel and then turned to me.

“Can I please go zoom-zoom now?” she asked, her hazel eyes glimmering with hope and excitement. “I think I’ve demonstrated my proficiency well enough, don’t you think?”

My lips curled at her request, knowing this was what she’d been really after the whole time. I just hoped I wasn’t going to regret it.

“Yes, princess, you can go zoom-zoom now.”

The look on her face confirmed the worst.

Fuck, I am so going to regret this.

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TUESDAYS



U^{n-fucking-believable.}

Red brake lights. That was all I saw for the last four miles since Darren finally agreed to let me go on the freeway. I couldn't believe the traffic at this hour. It was almost eight o'clock on a weekday, for fuck's sake. Shouldn't people be home by now? We'd been sitting in this traffic for almost twenty minutes, and my impatience was beginning to replace all the oxygen in the car.

"This is bullshit," I muttered.

"Relax, Jaden. Deep breath. You'll get to go zoom-zoom as soon as we're through this."

I huffed my sigh as I sank back into the seat, Darren's dried cum still sticky on my inner thighs. I still couldn't believe I'd said what I said at the restaurant—my careless slip an embarrassing act of stupidity. But I'd gotten caught up in the warm sense of nostalgia, the hope of a familiar experience disrupting my ruse of complacency. And my pussy was still paying for it.

"You did this on purpose, didn't you? Had me drive right into a traffic jam just to slow me down."

Some wedding anniversary this was turning out to be.

Darren scoffed. “Oh, come on, Jaden. Even I’m not *that* diabolical. This is torture for me too, you know.”

I groaned my disagreement.

Driving the Ferrari around before we hit the freeway had been incredible, the feeling of freedom flowing uninhibited through my veins and hair. The car was a dream to handle, the shifting so seamless, and the acceleration time of the engine far too tempting for city streets. That was why I needed to get the fuck through this traffic so I could finally go full throttle and experience everything I’d been denied over the past few years.

I’d only been allowed to drive a little here and there during my training sessions, most of it centered around evasive driving and quick getaways on specially designed tracks, but that was about it. No leisure cruising for me. But the longer I was behind the wheel of the Ferrari, the more I realized how much I seriously missed it.

Maybe I could convince Darren to let me go on a few joyrides from time to time once he accepted that I was more than a competent driver.

Of course, that was to assume that his brother lived long enough for Darren to remain safe with me behind the wheel. If Daniel ever bit the dust, and I had another opportunity like this, Darren was right to worry like he had earlier. I’d release his seat belt so fast and whip the car around so hard, he wouldn’t have time to blink before his ass was ejected and smeared all over the fucking road.

It took several more minutes before we finally got to the cause of the traffic. A car had flipped on its side while another was sticking out of the median, the scene blocking two lanes—*on the other side of the fucking freeway*.

“Ugh! Goddamn fucking gawkers!” I growled as I quickly maneuvered around the ones still watching the cleanup crew, the roar of the engine matching my rage.

“I’ll allow that one,” Darren muttered through gritted teeth. “Given that I couldn’t agree more.”

I shook my head as I up-shifted, my speed climbing with satisfaction. With the open highway finally ahead of me, my blood rushed as I pushed the gas pedal to ninety miles an hour, jolting us forward. Damn, this car was fast.

“Hey, take it easy there, lead foot,” Darren griped as I sped down the curve of the freeway.

“You promised I could go zoom-zoom.”

“Just as long as your zoom-zoom doesn’t wreck my car.”

I scoffed with a laugh. “Don’t worry, pumpkin, I’ll buy you a new one.”

He snorted in response.

After turning up the radio, I opened the windows a little to allow the wind to blow through my hair. All the while, a very tense Darren remained pensive in the *passenger seat*.

Now this was the freedom I’d needed for so long. Just the open road, a full tank of gas, and some damn good tunes. Flipping through the radio stations, I scrolled for a few seconds until “Welcome 2 Detroit” by Trick Trick suddenly caught my ears.

“Ha ha, yes,” I cheered softly and turned the music up. Darren gave me a side-eyed glare as the bass of the song rattled the car, but those daggers he shot my way couldn’t penetrate shit. It was zoom-zoom time.

Speeding down the freeway, I spit out every word of that song. I might have endured a little disappointment over some mediocre California perch, but music would never let me down when I wanted a real taste of Detroit.

When the song barely finished, Darren turned down the volume and quickly changed the channel.

“Hey!” I protested.

“I said you could drive. Not DJ,” he rumbled, switching through the stations.

I scoffed as I steered us around the curving road. “That was a good song you just interrupted.”

“Why? Because it reminded you of Detroit?” he snapped, his tone setting up the trap question.

I shook my head quickly. “No, it’s just a good song,” I reasoned. “There are plenty of songs related to Detroit that I don’t care for. I’m not exactly the biggest Motown fan.”

A dark, seedy look flashed across Darren’s eyes. “Is that so?” he drawled, provocation dripping in his voice. And then a familiar piano solo began to play from the radio, the upbeat nostalgic melody making my stomach twist.

Oh no.

“Still a fan of this song?” he asked, his voice dripping with seedy provocation as he turned the volume back up.

The last time I heard this song...

“Don’t Stop Believin’” by Journey played through the speakers, immersing the cabin with notes of the ’80s and my harrowing regrets from the past. The words about a small town girl who lived in a lonely world was almost haunting.

My eyes shot to Darren’s, the devious expression on his face gleaming with challenge and predatory anticipation. I shook my head at him, unsurprised. He just loved to taunt me with his sadistic cruelty.

You fucking prick.

While the poison from his bait had already soured in my mouth, I dug deeper than I ever had before to channel my greatest inner brat and spit it back out in his stupid smug face.

“*Born and raised in SOUTH DETROIT!*” I shouted, singing the song with a vicious smile about a midnight train going anywhere.

You would have thought Darren would have been pissed that I’d thwarted his efforts to retraumatize me, but instead of the expected scowl, a

wide wolfish grin curled up his lips. Entranced by his surprise reaction, I let it fuel my confidence and sang the rest of the song with vigor and pure fucking spite.

The last time I sang it, a number of scared and helpless young girls sang along with me, filling their lungs with hope and a single molecule of joy. But it had quickly been forced down the drain with firehoses and the gang rape of a friend.

I steered clear of the song when I could, but now that Darren had foolishly forced me to endure it while driving his very expensive custom Ferrari, I reloaded the song with far more satisfying memories.

My heart was elated, my soul no longer encumbered by the burdens of my past sins and selfish mistakes. I literally sang the pain away like it was some kind of inner therapeutic liberation. And fuck, did it feel incredible to have that power again.

When the song finally died down, a triumphant smile absolutely wrecked my face.

“You can’t touch me, cupcake,” I teased Darren, shaking my head, rejuvenated by my victory. “Not in this state of mind. I’m impenetrable.”

Darren hummed a quiet laugh, the cruel sound nothing more than a bad omen promising swift retaliation. But right now, I couldn’t give one single fuck. I won the shit out of this round.

“Now it’s my turn to be proud,” he stated, genuine warmth in his words.

I smirked, surprised by his reaction, but said nothing as “Panama” by Van Halen filtered out the tension in the car.

Darren remained blissfully quiet as we sped down the freeway, his eyes acting as constant surveillance as he observed everything around us—my speed, the cars I flew past, even my relaxed grip on the steering wheel.

Every now and then, I’d catch him frowning, then texting something on his phone. With the music as loud as it was, I hoped it would drown out whatever regrets he likely had about letting me behind the wheel.

My dad had felt the same way when he taught me how to drive. He would sit in the passenger seat with his eyes glued to the road while he voiced every single concern, making sure I was aware of everything he saw.

He knew I was a lead foot and a bit reckless on my dirt bike, but after a few rides, he finally became comfortable enough to let me lead. After that, we'd crank classic rock in his old Trans Am and cruise down Jefferson Avenue until the sun went down.

Fuck, I missed my dad so much.

We'd been driving for nearly fifteen perfect minutes when Darren finally spoke again, ruining the whole damn thing instantly.

"It's time to start heading back, *pumpkin*."

I blew out a disappointed sigh but grudgingly signaled to switch lanes to exit the freeway. I wanted to protest, but I didn't want to give Darren one single excuse to deny this again. I got far more allowances with calculated compliance than I did with defiance, so I would cooperate this time.

No matter how much it killed me inside.

As I switched lanes, I noticed a car coming up behind us a little too quickly for my liking. Once the car got close enough to where I could see the four passengers inside, the car slowed down behind another vehicle one lane over. It looked like a large black SUV.

Deciding to test my theory, I sped up, flying between cars to see if they would speed up to avoid losing us. And they didn't disappoint.

"I think we've got a tail," I said after turning down the radio.

Darren's jaw clenched. "You're just now noticing that?"

I frowned. Was that why he wanted us to start heading back already?

"Excuse me for paying attention to the road *in front of me*."

"You know better than that. Roll up the windows," he scolded, taking out his phone and pressing it to his ear.

I grumbled under my breath and pressed the button to close the windows.

“Got eyes?” Darren asked into the phone. I couldn’t hear a thing the other person on the line was saying, but I imagined it was probably Scott.

My gaze couldn’t stop flying back to the rearview mirror to see if the car was still behind us. My hands gripped the steering wheel harder than they should, worried I might have to make some precise evasive maneuvers very soon.

Once Darren hung up the phone, he sighed heavily as he removed his seat belt and turned his body to reach behind our seats.

“What are you doing?” I asked as my eyes jumped back and forth between him, the road, and our tail. From what I could tell, he pushed a switch somewhere that opened up some kind of hidden compartment, revealing a shit ton of guns, knives, and explosives.

I rolled my eyes. Of course Darren would have an entire arsenal in his own car.

“Princess,” he called gently as he pulled out a very large Desert Eagle from the hidden compartment. “You have my permission to very *carefully* go nuts.”

With my heart now pulsing with adrenaline, I pressed the paddles to shift the car into sixth gear and surged forward like a damn rocket.

“Holy fuck,” I whispered to myself, glancing at Darren to make sure he didn’t hear that. This car was stupid fast.

Switching lanes, I zipped by several cars to get ahead, the SUV behind us getting smaller by the second. I swore the faster I drove the faster my heart beat, the adrenaline in my veins making it difficult to keep my breathing even.

“When they start shooting at us,” Darren began, his voice way too casual as he pulled the slide back to ensure a bullet slid into the chamber, “it will be very loud, so try not to panic and stay focused on the road. Remember that the car is bulletproof. Among other things.”

Wait, when?

Among other things?

“Then why are you pulling out the guns?” I asked as I maneuvered between vehicles.

Darren gave me that quick shark-like grin of his and winked. “Because their cars aren’t.”

Cool. My first time driving in years and it comes with a car chase and a shoot-out. Just the kind of outing I was hoping for.

“Listen to me carefully, Jaden,” Darren said calmly as he shifted in his seat. “You’re going to get off at the fifth exit and then make a right, and another immediate right. It’ll take you down a long private road. Do not stop until I tell you to. Understand?”

It was difficult trying to focus on not killing us while I drove almost a hundred miles an hour between cars and listened to the instructions he was giving me. But I nodded anyway.

“Big girl words, princess,” he growled.

“Yes. Fifth exit. Right, and another right. No stopping.”

Fuck, I hope I said that right.

“Good girl,” he praised, then rolled down his passenger window.

Keeping my eyes glued to the road was nearly impossible once Darren turned his body and stuck his arm out the window, resting it flush with the car.

And then the shooting started.

Darren fired three shots at the SUV that was gaining on us, only for its two front tires to blow out, causing the driver to lose control of the vehicle and crash into the median.

“Holy shit!” I gasped as I watched the SUV crash and flip onto its side.

“Focus on the road *in front* of you, Jaden!” Darren roared as he pulled his arm back into the car.

With my stomach flipping in on itself, I darted my eyes back to the road, noticing we only passed the first exit. Four more to go.

Just when I thought we were in the clear, several engines roaring in the distance behind us caught my ears. Glancing up into the rearview mirror, I could see two black sporty-looking vehicles closing in on us.

“There’s more!”

“There’s always fucking more,” Darren grumbled.

Realizing I was about to get trapped between two cars, I veered off into the shoulder to pass them before whipping us back into the main lanes.

“Jesus Christ, Jaden, watch the mirrors!”

“Hey, hey! I am no longer responsible for anything that happens to this car!”

Glancing back to the rearview mirror, I watched as the headlights of the closest car advanced. Darren aimed his gun out the window again, firing off one shot before I had to quickly veer around a damn bus, causing us to jerk in our seats.

He sighed in annoyance. “If you’re going to swerve like that, can you at least *try* to keep it straight?” he growled before firing two more shots.

“Hey! I’m doing the best I can!”

“Well, do better!” he snapped as he continued to fire.

And then the sharp sound of gunfire pummeled into the back of the car, forcing Darren to pull his arm back inside. The noise generated from the bullets that rained down on the poor Ferrari was deafening, shaking me down to my very bones.

“Jaden, move!” Darren shouted.

“I’m trying!”

Too often, I had to slam on my brakes to avoid a collision with another car, which gave our tails all the opportunity they needed to catch up. Veering around another car, I slammed my foot down on the gas pedal, switching lanes just as one of the tails nearly rammed us off the road.

But my quick maneuver forced me to cut off the car behind us, causing them to overcorrect and lose control, striking the car next to it. The

screeching sounds of tires sliding over pavement and crunching metal followed us, a massive pileup of cars slamming into each other and taking up two lanes.

“Oh fuck,” I whispered to myself, my gut twisting with regret.

“Nice work,” Darren applauded as he quickly glanced down at his phone, the wreckage seeming to slow our tails down significantly.

I cringed at his praise. “God, I hope no one died in that.”

“What did I tell you about where your focus needs to be?”

I huffed out a frustrated breath as I swerved between more cars, but slammed on my brakes again as we came around a corner with all lanes occupied.

“Shit,” I muttered to myself as I swerved between a very narrow opening between the cars, horns honking as I passed through. But the pause allowed enough time for both of the remaining tails to catch up, each one now flanking either side of the Ferrari. Their windows then rolled down to reveal some heavy-duty machinery.

Fuck!

“Move!”

“I can’t!”

I cringed internally as an infinite series of sonic booms ate away at the car, completely shattering the windows. Darren groaned, mumbling curses under his breath as sparks flew by his window.

“Fuck this,” I muttered.

Slamming on the brakes, I yanked the wheel to the right, putting us behind one of the tails, allowing Darren just enough clearance to pop two more rounds into their rear tires.

Pulling away, we made it to the exit at the perfect time, giving us the opportunity to witness the one car skid and roll to a stop onto the shoulder. The other one continued down the freeway.

I breathed a sigh of relief when we exited the freeway and turned onto the private road that Darren had indicated. But my relief was short-lived when I noticed he hadn't yet lowered his gun as he peered at the side view mirror.

"What, more?" I asked, wondering if I had missed another car behind us.

"I told you, there's always fucking more," he growled before quickly checking his phone.

And he was right. Another set of headlights appeared in my rearview mirror, and they were quickly becoming brighter.

Rolling down the window, Darren fired off several more shots before they returned fire with their own automatic weapons, completely destroying the back windshield. The sound of the bullets hitting the car made me flinch with way too much anxiety.

Darren groaned aloud. "You just had to pick the goddamn Ferrari, didn't you?" he scolded as he reached back behind us for another loaded magazine.

"Oh, cry me a fucking river!" I retorted. "We're being shot at right now."

Darren scoffed, a chuckle lingering behind as he released the empty mag from his gun. "Welcome to my Tuesdays," he replied with a laugh.

"Yeah, well your Tuesdays suck," I snapped, cursing his name as I sped down the narrow pathway. "I just wanted one quiet night of driving, but nooo, you have to be you."

"What the fuck is that supposed to mean?" He paused in his seat, actually sounding offended as more bullets pummeled into the back of the car.

"It means you attract bullshit everywhere you go. I can't enjoy anything nice around you!"

“Oh, cry *me* a fucking river,” he mocked in return, his voice muffled by the sound of the bullets. “You could have stayed home where it was safe, but no, *you* had to be *you* and whine about it until you got your way.” He shook his head as he pushed the loaded magazine in and pulled the slide back. “That’s the last time I let you win at anything.”

A long, dramatic gasp escaped my throat, my jaw dropping in utter disbelief at his words. “You take that back! I won that challenge fair and square when I dodged your arm.”

Darren’s shoulders shook as he actually started to laugh. “Sure, you did, princess,” he replied dismissively, typing something on his phone as a spray of bullets took out my side view mirror.

“I did, dammit!” I insisted, refusing to diminish my win as he rolled his eyes.

“Oh, stop it. You know damn well I would have caught your ass way sooner if I hadn’t slowed down to give you the chance at your new little ‘strategy’ that you were so excited to try.”

I scowled as he continued to type away on his phone.

“It’s not my problem *your* poor strategy of underestimating me caused you to lose. Clearly, *mine* worked.”

“Shut up and listen,” he snapped, his tone gaining in ferocity. “There will be two vehicles at the end of the road. You’re going to stop behind them and get into whatever one I put you in. They will take you back to the estate. Got it?”

I frowned in confusion. “Are you not coming with me?”

“No. I want this last one alive.”

I pitied the passengers already.

Turning a corner, I could see red brake lights far off in the distance, but the sound of the off-and-on gunfire behind us was starting to steal away my confidence in getting us there. The SUV behind us was still several yards away, but it was close enough to easily catch up to a parked car.

“Slow down before you pass them!”

Downshifting, I decelerated and slowed the car before quickly putting it back in neutral and killing the engine. I barely had time to remove my seat belt before Darren hauled me out of the driver’s seat and onto his lap. He then opened the passenger car door and pulled some kind of latch that released the door from its hinges.

Pulling me from the car, Darren was just astonishing in that moment as he lifted the heavy door to let it hang behind his back, affectively shielding us from the oncoming bullets. Keeping low, he expertly maneuvered me to the first vehicle, the back seat door wide open for me.

The second I was inside, Darren shut the door behind me and turned back to the oncoming vehicle, his makeshift shield now at his front. The driver sped off instantly, leaving Darren behind in the dust to fend for himself.

The exchange happened so quickly, I didn’t even have time to process what I had just experienced. Car chase. Shoot-out. Adrenaline rush.

Holy fuck, adrenaline rush.

“Are you hurt at all, Mrs. Davis?” the driver suddenly asked.

It took my brain a few seconds to process something other than what I could still see from the back of the window. There were still plenty of gunshots to be heard in the background.

“Huh?”

“He asked if you were hurt,” the front passenger answered.

Turning to address him, I found myself looking at some very familiar faces. The driver and his companion in the passenger seat were identical twins, the very same twins who chased me down in Darren’s Ducati the night I had escaped from his estate.

“No, I’m fine. Thanks.”

“Good, ’cause we’re not medics,” the passenger replied, drawing a chuckle from his twin brother.

Seeing the opportunity dangling, I snatched it. “If you’re not medics, then what are you?” I remembered how they drove the night they chased me —like a couple of professional stunt drivers. They couldn’t be just regular guards.

Both men snickered. “You can think of us as...special delivery drivers.” I detected a hint of an accent from both of them. New York, maybe? Or Boston?

“Delivery drivers, eh? The same delivery drivers who chased me down the night I stole Darren’s Ducati?”

They both snickered like teenagers.

“Oh, yeah! Now, that was a fun night,” the driver commented. “When you flew through both of our cars the way you did? Brilliant.”

“Yes, very impressive.”

I frowned. Darren’s staff didn’t typically praise me for my recklessness. These two were weird.

“Thanks, I guess?”

“We hadn’t had that much fun in a long time. You really had us going for a bit. Everybody else just crashes within the first few minutes, so thanks for the prolonged entertainment.”

My frown deepened. Was chasing people down part of their jobs?

“You’re welcome?”

“We should seriously do it again sometime,” the passenger said enthusiastically. “I bet you’ve got some new moves under your belt by now.”

I arched a brow. Clive and Owen would absolutely lose their shit over these two.

Where the hell did Darren find these people?

GUN POWDER AND DEATH



Keeping the car door securely placed in front of me, I moved to place myself between my assailants and the engine of my now shot-to-shit car. Scott was already in the same position, firing from behind the safety of the engine of his SUV.

Crouching in place, I aimed my pistol and fired off two shots, one entering the skull of the driver and the other at the calf of his passenger. Scott clipped the third one behind the driver, which left only one of them without a bullet. Maybe two was better than one.

Throwing my shoulder to the ground, I aimed around the grill of my mangled Ferrari and fired off a round of shots into the legs of the last man standing. When he went down, Scott and I moved quickly before he could reposition his gun.

“Hands!” Scott shouted at the two men now struggling through their injuries. Kicking away the rifle nearest to me, I knelt and pressed my gun to the bullet wound on the man’s leg.

“Talk fast and I’ll make it quick,” I offered.

His heavy breathing and silent tongue made me hope he was considering his options, the both of which were bleak.

“Miguel Spade sends his regards,” he mumbled out. “And he’s coming for you.”

“Good boy,” I said with a smile and fired a bullet into his head.

Standing, I walked around the vehicle to find Scott interrogating the other gunman.

“That one confirmed our suspicions,” I said, tilting my chin at the now dead body, and holstered my gun at the small of my back.

“Yeah, but this one knows where he is,” Scott replied as he twisted a knife he’d buried into the man’s shoulder, causing him to cry out.

I crouched down beside them, my interest now piquing at the potential information he might have.

“You can either tell us where he is while you’re whole or in pieces. Which one do you prefer?” I told him.

“If I were you, I’d choose the one that serves your best self-interest,” Scott added. “Not Miguel’s.”

Aside from his annoying panting, the man remained silent, his eyes moving back and forth from me to Scott. As if he really needed to consider his options like the last one.

“Tijuana,” he mumbled out, his voice shaking hysterically.

“How did you find us?” I asked pointedly.

“You were spotted. In the traffic.”

Son of a motherfucking bitch.

“How many more of you are there on this side of the border?”

He shook his head, shrugging his shoulder, and then immediately cringed.

“Guess,” I pushed him.

“A-at least two dozen.”

Good. More men to slake my bloodlust.

“And where are they?” Scott continued.

“San Diego.”

Well, at least I wouldn't have to travel far.

"There's a good boy," Scott said before putting a bullet between his eyes.

"He's closer than I thought he would be," I said, standing back to my full height.

"Keeping it just close enough to the border where we can't touch him."

"We'll just have to find a way to convince him to come visit us himself. Maybe it's time we send him a personal invitation."

"Sounds like a party. I'll notify the cleanup crew. The twins are almost back to the estate."

"Good. I want all of this at the warehouse within the next hour," I said, waving at the wrecked cars and bodies. "You and I are going to be in for a long night."

AFTER SPENDING the last three hours dissecting the SUVs and any equipment found on the bodies, I was fucking exhausted but wholly vindicated. All of the phones of Miguel's cronies eventually traced back to several locations around the city, all within ten miles of each other.

One had been so close that Scott and I decided to infiltrate it ourselves, capturing two of Miguel's men and killing the other four. What was left of their disfigured bodies after we'd tortured enough info out of them had been burned to a crisp with the others after we'd set their little outpost on fire. Plans were then put in place to attack the rest of the locations at the same time within the next two hours.

The phones and computers we confiscated also listed the contacts of their suppliers and dealers, but the text messages found were the most damning part. Conversations between Miguel and his men revealed just enough info to ensure a successful attack when the time was right.

At this point, he was just a dead sitting duck and didn't even know it. Hopefully, the attacks would drain him enough to get him to do something desperate and stupid. At least then I'd finally be able to knock one war off my list.

Stepping into the elevator of my favorite warehouse, I pushed for the first floor, deciding to take a little walk down memory lane. Making my way through the halls, I stopped just before the door that opened to the supply hall, my eyes peering through the window cutout for observation. Ten perfect girls slept soundly in their cages, awaiting their turn for the monthly auction that would change their lives entirely.

I thought back to how Jaden had changed my life. How I never knew of such a burning passion that could punish so vigorously until I met her. My world was not the same as it was so many years ago.

Jaden had taken up so much space in my head, there were days it was difficult to see past her. And those were the days I hated her the most. The control she had over me—the power. It was too much for me to ever admit to her, but she was the only thing that consumed me now.

Goddamn her.

By the time I made it back to the estate, it was nearly four in the morning. Jaden was actually asleep in our bed for once, her lush red hair cascading over the pillows. I stripped off my clothes and joined her in bed, not giving a shit about showering at this point.

Clutching her small frame, I pulled her into me, the warmth of her skin against mine bringing me back to earth—where I was needed as more than just a killing machine.

With her, I would always be so much more.

A protector.

A tormentor.

A provider.

A jailer.

A teacher.

A husband.

A father to our children.

The picture of Jaden's belly swelling with my child brought on such a strong feeling of pride, I wasn't sure how much longer I could contain it.

Her body wasn't ready yet, but mine sure as hell was. It had been six months since she'd been shot, and I really couldn't deny that she'd fully recovered months ago. She wasn't quite back in fighting shape yet, but she'd get there in time if I actually allowed her to.

After tonight, she'd shown me she could still handle herself in dangerous situations, that she was actually capable of following orders. And I was pleasantly surprised that she could overcome a little psychological torture when she was feeling spiteful enough.

While I enjoyed my time with her, I was livid over the fact that the first time I finally let her out of the house, we were attacked. And on our own damn wedding anniversary. *And* while she was the one driving, no less!

But that was the law of my universe—anything that could go wrong typically did. Which was why I always planned shit accordingly. You'd think the universe would have figured that out by now and stopped bothering.

But even in the face of an impromptu assault, I was actually a little relieved at how efficient Jaden and I were as a team. I hadn't expected that, but we had no choice but to adapt to the situation.

It gave me confidence that the next time we faced another inevitable attack, we could successfully do it together if we had no other choice.

Trusting Jaden's competence as a decent getaway driver had proven to be well worth the risk, considering it allowed me time to easily handle our assailants without minding the road.

It would have been a hell of a lot more difficult trying to open fire on tails behind us from the driver's seat. And no way in hell was I letting Jaden

stick her hand out the window, let alone her entire arm, just so she could be useful.

Her safety was always my main priority, and I allowed her to risk it all tonight because she was *bored*. I was fucking furious over the whole thing, furious with myself for giving in, especially after the attitude she'd given me earlier in the week.

But after seeing that gorgeous victory smile light up her face like that, the urge to recreate it was too damn strong to continue fighting.

I ended up spending several hours with Scott mapping out the entire route, making sure all the roads were clear or safe before I even thought about tossing Jaden the keys.

But the smile she rewarded me with made my chest burst with warmth and pride as she drove my car with such adorable confidence, exhibiting a rare and intoxicating display of pure joy.

But even the most calculated plans could be foiled with the most basic of interferences, like a random car accident that wasn't even on our goddamn track.

From now on, Jaden would need to understand that even if she had "earned" herself a privilege that I'd agreed to honor, that privilege would be postponed indefinitely if it jeopardized her safety. And no amount of whining from her was going to change that.

She would need to figure out new ways to entertain herself before I lost my shit and just beat her into compliance. I'd take a miserable Jaden over a dead Jaden any day. Misery could be mitigated. Death could not.

But the sooner I got her pregnant, the sooner she could start occupying herself with other things—things that would only make me too happy to see her fussing over. Decorating a nursery, picking out clothes and toys, choosing a name...

The reality was closer than she even realized, and I hoped that once she accepted it, she'd prioritize the safety of our child with the same vigor as I

did hers. Maybe then she'd finally stop complaining to leave the house and just stay where she knew she was safest. But that was just wishful thinking.

Stirring in my arms, Jaden grumbled in the adorable way she did when she was tired and turned around to face me. Her eyes squinted open slightly, those beautiful hazels bouncing all over my face. And then she wrinkled her nose.

“You smell like gunpowder and death.”

I chuckled, tightening my arm around her shoulders and pushing her hair back from her face. “The smell of a productive night.”

She grunted in response, knowing better than to ask for details. Running my hands through the softness of her hair, I released a satisfied sigh, knowing Jaden was back where she belonged, where she was safe and contained.

“You owe me a new car.”

Jaden snorted softly, her sleepy eyes peeking up at me. “Sure, baby, what color do you want?”

My lips curled as I tugged playfully on her hair. “I was thinking that black might be more difficult to track at night.”

“Mmm, good idea,” she murmured softly, nuzzling herself into my chest. “We can go pick one out in the morning.”

I hummed my disapproval, planting a chaste kiss on her forehead. “That’s not how buying a Ferrari works, but it’s cute you think I’d let you go anywhere after what happened tonight.”

She closed her eyes and grimaced, groaning dramatically. “I was afraid you were going to say that.” She then tried to turn away in my arms, but I tightened my hold to keep her in place.

“You can pout all you want, but tonight only reinforced my reasoning for keeping you home. I won’t allow that to happen again,” I said sternly.

Her eyes narrowed into little slits, an argument cocked and ready at the tip of her tongue. Maybe if I’d honored our agreement earlier, we wouldn’t

have been spotted. If I had just given in when I should have, none of what had transpired earlier would have happened. But instead, Jaden surprised me by taking a completely different approach.

She sighed with contempt, her eyes lowering to my chest. “And here I thought we made such a good team back there.”

I couldn’t help but smirk, finding her disappointment a little endearing. “You did very well,” I praised, running my knuckles gently along her cheekbone. “But that doesn’t mean I want it repeated. You’re back on lockdown until I say otherwise.”

Her entire body deflated in my arms, the look on her face igniting a tiny spark of guilt that I forced myself to snuff out immediately. Guilt was not an emotion I was looking to become familiar with again. It had been beaten out of my head and heart decades ago, and I was not about to let it return to wreak havoc on my life now.

But the fact that Jaden was actually making it return was concerning.

I could easily handle her temper tantrums and raging outbursts when she thought to go against me, oftentimes finding them to be incredibly amusing.

Sometimes she’d do it just to appease me when she thought I needed it, the little saint. But seeing that sorrowful look of disappointment on her face when she technically hadn’t done anything wrong was oddly painful to swallow.

I almost wished she’d just lash out so I could fuck her into exhaustion and that would be the end of it. But this reaction lingered in a way I didn’t care for, and I needed to correct it. Right now.

“Don’t give me that look. You know better than that.”

She sighed, refusing to look at me. “I guess I’ll just continue to *lounge* around the house then.”

My lips tugged into a sneer, remembering the shock and awe on her face when I’d said that. Sometimes Jaden took the bait way too easily.

“There’s my good girl. Now, there’s just one other thing,” I said, pulling the sheet away from her naked body.

Lifting my arm, I smacked my palm hard against her ass, the sound slicing through the silence of the room. Her face immediately tightened into a pained grimace, her body instinctively curling into mine as she sucked in a loud gasp while burrowing her face into my shoulder.

I grinned as she groaned against my skin, grabbing the sheet to pull it back up to her shoulders. Leaning down, I kissed her forehead before tucking her into my side even more than she already was.

“Good night, my little brat.”

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CONFESSTIONS



I only lasted another four days before I was ready to bite someone's head off. I finally got a taste of the outside world, and Darren spat all over it in a single night.

The car chase had been fucking terrifying of course, but it was also incredibly exhilarating. I hadn't felt that damn alive in so long, absolutely thrilled by the fact that Darren was essentially forced to work with me like we were some kind of functional team. And it had gone better than I could have ever hoped.

But naturally, Darren didn't see it that way and probably never would, which was disappointing. Getting him to acknowledge my ability to hold my own was like pulling teeth. He wanted too much to be needed by me to ever let me match him in anything.

Still, at that moment, it felt invigorating to contribute something to the fight, to be useful in ways I was never allowed to be. What good was all this training if it never got put to the test? It was worthless if Darren kept me from ever utilizing my hard-earned skills that he himself had instilled in me. And worthlessness was not a term I ever wanted to be associated with again.

Bored out of my mind, I decided to hit the bags in my personal gym to blow off some steam. It only took about twenty minutes before the strain eventually kicked in, but my body bounced back with a vengeance, and it kept me motivated.

I decided to take things a little further and started training with weights around my wrists and ankles, hoping to increase the speed of my strikes over time. Strength alone didn't always secure a knockout. Sometimes, you literally had to beat them to the punch.

When I finished, I took a quick shower upstairs and headed back down to find Camaro where I'd left her, in the kitchen so she could eat her lunch peacefully. But as I rounded the corner, I smacked face-first into a solid wall of muscle.

I stepped back on reflex, and my upper arms were caught by large, warm hands that kept me still. I glanced up in confusion, angry with myself that I hadn't heard him walking down the hallway like I usually could.

"Where are you off to?" Darren asked, his hands still clutching my arms.

"I was going to find Camaro. I left her in the kitchen while I showered."

Darren glanced down at the left hand I was using to point in the direction of the kitchen and immediately scowled.

"Where the *fuck* are your rings?" he barked, tightening his grip with a quick jerk.

I looked down at my fingers and realized I was, in fact, not wearing my rings.

Shit.

"Oh, I must have left them in the gym. I took them off when I was hitting the bag earlier." I tried to keep my tone as innocent as possible, but I doubted that would be enough to pacify him.

He stepped closer to me, raising me so I was basically standing on my toes, and forced me backward until he crowded me against the wall. I

silently cursed myself for my absentmindedness, my stomach clenching in anticipation of his anger.

“I thought I told you to ensure those rings never leave your finger again,” he rumbled, his voice low with a dangerously dark edge.

“Well, I can’t exactly train with my rings on,” I tried to argue, but the sharp knots of regret that began to twist in my stomach made it difficult to think past the encroaching panic.

Darren’s frown deepened, the intensity of his scowl growing with even more disapproval. “Why not? You’d be fighting with them on in real life anyway.”

I tried to shrug, but his fingers continued to bite into my skin. “I don’t want to injure my hands—”

“I had your engagement ring specifically designed so it could also be utilized as a weapon, Jaden, not so you could shelve it at your discretion.”

“I know—”

“You know,” he mocked sharply. “Yet here you are, once again discarding the one thing I’ve repeatedly told you not to remove.”

My mouth suddenly went dry as he glowered down at me, the forewarnings of something sinister preparing to surface setting off all the alarm bells in my head.

I grimaced as he started to squeeze even tighter. “Darren, you’re hurting m—”

“You disobeyed me, Jaden. Again.”

The more he spoke, the harsher his voice became. His gaze sharpened to a lethal edge, dark waves of fury brimming in those deep blue irises of his. And the longer he stared at me, the tighter his grip around my arms became, causing me to visibly wince.

“I’m sorry,” I implored, emphasizing the regret in my voice. “I didn’t—”

“No. You’re not. Not even close. But your reckoning has finally come, little girl. And I’ve waited long enough to exact it.”

I looked up at him in confusion, his words ill-fitting of my sins. He’d seen me plenty of times without my rings, but he’d never been this angry about it before. The unmistakable rage rolling off him was palpable, like a charged storm cloud suffocating the sky, making breathing almost difficult.

Something was different this time.

What the hell was happening?

“You have exactly sixty seconds to go get your rings and get your ass in my office. There’s something I need to show you.”

With that, he released me and turned away to stalk down the hallway toward his office. Dread tore through my nervous system like acid.

I didn’t know what the fuck had brought this kind of reaction on or what he wanted to show me, but I didn’t want to make it worse by making him wait or enticing him to hunt me down.

Racing back down the hall, I shoved through the double doors of my gym and zeroed in on my rings lying neatly on one of the benches. Snatching them up, I beelined it back toward Darren’s office, slipping them on my finger as I ran.

Approaching the door left ajar, I slowed my pace and sucked in a deep breath to calm my erratic heartbeat. The guard next to the door looked down at me with a cocked brow, his eyes moving up and down at my state.

Ignoring his clear judgment, I released another slow, deep breath, then steeled my spine, schooled my features, and reluctantly pushed my way through the doorway.

With vigilant eyes, I scanned the room for my threat, finding him seated behind his desk, a dark look emanating from his piercing gaze. And just like that, my heart reverted right back into panic mode.

“Shut the door and come here,” Darren commanded.

Sighing quietly, I shut the door and cautiously made my way around his desk to stand beside his chair. I could see on his computer screen what looked like a paused video of some security footage.

Reaching around my middle, Darren pulled me into his lap and wrapped his arm securely around my body, his grip noticeably tighter than what was necessary.

Red flag.

Testing him, I took in a big breath to expand my rib cage and felt his grasp tighten for just a second before relaxing it again. He was preparing for me to flee.

My stomach clenched.

Fuck. I'm not going to like whatever is on this video. And he knows it.

Darren then reached forward and hit the play button on the screen.

“Watch,” he ordered.

My eyes focused on the footage, observing a woman walking into what looked like some kind of store. She had a hood up over her head, concealing most of her face, and approached the glass counter.

My brow arched in confusion. What the hell did this have to do with me forgetting to put my rings back on?

A store clerk then came into view and addressed the woman, exchanging what must have been pleasantries as they both smiled. And then she took what I assumed was a ring off her left hand and showed it to him. Suddenly, an ominous aura of doubt gathered at the base of my spine.

Wait...

As the clerk took the small object from her, he examined it first for a moment, holding it up to allow the natural light to shine over it. When the hint of a sparkle caught the light, my heart immediately plummeted to my stomach. The man was reviewing a ring with a very large clear stone.

No.

The hairs on the back of my neck began to stand on end, my gut hardening around an onslaught of anxiety that violently slashed its way through my body.

After his brief assessment, the man smiled and then took the ring out of the camera view. Left alone, the woman turned slightly to look over her shoulder at the other patrons behind her, revealing more of her petite body to the camera.

I found myself leaning forward to get a closer look, hoping with all my might that what I saw was inaccurate—that I was considerably mistaken. Darren loosened his grip on me just enough to allow me to get a closer look at the screen.

Please, no.

Please don't let it be her.

Please be wrong...

And then Darren paused the video, immortalizing half of her face on the screen. It was still partially covered, but the blue diamond collar around her neck was unmistakable.

Kayla.

“No,” I whispered, my hope shattering into a thousand pieces.

I felt my body start to shake, the tremors riding up my arms and into my shoulders as I tried to blink the quickly forming tears away. But the dark energy radiating from Darren’s body had my heart accelerating into overdrive.

He knew. Just like I’d suspected. He knew.

But he didn’t know *everything*.

“When was this?” I asked, swallowing back my trepidation.

“The day after we picked you up from the storage facility. I hadn’t even reported it stolen yet.”

I held back my sigh of relief. She had acted quickly.

Good girl.

In that case, this was from months ago, and Kayla would be long gone by now. But I couldn't let Darren believe in my hope for that. As far as I was concerned, Kayla was dead. And she would fucking stay that way.

Shaking my head, I leaned back and steeled myself away, forcing my mounting fear back into the shadows of my mind. I needed to fight back while I still could.

"No," I repeated more forcefully. "I can see what you're trying to imply, but that's impossible. She's dead. She has to be."

"Clearly, she isn't," he retorted, his calm tone a terrifying warning.

"That's not her," I argued. "I refuse to believe it."

Darren gripped my hair and shoved my head forward, forcing my gaze to the computer screen.

"I don't give a shit about what *you* believe, Jaden," he growled into my ear. "The only beliefs that actually matter around here are *mine*, and right now, I'm feeling pretty fucking vindicated."

"You're wrong," I spat.

"I'm not, and you fucking know it."

I tried to shake my head again, but with his hand tangled so tightly in my hair, it was impossible. "It's not her!" I shouted.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck!

Darren yanked me away from the screen and brought his mouth to my ear, the words he spoke making my entire system implode with horror.

"You *lied* to me."

I whimpered, my eyes clouding with tears while my stomach ripped itself to shreds. *This* had been the reckoning he'd been referring to. The one thing I had hoped he would never be able to uncover. But I was a goddamn fool.

"No," I murmured in denial, like I could still somehow convince him otherwise. But I knew in my heart his mind was already made up. He had

made it up a long time ago. Nothing I said was going to change a damn thing now.

In a single breath, I found myself being slammed face-first onto Darren's desk, my chest pressing painfully into the hard wood beneath it. With his hand at the back of my neck, he kept me pinned in place while a rage I hadn't felt in so long radiated off him in waves.

The sharp sound of a knife being unsheathed abruptly sliced through the air, and I suddenly found cold air caressing my bare skin as Darren cut through the back of my sundress with a single swipe.

"Darren, don't!" I cried out as he unhooked my bra and tore my thong down my legs.

"I'm going to give you one more chance, princess," he warned, the sound of his belt buckle clinking as the leather strap was pulled from his waist. "And if you lie to me again, I swear to God, I won't stop until I see you bleed."

Fuck.

The familiar icy edge of panic crystalized my limbs, damn near locking them in place, my entire body tensing for the absolute worst.

Darren planted himself right behind my legs, trapping them against the desk.

"Tell me the truth, Jaden. Did you have anything to do with Kayla's escape?"

My whole body shook with fear, and as much as I tried to get ahold of myself and stow away the paralyzing terror, there was no escaping it. No escaping him.

"If it makes it any easier for you, I've already commissioned a team to find her. So you should have no qualms about giving her up. She's already being pursued."

This time, the tears did finally break free as a quiet sob escaped my throat. I had tried so hard to protect Kayla, to keep her hidden, to give her a

chance to get away.

And now all my efforts had been ripped apart by a monster I actually thought I could outsmart. And here were the consequences ready to bust down my front door.

The only silver lining left was that he clearly hadn't found her if he was still pursuing her. Maybe she had found Jason. Or maybe she died somewhere, and they just hadn't found her body yet. The possibilities were endless.

"Last chance, Jaden," Darren warned, his voice hard with the promise of pain.

More tears spilled. What was the point in lying now when he already knew the truth? That ship had already sailed. But I could still save myself from an agony I knew would last much longer than I could bear right now. There was no point in suffering for a lie I could no longer defend.

Pick your battles, Jaden. You already lost this one long before you knew it even existed.

I sucked in a breath, absolutely hating myself.

"I did," I whispered, the rancid taste of weakness and betrayal coating my tongue.

Darren dropped the belt to the desk and flipped me over to face him. His hand then shot out and wrapped around my throat, squeezing hard, harder than he ever had before.

Terror clutched my heart as my eyes caught the unyielded rage emanating from Darren's gaze, his teeth bared in a vicious snarl as he compressed my airway with one incredibly strong hand. His arm was like steel as I fought against it, but all my clawing and kicking did absolutely nothing as he strangled me like he was actually trying to kill me.

Oh God, was this it? Was this how I finally met my end? Was he finally going to kill me?

I could feel the intense pressure building behind my eyes, drawing tears that blurred my vision. The sound of my blood pounded through my ears as a blunt agony collared my throat. My arms grew weak, and my strength finally left my body, darkness clouding everything as my chest burned for mercy. Only then did Darren finally release me.

My lungs immediately filled with a powerful rush of oxygen, my airway spasming as I choked and coughed on the air it desperately craved. Tears continued to spill over, wetting my cheeks as my body shook from the adrenaline surging through my veins.

Relief was immediate as the gift of life was restored by my god while my internal panic battered my body from the trauma of believing that death was imminent.

When Darren's eyes locked with mine, not an ounce of leniency or regret reflected back at me, just the cold dark promise of more to come.

Still recovering, he leaned down and leered over top of me, both hands planted on either side of my head. He studied me with the kind of intensity that penetrated through even the strongest of resolves, and made lesser men run for their lives.

“The truth, Jaden. Now,” he spat.

My tongue felt huge in my mouth, like forming words was the hardest thing I could possibly do right now.

“We s-stole the cloaking device from Tony,” I croaked, my voice raw and scratchy. “I gave it to Kayla, along with my ring to sell. I told her to d-disappear.”

I wanted to slit my own throat. My stomach was sour, the sickly toxin of cowardice snaking through my veins while my heart pulsed with self-hatred.

Darren's steely eyes searched mine, hunting for even the slightest hint of a lie, and while I didn't give him all the details, I did tell him the truth.

“Why didn’t you go with her?” he asked, his hard gaze sharpening.
“Why didn’t you run when you had the chance?”

Now’s your opportunity for redemption. Tell him what he wants to hear. Make him forgive you.

“Because my place is h-here,” I whispered, my breath hitching. “And leaving you isn’t an option.”

My soul sank at my words, but they were still technically true. My place was here so that I could tamper from the inside, like an infection festering in a wound. And I couldn’t leave Darren until I knew he was fucking dead.

His features softened just slightly, signifying his acceptance and approval of my answer. His hand gently reached out, his thumb caressing my cheek, smearing the tears into my skin. Hope flickered when Darren finally sighed a breath of satisfaction.

“Good girl,” he cooed. And then he swiftly flipped me back over onto my stomach.

Within seconds, my shoulders were searing from the hot lash that bloomed across my skin. I screamed, my hands instinctively reaching out to pull myself away, but Darren’s hand snatched the back of my neck and held me still. Blow after blow from his belt rained down on my back, ass and thighs, scorching my skin to shreds.

“I told you the truth!” I cried, my nails cracking as they dug into the wooden desk.

“I know you did,” he rasped, his voice barely recognizable as he struck me harder than he ever had before, making me scream louder. “But you still lied. *And* you assisted in her escape. You have no idea how much penance you owe for those grave mistakes, little girl.” He struck me again, the belt hitting just below my ass and I swore I could feel my skin splitting. “But I’m going to rectify that so it *never* happens again.”

The strikes were endless, my back, ass, and legs made up entirely of acid as Darren rained hellfire over my skin. When the exhaustion was too

much, and I didn't have the energy to scream anymore, only then did he finally stop.

"You should know that I've had that footage for months," he growled as he tossed the belt aside, his voice rough with fury. "So if you're still wondering why I kept you trapped in our bed for so long, now you know. I couldn't very well punish an already broken body with more pain. At least, not yet."

I closed my eyes at his confession, hating the absolute poetry of it. There was more than one way to make me suffer, and keeping me trapped like that had certainly hit its mark. Now it all made sense.

Fucking monster.

I didn't even flinch when I felt his cock suddenly slam into me, my passage still just as wet to allow him to slide in with ease. I lay there like I was dead, internally sobbing from the pure agony of my skin combined with the punishing onslaught of his cock inside me.

Grabbing my hair at the back of my head, he yanked my face up from the desk and snarled in my ear. "The fact that you obeyed me and stayed behind like a good girl is the *only* reason Kayla will be allowed to live when I find her. Until then, you and I will be exploring some new methods for your much-needed attitude adjustment."

Oh God. No.

"You're mine, Jaden. And it's fucking time you started acting like it."

With a savage growl, Darren pulled out and came all over my back and ass, creating a sharp sting where each rope of cum landed. And then the bastard rubbed it into my skin with his hand, causing me to cry out and shudder from the minor touch.

When he was finished, he picked up my dead weight, removed the remaining ribbons of my clothes still hanging from my arms and chest, and placed me over his shoulder.

My back stretched in a new way that made me grimace and cry. But still, I had no energy to move. I just hung there loosely over his back, watching the floor as we passed over it. And then he opened a door and started walking down a set of stairs.

An icy river of panic shot through my spine as we walked farther down the steps, Darren pausing as he unlocked another door.

No. No. Please, no!

I tried to move, tried to pry myself away from him, but my body had nothing left to fight with. Every last molecule of energy had been drained away from me, while the slightest twitch felt like a shard of glass in my skin.

Kicking the door shut behind him, Darren slowly slid me from his shoulder down his chest, placing his hands under my arms to turn me around and hold me still.

Pure devastation laced with absolute horror rushed my system as I eyed the familiar room I had sworn I would never see the inside of again.

“You know, this room will always have a special place in my heart. And I’m really looking forward to making some new memories.”

Darren’s voice could barely be heard over the sound of my blood pumping through my ears, my eyes instantly locking on the steel cage tucked in the corner of the room.

The familiar bite of the chilled metal flared against my skin, the phantom sting rattling the inner cell where I had trapped that trauma away.

Fear instantly liquefied in my eyes, the tears bursting against the brim of my lids as I fought back against the violent tremble in my knees. I would have crumpled to the floor already if Darren hadn’t been holding me up.

I shook my head, my chin quivering uncontrollably.

No. I wouldn’t do it again.

“If you leave me down here, I will kill myself,” I choked out. “I swear to God, I’ll find a way.”

Darren sighed, finding my threat to be both hollow and comical.

“So dramatic,” he commented.

With no effort at all, he whisked me over to the bed and forced me down onto my back, another scream ripping from my throat. My attempt at fighting him was pitiful, I could barely lift a single limb to combat him.

It took Darren all of five seconds to properly secure my wrists and ankles to the corners of the bed, all the while the weight of my body adding to the agonizing pressure against my destroyed skin.

“Please, don’t do this,” I cried, my wretched voice barely above a whisper as I tugged pitifully at my restraints.

The familiar chill of the room was already penetrating my skin, making it rise with goose bumps as more tears formed in my eyes.

With all the patience of a disappointed parent, Darren sat down beside me, placing his hand on the other side of my waist so that he was leaning over me.

I barely had the strength to look him in the eye, unwilling to meet the inferno of malevolence burning in his gaze, completely devoid of mercy. It told me there was no point in pleading with him, his intent clearly fixed on delivering my suffering for the unforeseeable future. Begging would just be an embarrassing way to waste my energy.

“Unlike last time, I’m going to give you a much easier way to get out of here. Just one simple task,” he told me calmly. “And you will not leave this room until you have completed it to my satisfaction.”

I closed my eyes then, trying to calm my raging fear so that I could adequately comprehend what horror he wanted to subject me to.

“What do you want?” I whispered despondently.

The corners of Darren’s lips curled into something heinous and evil.

“Since you’ve apparently gotten so damn good at lying to me, performing one more shouldn’t be that difficult of a task for you.”

Oh God.

His gaze darkened to something possessive and cruel, a sinister gleam in his eye that promised my ultimate destruction.

“I want you to fuck me like you love me.”

My breath suddenly died in my lungs. Like someone had dropped a giant anvil on my chest, the weight crushing me into the bed.

“I don’t care what you need to do or how you need to do it, but one way or another, Jaden, you will make me believe it or you will never leave this room again. *That is your only ticket out.*”

Darren then got up and moved for the door, turning back to address me one last time.

“I’ll give you some time to mentally prepare yourself. When you’re ready, we can give it your first go.”

With that, he opened the door, turned off the light, and shut the door behind him, locking me in. He left me in total darkness, left me to drown in the complete desolation of my despair while my back burned to cinders under my own weight.

My eyes slid away to linger on the memorable ceiling above me even though I could barely see it in the dark. The unforgettable kiss of the icy air caressed my naked skin, welcoming me back to my personal hell like a long-lost lover, eager for another taste of me.

I could feel the panic attack rising, the burst of fear ready to disrupt the calm I had once managed to achieve in such a wretched place. The sharp memories assaulted me like knives, cutting into old scars I had once cauterized shut.

You’re not a person anymore, Jaden. You’re a thing now, an object, a living breathing doll with the sole purpose of obeying my every command.

My fists clenched, my knuckles turning white.

Every single molecule of you belongs to me. From the breath in your lungs to the blood in your veins. Your thoughts, your attention, your fears—all mine.

My body shivered, the deep tremble causing my limbs to lock up.
Your pretty little smiles, your adorable cries, your perfect screams? All. Mine.

My chest quaked, my heart rate climbing.
You exist for me and me alone. Nothing outside of my desires matter to you anymore. Your only concern is to please your master.

I shook my head, gritting my teeth as the daggers continued to pierce and slash.

I own this body now, do you understand? You have no rights to it anymore. It's mine to keep, to fuck, to break...

My breath caught in my throat, my lungs struggling to keep up.

You will never leave me, Jaden. This is your forever now. Embrace it.

“NO!”

The rage left my lungs in waves, the jagged energy cutting through the silence of that black room like lightning in a storm. My chest surged, a rush of anguish and destitution pulsing through my system, leading me down a dark hole of depravity.

I had to slow down. I had to re-center. Bring myself back to the present. Rearrange my erratic thoughts. I could manage this like I had before. I needed to rationalize.

Breathe, Jaden. Just breathe.

I was bound, yes. But I was alone.

I was cold. But I was whole.

And I was scared. But I was also smart.

I didn't have to endure it like this. I didn't have to give in.

It would be so easy to lose myself again to that familiar endless black hole of my helplessness, let it swallow me up until my mind was numb and my soul was dead. So simple to just succumb to the tears and let my body break down into the jagged pieces Darren had fractured inside me. To

wallow in the pollution of self-pity and regret. It was like trying to survive a hurricane with no shelter in sight.

I gritted my teeth.

No.

This time, I refused to allow myself that luxury.

This time, I wouldn't go numb.

This time, I would retrain my focus.

This time, the only thing I planned to dwell on was my next move and form a new strategy he wouldn't see coming.

If Darren wanted me to lie to him, then that's exactly what I'd fucking do.

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LOVE LANGUAGE



Unlocking the door, I stepped inside the room and quietly closed it behind me, allowing the familiar surrounding darkness to penetrate and swallow me whole. There were no windows down here—no clocks, or pictures, or any indication of the outside world. It was just us, and the magnetic atmosphere of chaos we created.

It was like coming home.

When I flipped the switch, low warm light revealed the beautifully tortured soul still chained to the bed. Jaden's eyes were open, her gaze pinned to the ceiling as she took in deep, steady breaths.

My lips curled as I made my way over to the bed, carrying a bottle of water and a large mug of oatmeal I had Pascal make for her this morning.

I decided to leave her down here overnight to give her all the time she'd need to formulate her exit strategy. And I was eager to see what she had devised.

“Good morning,” I said warmly, luring her eyes away from the ceiling.

Jaden swallowed, the movement at the column of her throat enticing me to drag my teeth across the massive ring of colorful bruises collaring her neck. Her pale skin accentuated beautifully with the blues, purples, and

greens, an artistic masterpiece of pure unadulterated rage and betrayal. I could still feel her pulse pounding against the palm of my hand as I'd held her life in the balance between heaven and earth.

Her admission had set something off in me that blazed to such a ferocity it demanded immediate retribution. She had finally confirmed what I'd already known for so long and all I wanted to do was fucking strangle her until her life flashed before her eyes. And judging by her cautious demeanor, I'd successfully reached my mark.

Jaden's eyes slowly shifted to mine, a blank expression on her face. I held up the water bottle and gave it a little shake.

"You know everything down here is transactional," I reminded her.

She swallowed again and attempted to clear her throat.

"Good morning," she rasped, her voice barely a broken whisper.

Setting the mug down on the nightstand, I cracked the lid of the bottle and pulled out a straw from the nightstand drawer to place it inside the opening. I then held it out to her lips.

Slowly, Jaden took the straw into her mouth and sipped down the water. She was careful not to go too fast, remembering that I would remove it if she did. The bottle was halfway gone when she finally released the straw.

"Thank you," she said, her voice sounding a little less dry.

Setting the bottle aside, I took the mug in my hand and held up a spoonful of the oatmeal for her to see. She'd missed dinner yesterday, so I had hoped that her appetite might have some sway over her this morning.

Evidently, I was wrong as her eyes widened slightly, the shadow of discomfort passing over them. She wanted to refuse but knew I wouldn't allow it. She would eat what and when she was told, whether she wanted to or not.

"If you let me lie on my stomach, I'll eat every bite, even if I'm full," she offered, her eyes pleading with me to accept. "Please."

See? Transactional.

Not only did the offer afford me her compliance, but she was also reminding me of her ability to satisfy both our needs at the same time. She knew I'd want to assess the damage I'd done to her back. So while she would gain one desired action, I'd gain two.

Jaden knew exactly how to negotiate in our little world down here.

Of course, I could always decline the offer and force her anyway, the transaction being submission for another moment unaccompanied by pain. But where was the fun in that?

I found too much enjoyment in watching her little mind spin for another way to benefit from pleasing me. Those priceless lessons taught her the mutual value of obedience. When Jaden spoke my currency, she became quite the little capitalist with a very impressive profit margin.

On a nod, I accepted Jaden's offer, setting the mug aside to reach up for the latches of her restraints.

Releasing one, it allowed the chain to slide to the middle of the headboard, naturally lengthening it. I did the same to the other side and slightly extended the length of the ones at her ankles.

Jaden groaned as she carefully shifted her body to the side, a grimace tightening her facial features. Bending her elbows, she gasped as blood rushed back into her limbs, her forehead pressing into the pillows as her shoulders hunched.

The chains were now long enough for her to tuck her elbows against her chest as she settled into a comfortable position, resting her temple against her wrists.

Returning to my place on the side of the bed, I ran my eyes over the bold new colors painting her back. I imagined she felt worse than she looked.

But even as her screams had fed the violence running through my veins, I hadn't broken her skin like I had threatened to. She had, after all, told me the truth. But I knew how to cause pain without destroying the body.

You're welcome, little girl.

Grabbing the mug, I gave it a stir and held up a small spoonful to Jaden's mouth. The portion was mouselike in comparison, but I knew she'd have a better chance at keeping it down with smaller bites.

Parting her lips, she took the spoon into her mouth. True to her word, she swallowed every bite. I let her finish off the water bottle before tossing it into the trash. Jaden then closed her eyes and sighed, letting the contents of her stomach settle.

Unable to help myself, I gently ran my fingers through her hair, marveling at the softness and vibrant coppery color.

Jaden hummed quietly, the corner of her lips curving just a tiny bit, like she was trying to hide it. One singular moan and my cock was already primed for her, an instinctual need to create more of that intoxicating sound.

Little tease.

Battling against my soul's need for her, it was easy to forget why Jaden was down here in the first place. Easy to replace the pain of her betrayal with the pleasure of her body's inevitable forced surrender.

For several weeks, I struggled with decision of when to punish her for her involvement in Kayla's escape and the lies she told to cover it up. But the second I noticed she wasn't wearing her wedding rings after I'd already warned her to keep them on, I finally fucking snapped.

Her engagement ring was the only reason I'd discovered the truth in the first place. To have her disregard the ring's significance so flippantly a second time brought all the rage I'd reserved for another day bursting back to the surface like an uncontrollable wildfire.

Jaden had earned her way back down here all on her own, and now she'd pay a heavy price for her admission back into the real world above.

Set on consistency, I stood and pulled off my suit jacket, laying it across the armchair, and released the restraints on Jaden's wrists and ankles, noting

the ice-cold touch of her skin. She slowly dragged her limbs into her body while I began to unbutton my shirt.

Pulling back the covers, I slipped into the bed and pulled her to me, turning her face into my bare chest like I'd always done before, and lifted the covers up to her shoulders. The second her skin met mine, a raging fire stormed through my blood, my touch the most basic method of branding what was mine.

Jaden sighed as she melted into me, burrowing into the warmth that my body offered, falling right back into our old pattern. To avoid putting too much pressure on her back, I carefully placed my arms around her, wrapping her shivering body in the comfort it desperately desired.

I hummed in satisfaction at the feel of her small frame against mine, the chill of her skin bringing me back to a time of complete domination and total submission. There was so much beauty in those days.

When you broke a person's psyche, you couldn't help but admire the process. When you witnessed their personality drain away, day by day, until there was nothing but an empty shell, you recognized the artistry involved.

Each move was carefully designed to rob them of free thought, of willfulness, until the only thing left was pure survival instinct. And then, you began to teach them exactly what survival looked like.

Survival was obedience. It was acceptance. It entailed responsibility and accountability. You became loyal to that method of survival, faithful in its protection from harm. It was the only thing you could rely on to keep yourself safe. So you followed it like it was the only map to your salvation, your only home.

And my wife was a master at survival.

Every day, Jaden found a way to survive me, to surpass what she once knew and adapt to each new trauma I scarred her with. How she did it, I may never comprehend, but a part of me believed it was almost entirely out

of spite. And I had no problem refueling that tank every chance I got, just to see what she'd do next.

As often as she tried to piss me off almost every day, it paled in comparison to her ability to fascinate me with just a flick of her hair. No one had managed to captivate me the way she had.

And wasn't that just her curse.

When Jaden finally stopped shivering and her skin was as warm as mine, I pressed my lips to the top of her head, reveling in the scent of her hair. "Stay here," I said.

Reluctantly dragging myself away, I left her in the bed and headed into the bathroom to draw her a bath. After pouring in a generous helping of Epsom salt and bath oils, I watched it all dissolve and mix into the rising warm water.

Walking back into the bedroom, Jaden didn't stir, her ears already tracking every sound I made so she would always know exactly where I was in the room and what I was doing. It was how she stayed prepared for my next move.

The atmosphere was volatile down here, the edge of madness just mere centimeters from our fingertips. Being unprepared was a sure way to spark that fragile line and detonate our world into pure chaos.

"Sit up," I ordered, holding my palm out for her to take.

On a muffled groan, Jaden slowly raised her upper body from under the covers and reached out to place her small hand in mine. Offering her leverage, I helped her move into a sitting position, studying her facial features for the signs of the agony I knew she was hiding. She concealed it well, but I knew the damage I had done.

I snapped my fingers and pointed toward the bathroom. "You know the drill."

Gripping the edge of the bed, Jaden clenched her jaw and then finally stood. She sucked in a sharp breath of air, but refocused her eyes on the

bathroom just a few feet in front of her.

Abandoning my hand, she walked with purpose and without assistance straight for the doorway. But three steps in, her knee abruptly hit the ground, an anguished cry leaving her lips as she bared her teeth in a tight grimace.

I stood back and watched her collect herself, breathing through the pain as her chest heaved up and down, sucking down oxygen. I knew she could feel my expectant eyes on her, knew that despite her misery, she still had an order to follow.

So when she opened her eyes and forced herself to rise, I couldn't deny the flare of pride in my chest as she marched her brutalized body through the doorway.

I allowed her a moment of privacy to relieve herself and brush her teeth, crossing the room to retrieve the pain medication from the locked cabinet inside the closet.

When I heard her slip into the tub, I took two pills from the container, grabbed another bottle of water and set everything on the bathroom counter where Jaden could clearly see them. Another unspoken transactional reward for her obedience.

She was huddled in the water, resting her cheek on her knees that were clenched tightly to her chest. Her eyes lingered over the rising water licking just below her shoulders, prompting me to turn off the faucet before it got too high.

Grabbing the pills, I placed them in my palm and held them in front of her to take. She carefully plucked the anti-inflammatories from my hand and placed them in her mouth, swallowing them back with the bottled water I gave her.

After removing the rest of my clothes, I stepped into the tub behind her and sat down, spreading my knees on either side of her body. Grabbing the

bottle of body wash, I poured some into my palms and lathered them up until they were good and sudsy.

Carefully, like I was approaching an injured animal, I lightly placed my hands on the tops of Jaden's shoulders and ran them down the lengths of her arms.

She flinched at first but then sighed softly as I rubbed my thumbs into her stiff muscles, massaging her body until it finally started to loosen up.

One at a time, I pulled her arms away from her legs and washed them with gentle soapy strokes. Her eyes closed at my ministrations, her body relaxing with each minute that passed as I slowly took my time.

Leaning over her, I allowed her to remain in her little fetal position, my arms plenty long enough to reach around for her legs. Even though they were mostly underwater, it didn't stop me from rubbing and massaging her calves, eliciting a quiet moan from her lips.

When I was finished, I poured one more handful of soap into my palms and gripped her upper arms to pull her back so her shoulders rested against my chest. Once she settled, Jaden's breath hitched as I ran my hands along her collarbone, rubbing the soap in slow circles.

Each little movement brought me lower and lower until I was casually dragging my thumbs across her nipples, my hands cupping her breasts possessively. With careful squeezes, I groaned with gratification, marveling at how amazing they felt against my palms.

A sharp gasp escaped her lips as I massaged the soap into each perfect globe, the pads of my thumbs circling her pretty pink nipples until they pebbled with need.

When Jaden finally released the whimper I knew she'd been holding back, only then did I allow my hands to travel south, down her muscled abdomen to my favorite place.

Pausing at the inside of her thighs, a silent command with a little bit of pressure was all that was necessary to part her legs.

My hands lazily ventured lower until my fingers brushed along the outside of her pussy. Her chest rose as I moved my hands up and down along her skin, the tips of my fingers pressing into the underside of her ass.

Extending my thumbs, I gently ran them along the smooth lips of her pussy, enjoying the shiver that ran up her spine as her folds were stretched and teased. All the while, my hardened cock was pressing into her lower back, begging for her attention.

As much as I wanted to sink myself inside her and play with her pussy until she screamed, now wasn't the time.

With one final stroke, I faintly dragged the tip of my thumb along her clit, grinning to myself as I felt her abdomen clench. Nipping at the shell of her ear, I slowly withdrew my hands.

"Sit up," I ordered.

Keeping her knees in place, Jaden gripped the edges of the tub and pulled herself forward into a sitting position. I decided to save her back for last.

Ignoring the hiss that escaped her mouth, I kept my touch lighter than she deserved as I rubbed more soap into her skin. But the longer my gaze lingered on the bruises I'd given her, the more it sparked my anger for why I had put them there in the first place.

She *lied* to me.

And what was worse, for a time, she had actually gotten away with it, which had me incredibly pissed off with myself. The thought of lying shouldn't have even crossed her mind, the price of such a betrayal too costly to even be considered.

But at that moment, Jaden had made her choice. And she chose her loyalty to an insignificant little blonde over her own fucking husband.

The thought alone enraged me.

A dark shadow of jealousy formed in the back of my mind, harboring a malicious will to rain down retribution on anyone stupid enough to corrupt

Jaden's loyalty to me.

I would have no competing interests, no contenders to fight, no other roads to compare. Every path would lead back to me, the map redrawn with only one destination, one target in sight, and nothing was going to derail Jaden's route. Ever. All exit ramps would be eliminated, cementing her one and only trajectory—me.

Luckily for her, she had managed some level of sanity and rejected the chance to commit worse sins. It was her only saving grace.

If she had run and forced me to hunt her down, I would have burned the whole world to ash in my pursuit just to spite her. There would be nothing left for her to run away to ever again.

When I was finished, I leaned forward and pressed my lips to her ear.

“Your turn,” I declared, reclining to rest my back against the tub. I had already showered earlier this morning after my workout, but I would never pass up an opportunity to have my wife’s pretty little hands all over me.

With my arms draped casually over the edges of the tub, I waited patiently for Jaden to gather her strength and turn her body to face mine. Forced intimacy with her was a game I loved to play.

Watching her fight her hatred for me with a dripping wet pussy between her legs was a special kind of torture she’d invented for herself all on her own. And I couldn’t help but appreciate the show.

On a quiet breath, Jaden slowly turned herself around, the water barely disturbed by her slight movements. Raising her eyes to meet mine, she quickly steeled her gaze, that hardened expression on her face revealing far more than she likely realized.

But even as she reached for the bottle and poured the soap into her palm, she never looked away.

Brave girl.

Rubbing her hands together, Jaden lathered up the soap and then glanced down to press her hands against my bare chest. A smug grin slid

across my face as she ran her slender fingers over my skin, her gentle touch leaving behind a wave of heat that went straight to my dick.

I hummed with approval as I watched Jaden's eyes maintain an intense focus on her task. Her fingertips lazily grazed over the hard ridges of my abdomen and back up along the side of my torso.

Sliding along the bulging curve of my shoulder, she dragged the soap down the length of my arm, working my muscles with sure strokes designed to relax me. But in truth, they did the exact opposite.

And she fucking knew this.

Before, her movements had been methodical and detached, knowing her objective was to wash and clean, not tease me into a lust-filled frenzy. But these slow ministrations of hers were deliberately enticing my desire for her, each caress broadcasting a message to my body to take what it wanted.

The little brat was trying to rush me.

When her hands slid across my chest to my other arm, I grabbed her hips and yanked her into my lap. She gasped as I forced her knees to straddle me, her hands pressing into my pectorals to steady herself. I gripped both her wrists in one hand to pin them in place.

“What are you doing?” I growled, my tone low with warning.

Collecting herself quickly, Jaden switched her tense composure back to something calm and sensual, adjusting herself to regain control of my mood. With an easy sigh, she lowered herself to gently run the tip of her nose along mine.

“Lying to you,” she murmured softly, her thumbs tracing small circles over my skin.

I cocked a brow, my gaze becoming heated as I tightened my grip on her wrists.

Malicious. Fucking. Compliance.

Reaching below the water, I ran my hand along her thigh until it reached the juncture of her legs. Palming her pussy, I spread my fingers along her

slit until I found the source of her *lies*.

Even submerged in water, the unmistakable slickness breaching her opening could not be denied.

“Is this what you call a lie?” I asked, piercing two fingers through her liquid desire.

Jaden shuddered with a gasp as I curled my fingers inside her, her teeth pressing into her bottom lip before quickly regaining her composure.

“Do you want me to stop?” she asked, her voice soft and sensual.

A low growl rumbled deep in my chest. “You know what I want.”

The corner of her lips curved. “Then let me give it to you.” She then lowered her head and pressed her forehead to mine, pushing her pinned hands into my chest. “Let go,” she whispered sweetly, lightly tugging against my grip. When I didn’t release her, she brushed her lips against my cheek, kissing her way down to my jaw. “Let go,” she whispered again, a silent plea hidden in her voice.

Relenting out of curiosity, I freed her wrists. My reward came in the form of a soft kiss, her hands moving up to cup both sides of my face.

My arms instinctively circled around her waist, pulling her closer to me and deepening the kiss. Her mouth felt too damn good against mine, her lips soft and yielding, her tongue coaxing mine into a dance she clearly wanted to lead. I let her, wanting to see where she could take us uninhibited.

Jaden’s hands moved from my jaw to thread through my hair, tugging just enough as she held me close. She peppered my face with sweet, unhurried kisses, trailing them along my jaw and down the side of my neck.

When her teeth sank into the juncture of my shoulder and neck, a hiss escaped my mouth as she sucked on my skin, and I hoped like fuck she’d left a mark.

My hands traveled up her sides as she continued to rain kisses from my neck to my chest, raking her nails over my skin and lighting me on fucking fire.

My control was close to snapping, my cock harder than fucking steel and ready to absolutely annihilate her pussy. But just when I thought I couldn't take another second, Jaden raised her hips and finally sank down onto my cock.

Pressing her lips back to mine, Jaden swallowed the groan that left my throat, mixing with the moans leaving hers as she began to move her hips.

Primal instinct had me desperately meeting her thrusts as I lifted my hips to work with her rhythm. Releasing my mouth, she sucked in a breath as she leaned back and road my dick like it was the only thing that mattered to her.

Her breasts bounced in my face, her pert nipples begging for my attention. Pushing against her shoulders, I held her tightly as my mouth descended onto one nipple while my other free hand gripped and kneaded the other. Jaden moaned, throwing her head back as she continued to fuck me, water splashing and spilling all over the floor.

Her hands gripped my shoulders, her nails digging in deep as her pussy clenched around my cock, the room echoing with her moans. She was so fucking beautiful like this—wild, wanton, and so goddamn wet.

So goddamn *mine*.

But her body was still weak from my vicious retribution, her mouth twisting into a pained grimace as her hips began to falter. As hard as she was trying to deliver on her objective, I knew she wouldn't be able to keep her pace up for long, the evidence piling up as she cried out from behind clenched teeth.

Despite her obvious anguish, she continued to fuck me with the vigor of a wounded animal, holding on for survival.

But I wanted more than that.

Gripping her waist, I pulled her down harder, shifting my hips to impale her over and over again until my cock was ready to explode. Breathless,

Jaden's mouth slammed back down over mine, kissing me with a fiery desperation as her pussy tightened.

Pressing my thumb against her clit, she screamed into my mouth as her walls clamped down on my cock, her orgasm erupting around me and shoving me right over the edge. I came with a feral growl, pumping inside her until she was filled to the brim with my cum.

Jaden's chest rose and fell as we both came down from the high. Her arms had locked themselves around my neck while her body remained tightly pressed against mine. Leaning in closer, her lips lightly grazed against my temple, moving down my cheek and to my jaw, one little kiss at a time.

I wanted more of it, more of whatever the fuck she was doing that made me question my own objectives. And the more I thought about it, the harder it was to convince myself against antagonizing the crooked downward spiral that slowly came into focus.

The door to a new kind of psychological warfare had revealed itself to me last night, presenting a whole new world of material manipulation. The toxicity of it would poison us both, but the result would be nothing short of the most magnanimous catharsis ever achieved.

Jaden would never see it coming. But if she wanted to lie to me, then she could keep on doing it until it became so well-ingrained, so natural to speak, that she wouldn't even remember it was ever a lie to begin with.

I could train Jaden into trapping her own mind in a cage made up of her own lies. Keep her there until she didn't recognize the bars anymore, never realizing that they'd long ago evaporated into a truth that would ultimately become her undoing.

The power those three little words held made them true weapons of mass destruction.

And I was ready to detonate.

At the prospect of my impending victory, I was instantly hard again, my body eager to exact its goals. Keeping Jaden tight to my chest, I stood from the bath and stepped out, not giving a single fuck about the water dripping everywhere.

I dropped Jaden's soaking-wet ass onto the bathroom counter, my cock twitching with need at the sound of her cries from the welts still raised on her skin. The counter would be slippery from all the water, easing the friction against her skin, but it wouldn't be enough.

Attempting to alleviate the pressure, she placed her hands on the counter just behind her hips and tilted her pelvis up to meet mine. I didn't need the invitation as I began to fuck her with deep hard thrusts, my fingertips leaving bruises in her skin as I held her body in my hands.

The urge to claim, to conquer, and own was a driving force I had no intention of fighting. I wanted Jaden to feel me for days, to remember this exact moment whenever she moved, because it would set the course for a whole new journey I was eager to start.

When I could feel her body getting close, I slowed my pace, her warm wet heat enveloping my cock making it difficult to resist. Gripping her throat, I squeezed just enough to get her attention, maintaining steady hard thrusts into her pussy.

"Lie to me, Jaden," I growled, my voice barely recognizable. "I want to hear the words that will slay us both."

A frown graced her beautiful features, her eyes glazing over in terrified confusion. But the truth was there, the recognition of my demand impossible to ignore.

She shook her head. "No," she whispered. "You can't..."

I squeezed her throat harder, cutting off her words. "I can and *you will*."

Jaden froze, the most beautiful tears filling the corners of her eyes, making me thrust into her even harder so they would spill onto her cheeks.

With liquid crystals glistening down her face, Jaden tried to shake her head again, her eyes pleading for me to see reason. But there would be none. My mind was made up.

“Three little words, princess,” I coaxed, pressing my thumb to her clit, making her cry out with a sob. “The only keys to your salvation.”

Her cries just made me want to fuck her harder, the sounds of her emotional internal battle waging war on my dick as I groaned at the feel of her walls clenching around me.

She was so close. So close to coming. So close to caving.

“Say them, Jaden. You will not leave here until you do.”

Her turmoil was perfection, her hardened gaze so full of hatred and disbelief, yet her body was on the brink of shattering into tiny broken pieces beneath me.

Fuck, I could never get enough of this. No one could fulfill me the way she could. Nothing could ever compare to the power she had over me.

“*Say it, Jaden,*” I snarled, my patience evaporating with each breath I took. “Make me believe it.”

Hopeless and defeated, Jaden’s hazel eyes softened, her brow relaxing as she looked at me in a way I couldn’t discern.

Her tears continued to spill down her cheeks, but they didn’t deter her from reaching up and wrapping her hands around my forearm.

I loosened the grip of my fingers around her throat, the gesture encouraging her to surrender to my demands. Instead of pushing me away, her hands clutched me tightly, her thumb gently skimming along the inside of my arm, creating soothing little circles.

And then she opened her mouth and completely obliterated my soul.

“I love you.”

POWER



Déjà vu was a strange feeling. It could never be explained or understood, yet just about every human on the planet experienced it on more than one occasion. It didn't creep up on you. Didn't warn you of its approach.

It just...happened.

Suddenly, you're reliving unsolicited memories you don't recognize. And even though you tell yourself that you can't possibly know them, there's no denying the taste of familiarity that clings to your tongue.

I could feel it happening again, the beginnings of my brain being warped by something dark and sinister. That magnetic pull that forced my mind to stretch in directions beyond its ability, spreading me so thin that even the shadows could bleed through.

I recalled the agony of my heart breaking into pieces all over again, but my heart couldn't understand why it felt different this time. Somehow, that familiar crack went deeper than before, the fractured fragments carrying serrated edges that ripped and sawed their way through me.

It allowed for an unusual kind of pain to seep inside, filling in the gaps that tore past the healed residual scar tissue from before. And now, it had

made a home for itself in the ugly new cavern it had constructed deep within my chest.

I remembered what it was like to feel dead inside. To watch my soul being dragged from my body and left out in the cold to rot, deteriorating right alongside my pride and dignity.

It was the aftermath of a ruthless execution conducted by three venomous little words slicing their way up my throat and severing all hope of revival.

Every time I was forced to give voice to them, another arrow pierced into my back. And I didn't know how many I could take before the agony finally knocked me off my feet and sent me face-first into a delusion that would paralyze me forever.

I had to figure out a way to prevent those lies from taking root—from trapping me in a cage I wasn't sure I could always convince myself didn't actually exist.

God, I was so tired. So tired of having to refashion another set of armor to fight a new battle that would still leave me battered and bloodied in the end.

I had considered too many times what it would be like if I just gave in, if I just stopped fighting. And it was a hideous image. Because even if I did, I knew damn well I'd still be just as fucking miserable as I was now, if not worse.

Every time I thought about it, I could feel myself drowning in a tsunami of self-hatred, and I often wondered if dying would actually be easier than this.

I just didn't want to be a prisoner of war anymore. It was fucking exhausting and it obviously showed, considering the odd look Sid was currently giving me as I sat on the medical table in his office.

"You look like shit, Jaden. I've never seen your neck this bruised before. What the hell did he do now?" he asked, his tone more than serious.

Besides almost kill me? I didn't want to remember.

I rubbed my tired eyes with the palms of my hands. It was nine in the morning, and I wasn't prepared for the looming interrogation that Sid would undoubtedly hassle me with.

Stalling, I glanced down at the medical tray containing all the necessary items for today's procedure. My throat was still hurting too much to speak comfortably after Darren nearly choked the life right out of me.

"I'm surprised he didn't tell you," I murmured, my voice cracking as my eyes scanned over the syringe containing the anesthetic.

As grateful as I was that Darren was allowing my expiring birth control implant to be replaced with a new one, it was oddly suspicious. It had been over eight months since he had declared his intentions to get me pregnant, until a bullet to my ovary thwarted those plans. And now he was delaying it even more. Had he changed his mind?

Maybe he finally realized that a woman rife with psychological trauma didn't make for a very suitable incubator for his offspring.

"Tell me what?" Sid asked warily, apprehension coating his voice.

I avoided his insistent gaze, preferring to focus on the subtle scratches in the medical tray, cataloging every instrument on display.

"Well...after nearly strangling me to death—"

"That much is obvious," Sid deadpanned.

My glare shot up at his interruption. Was it really that obvious?

"He took me back into the basement."

Sid stood silent for a moment, but his eyes were so loud I didn't even need to look his way. I could feel him studying me up and down for other visible injuries, but the only one that mattered was the one still festering inside my head.

"Why?" he asked.

I took a deep breath and admitted my crime. "I lied to him."

He cocked a confused brow. “Must have been one hell of a lie to warrant that kind of reaction.”

I nodded.

“Why did you lie?”

I paused, wondering how careful I should be. “To protect a friend.”

Sid frowned. “You don’t have friends, Jaden. You know this.”

I nodded slowly in agreement. I didn’t have friends, not in this world at least. Not anymore. But at that particular moment, I had something worth protecting, friend or not. And I made my choice.

“How long were you down there?”

I shrugged, then grimaced, my back still aching from Darren’s onslaught. “Maybe eighteen hours, give or take.”

It wasn’t like Darren had just automatically released me from my trauma-inducing confinement. The results of his objective had to be cemented in at least two more times before he was convinced that my performance was genuine enough to fall for.

I couldn’t remember the last time I had spent that many hours in his arms like that, reciprocating the tenderness and passion he tried to suffocate me with. And when the last of my energy had been spent on reinforcing his gratification, I woke up to the blissful relief of my dog licking my face in our bedroom.

Sid’s eyes sharpened as he watched me reminisce. “That’s much shorter than I would have expected.”

Apparently, I was a better liar than I thought.

I nodded. “I did what I had to in order to get out.”

“And what was that?”

A kind of liquid fury settled in my veins as I recalled what it felt like to hang myself with those three little words. What it felt like to choke to death on them. And it gave me the strength to finally meet Sid’s gaze.

“A lie got me in there. So Darren thought it fitting that only a lie could get me out,” I said, keeping my eyes trained on him, ignoring the pain in my throat. “But I had to make him believe it.”

His jaw started to clench, his lips folding into a thin line as his brain began firing off potential lies that Darren might favor. But there was only one true conclusion.

“What did you tell him, Jaden?” he asked, his voice suddenly becoming rough and raspy.

My fingers subconsciously glided over the wedding rings on my left finger. Those bands that wrapped tightly around my skin and bones were the catalysts for the entire shitstorm I’d recently endured.

If I hadn’t sent Kayla off with them, would Darren have had the same suspicions? Would he have ever really known? I doubted it, which made the whole situation entirely my fault.

“I told him exactly what he wanted to hear,” I replied, my voice grave. “What he’s *always* wanted to hear.”

Sid visibly tensed, worry glossing across his eyes.

I lowered my gaze and nodded. “That I loved him.”

Sid’s chin snapped up at my words, a deep frown in his brow as he processed my revelation. I couldn’t imagine all the medical and professional opinions he was forming in his head, but I was willing to bet it would be fascinating to comb through.

After a few moments, he shook his head and slid his eyes back to mine.

“And how did he react after you said those words?”

My body involuntarily shuddered at the memory of the most sickening smile I’d ever seen split Darren’s face in two. He’d come so hard after I said those words, the animalistic roars from his throat bouncing off the walls and ravaging my ears.

I’d never seen him come apart like that—to unravel so viciously from his triumph over me. And it terrified the absolute shit out of me.

“Like a seasoned cocaine addict experiencing his first taste of meth.”

Sid sighed as he pinched the bridge of his nose, quietly cursing under his breath.

“I get what he’s trying to do,” I added. “He thinks if I say it enough times, eventually I’ll start to believe it.”

Sid nodded. “It’s a fair theory.”

His choice of words didn’t go unnoticed. *Theory*. And that was all it was, just a theory. It didn’t mean it would come true. Saying those words felt like I was swallowing battery acid, but I knew eventually my tongue would adapt to their taste whether I wanted it to or not.

My only hope was that my emotional response would never grow any further than passive indifference to those words rather than the hopeless desire I knew Darren was gunning for.

“Yeah,” I murmured, looking back down at the medical tray. “And it’s going to *remain* a theory.”

Sid followed my vision, frowning slightly at the tray like it had offended him. I watched as his hands turned into fists at his sides, his knuckles turning white as he clenched them. He actually looked...angry.

Shit.

“They’re just words, Sid. They can’t have that much power,” I offered, hoping to resolve some of his clear discomfort.

He tilted his head to gaze over at me, his brow softening as he looked at me with obvious pity and concern. And I fucking hated him for it.

“Sid. Don’t,” I warned. I didn’t need his fucking pity. In fact, I didn’t even know why I said anything at all. Maybe I just wanted to know what he thought about it, and now I had the answer I never should have asked for.

“Jaden, I—” Sid abruptly turned away as another one of his aggressive coughing fits interrupted his words, his elbow covering his mouth as he stumbled halfway across the room.

“Jesus, Sid, are you okay?” I asked, my feet ready to hit the floor to help him.

He nodded but continued to cough a few more times before he finally caught his breath with an odd wheeze and straightened.

“I’m fine, Jaden,” he muttered with strain. “I think I just accidentally inhaled my own saliva. I do it all the time.”

I frowned at him. I had done that before too on many occasions, but I don’t think I ended up coughing that bad or for that long.

When Sid was finally settled, he cleared his throat and took a deep breath before his eyes eventually centered back on the medical tray. With a sigh, he moved toward the sink and thoroughly washed his hands before drying them.

“Sorry about that.” He cleared his throat again. “I want you to consider something, Jaden, and I hope for your sake, you’ll figure out how to properly wield it.”

I frowned as I watched him toss the paper towel in the trash and fit himself with a pair of latex gloves.

“Wield what?”

“The power Darren keeps giving you.”

I cocked a brow. Power? After what I’d just endured, I wasn’t feeling very powerful. More like the exact opposite. Like my battery had been drained in a single night. It would replenish eventually, but right now, I didn’t feel like fighting for an immediate charge.

When Sid noticed my frown deepen, he took another step forward.

“Darren clearly wants something from you, something he hasn’t obtained yet, and it’s something only you can give him. And now, it seems he’s gotten to the point where he’s willing to settle for something artificial if he thinks it’ll ultimately lead to the real thing. Do you know what that sounds like to me?”

I slowly shook my head, refusing to make assumptions when it came to the man who ruled every second of my life. I was too exhausted for the mental gymnastics. “Why don’t you spell it out for me.”

“Desperation,” Sid answered, the single word puncturing through my brain fog.

I stared at him for a moment, slightly surprised at his volition. Openly calling Darren desperate? In a place where he was most likely being recorded?

When did Sid become so brazen?

“That’s a bold assessment, Sid,” I replied, my voice tight with caution.

“But not wrong,” he countered. “And it puts you at an advantage.”

“How so?”

“What do we know about desperate men?” he asked.

My gaze sharpened, wary of where this was headed, but too curious to back out.

“They’re vulnerable,” I deadpanned.

He nodded. “Exactly. Darren may feel nothing when it comes to other scenarios or people, but when it comes to you, you make him feel things he has no control over. And it pisses him off.

But based on this, it seems to me that he’s given up trying to control them. Which means the driver’s seat is officially empty, Jaden.”

I could feel my jaw clenching in anticipation.

“Do you even understand what it means to be desired by a man as powerful and dangerous as Darren? To have him so deeply enthralled by you?”

I shook my head, waiting for him to get to the goddamn point.

“It makes you just as powerful,” he emphasized. “And it makes you a *very dangerous* woman having a man like that in your corner...if you know how to control it.”

I almost rolled my eyes. Like Darren would ever allow me an ounce of that power.

“What exactly is it you want me to do, Sid?”

He frowned in irritation. “Take the key he’s given you, start the ignition, and drive the fucking car, Jaden. It’s not a difficult concept. Embrace the power he’s given you. Don’t squander it because you’re scared it might hurt you too. It won’t if you learn how to properly control it.”

My eyes drifted off at the memory of me actually driving Darren’s car, the ghost of a smirk forming on my lips.

“He let me drive once already. Though I doubt I’ll ever get the chance again after what happened to his Ferrari.”

Sid stopped for a moment, tilting his head as his brows knitted together. “Wait, he let you drive his Ferrari?”

I nodded in confirmation.

Sid cocked a brow as he stared back at me. “How the hell did you manage that?”

This time the smirk was real. “He lost a bet,” I answered bluntly. “To me.”

His face softened for a moment before he actually started to laugh. “Okay, sure he did, Jaden.”

I rolled my eyes. “He knew what the stakes were, and he chose to underestimate me. Either way, he did eventually follow through on the bet and let me drive for nearly an hour.”

Sid grinned as he stared at me, slightly shaking his head. “Well, damn, Jaden. The fact that you were actually able to get him to willfully hand over the driver’s seat is all the proof I need. That kind of progress gives me hope for you.”

I was silent for another moment before I huffed a laugh, shaking my head with absolute bewilderment. Was Sid actually encouraging me to manipulate Darren? To *use* him? Had he actually just said that out loud?

“Hope for what? After what he just put me through, how do you expect me to take advantage of that...*progress*?” I asked, rubbing the exhaustion from my eyes. “He can’t trust me.”

Sid sighed dramatically and folded his arms across his chest. “It doesn’t matter, Jaden. If it did, you wouldn’t be breathing right now. He’ll want you no matter what you do,” he reasoned, but I didn’t think my invincibility went as far as he thought it did. The man was far too confident. “You need to think of Darren as a sword, Jaden. Regardless of the circumstances, if you swing it in the right direction, you’ll smite any enemy that stands in your way. *Any enemy.*”

I paused to consider what he said, my thoughts drifting into a very dark and bloody corner of my mind. I already knew Darren would destroy anyone who threatened me harm. Not even his youngest brother had escaped his fury when he tried to fight me in my octagon.

But what if Dominic had done worse? Would Darren murder his own family if they hurt me? Would he destroy his allies if they insulted me? Was there a line he wasn’t willing to cross when it came to me?

If that was the case, if his possessiveness and obsession ran that deep, then no one was safe. *No one.*

Suddenly, the little hamster in my brain that had flatlined long ago was now spinning that wheel with a new demented sense of purpose.

“Do you understand what I’m getting at?” Sid asked, his voice taking on a strange edge of agitation.

I nodded quietly, refusing to add more words to the conversation. What the hell was Sid even doing?

“Good. Now, let’s get this implant replaced and get you out of here.”

I was silent as Sid went through the process of removing the old implant and replacing it with the new one. My mind was so wrapped around what he had just openly suggested, I barely bothered to focus on what he was doing.

The man wanted me to use Darren's *desperate* need for my love as a weapon against him, against anyone—but how the fuck would I even go about doing that? Positive reinforcement?

I could use his lust for me. I'd done that plenty of times. That was easy. But that was the Minors. Sid was asking me to enter the Majors. I wasn't sure if I was prepared for that and what it might result in. After what happened the other night, my confidence to try anything was completely shot.

I sighed in frustration. While Sid was right that having something Darren wanted did give me some kind of power over him, it meant nothing if I couldn't actually use it to my advantage.

I would just have to wait for an opportunity to appear and hope I had the guts to test those treacherous waters.

As Sid finished up, I glanced over at him, but when I did, my eyes suddenly caught sight of the reason for his odd lack of concern for his own skin. It was subtle, but its meaning was loud and clear. Keeping my discovery to myself, I looked back at the ceiling, my heart oddly feeling heavy in my chest.

When I was cleared to leave, I hopped off the table and thanked Sid for the replacement. Then I headed straight for the door, pretending to ignore the slight dusting of blood that dotted the inside elbow of Sid's white coat. The very same sign my father had shown when he was diagnosed with stage four lung cancer.



THE DOORS to my office burst open, Sid rushing through the doorway and storming over to my desk.

“Have you absolutely lost your goddamn mind?!” he practically shrieked at me, right before he went into another loud coughing fit,

covering his mouth with his elbow.

I cocked a brow at his raging form, irate by the audacity of his sudden unwise interruption. Yet, as he stood there puffing out his chest like a man possessed, I couldn't help but be slightly amused at his sudden boost of confidence to actually barge in here and question me.

Over the past couple of months, Sid had given voice to his disagreements with me far more often than usual. He wasn't the type to argue, just merely offered his medical expertise and then followed orders when told. And while I valued his opinions, respected him even, his growing boldness was really starting to piss me off.

I glanced back over at Scott and Daniel, who were sitting in the chairs across from my desk, their eyes lit with intrigue. Tilting my head toward the door, I gestured for them to leave so I could handle the red-faced old man without an audience. When the doors closed behind them, I turned back to address the very distraught doctor.

"I assume you're only here to report that my wife's new "implant" was successfully replaced, and not to bother me with something that doesn't actually concern you," I said, my tone dark with warning.

Sid seemed to right himself for a moment, sucking in a broken breath before coughing again to clear his throat. "Of course, it's done. But whether you want to admit it or not, Jaden's *mental health* does actually concern me."

I leveled him with a glare. "Careful, Sid. Your concern is reserved only for the directions I aim it in."

He didn't waver. "You tasked me with Jaden's care. And I'm sorry to tell you that dragging her back into the basement and *forcing* her to tell you lies is not going to have a positive impact on her overall health."

My lips curled into a smirk. So Jaden had told him after all. I was curious if she would seek his counsel over it. And now I had my answer. I'd have to watch the tapes later for that interesting conversation.

“Is this the part where you convince me I’ve lost my goddamn mind?” I asked. “So far, it’s not very compelling.”

“You find the idea of another mental breakdown *more* compelling?”

I rolled my eyes. “Don’t be so fucking dramatic, Sid. Jaden will adapt and fall in line like she always does.”

Agitated, I turned my attention back to my desk, dismissing the pointless conversation.

“She is not a goddamn experiment, Darren!” Sid retorted. “This will inspire massive ramifications that you or I may not be able to rewire. How could you possibly think that was a good idea?”

I eyed Sid with the kind of warning that most men instantly pissed themselves over. The kind that cautioned them that death was just a hairbreadth away if they spoke one more wrong word. And it made Sid immediately freeze in place.

Standing from my chair, I pulled on the sleeves of my shirt under my jacket and slowly made my way around my desk. My large frame towered over the frail man, the white coat he continued to wear a bold contrast against his still flushed face. And while my imposing presence might make a lesser man tremble, Sid didn’t visibly cower.

I could respect him for that.

“Not that you’re entitled to a single explanation for anything I do that concerns my wife, but since you seem so inclined to actually barge in here and *demand* one, I’ll satisfy your curiosity with this—one way or another Sid, I will always get what I fucking want. You should know this by now.”

“Even if it’s just pure delusion?”

“Whose, Sid? Hers or mine? Because I have no problem with it being hers for as long as it takes.”

“You honestly think it will become truth? That eventually she’ll really believe that she actually does love you?”

The sneer that crawled up my face had to be as maniacal as I felt. “It’s a strategy I’m more than willing to explore.”

Sid shook his head. “This will backfire on you, Darren. You’re making a grave mistake,” he argued, then turned to cough into his elbow again.

I scoffed and reached into my pocket for my ringing phone.

“Your opinion is noted. Now get the fuck out of my office before I remove you myself.” I turned away to glance down at the number on the screen, ignoring Sid’s grumbling as he stormed toward the door. “Oh, and Sid,” I called again, watching him pause in his steps. “Don’t forget to wash the blood out of your coat before tending to Jaden’s *mental health* again.”

His facial features softened for a moment, but the alarm flashing in his eyes was almost comical. He should know by now nothing could stay hidden from me. The truth always made its appearance eventually, even if I had to drag it out of the shadows myself.

Dismissing his mortification, I turned back to answer my phone.

“Yeah?”

“Matt’s been sighted. He’s in Chicago.”

I paused, elation quickly lifting my mood entirely.

Finally.

I’d entrusted Dean and his team with the riveting task of tracking Matt down, and as usual, I was pleased with his results.

“How long ago?”

“I’m watching him right now.”

“What is he doing?” I asked.

“Having dinner at a *public* restaurant.”

My instincts immediately flared. Matt wouldn’t allow himself to be seen so openly knowing he had a massive target on his back, which meant only one thing. He was purposely trying to draw me out.

Be careful what you wish for, Matthew.

“Sounds like someone wants my attention,” I mused.

“Agreed.”

The question now was why he’d chosen Chicago of all places? He couldn’t possibly believe he would be safe in divided territory. I doubted it was a happy coincidence. Maybe he thought I might actually behave myself because of it.

After all these years, the fucker hardly knew me at all.

“As it so conveniently turns out, I have to be in Chicago for an event in two days. Keep a tail on him. I’ll be there in six hours.”

I hung up the phone just as Scott and Daniel came back into the room.

“Inform the trio to have Jaden packed and ready to leave for Chicago in the next three hours,” I told Scott as I rounded my desk.

“You’re leaving early?” Daniel asked as Scott promptly took out his phone to send out my instructions.

“Matt purposely, and very conveniently, revealed himself in Chicago. So I’m going to take him up on his little invitation.”

“Springing the trap then?” Scott asked as he pocketed his phone.

“Naturally,” I answered. “I wouldn’t want to disappoint him.”

“What about tomorrow’s auction?” Daniel asked.

“I think you can handle it without me,” I replied as I texted my pilots to ready the jet.

“I’ll dispatch a team to scope out the area. See what they can pick up,” Scott said.

I nodded in agreement. “Have them coordinate with Dean and his team. I want as many eyes in that city as we can find.”

Scott dipped his chin in acknowledgment, putting his phone to his ear and exiting my office to carry out my orders.

“It could also be a setup, you know. To lure you away from me,” Daniel mused.

I shrugged. “It probably is. Good thing we know how to handle those scenarios, eh?” I glanced up at him from my phone, catching the surprising

worry etched into his brow. He said nothing as I scrutinized his reaction, my gaze sharpening at his obvious trepidation. Was my little brother actually worried?

“Yeah, good thing you’re doing exactly what he wants you to do,” Daniel murmured as he stepped away, running his hand through his hair.

I arched a brow. “What’s the matter, Dan? Are you scared of being left on your own?”

He frowned as he crossed his arms over his chest. “Of course not. I just don’t think we should split up our resources so hastily. It puts us in a vulnerable position.”

I rose from my desk and moved to stand in front of him, checking the time on my watch. “You know I have to be there anyway, but it’s disappointing to hear you question our strength, little brother,” I taunted before stepping away.

His frown deepened. “I’m not questioning anythin—”

“Then make the necessary arrangements,” I said, cutting him off. “I’ll see you in a few days.”

I left Daniel to his task in my office, and made my way down the hall, the sour taste of his doubt coating my mouth. Dan wasn’t usually this apprehensive, but maybe after taking Matt’s bullet to the chest a few months ago, he was reconsidering his own invincibility.

And that kind of self-doubt was not something I had time for. He needed to get his shit together and maintain a stronghold in my absence. We couldn’t afford any semblance of weakness, and I would not let my brother tarnish our reputation.

Dominic had already done a good job at doing that and look where he ended up. Truthfully, I’d always known Dominic was bound for an early grave. He’d been a pain in the ass for most of his life, the reckless behavior counting down the days that would lead to his death and an all-out war.

It took serious talent for each of my brothers to start their own wars within the same fucking week. And now here I was, fighting both of them, cleaning up their fucking messes.

Family was really starting to feel overrated. I needed people I could rely on, people who followed orders and kept in line. People who could do their jobs without issue or complaint.

But such perfection was unachievable. Humans were flawed creatures through and through, right down to our very marrow. We were all just one mistake away from our ultimate destruction.

We just had to hope that mistake was worth it.

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SWAY

Loud music assaulted my ears, the deep bass rattling my chest cavity while brightly colored lights bounced off the walls and ceiling. A sea of bodies danced in front of us, the scent of sweat and body glitter in the air.

Women in neon bikinis served drinks to overweight men in suits while armed bouncers stood watch from every corner. With Clive and Owen at my back, I was beginning to feel claustrophobic.

Not that I was complaining since I was not only out of the house, but in an entirely different state. Clubs were just not my scene anymore. Nothing good ever came from them, especially since the last time I had voluntarily entered one, I ended up in a row of cages with no clothes or memories.

I had no idea why we were suddenly in Chicago or how long we were staying, but I hoped it wasn't just for a single night at another one of Darren's clubs. I had no desire to return to that deafening world of isolation and confinement back in California.

Clutching my waist tightly, I watched from the corner of my eye as Darren observed the room, his gaze scanning every inch with the scrutiny of God himself.

It had been a few days since the basement, and I still felt skittish around him, unsure of myself and how I wanted to interact with him.

And I hated that he noticed.

The man loved making me squirm. But I forced myself to just silently tolerate him while I discreetly licked my wounds from a safe distance. My confidence would eventually return as it always did, but somehow, this time things felt different.

I still felt oddly insecure in my dark purple dress, the bodycon style wrapping tightly around my figure. But my insecurity most likely lied with the bruises still healing around my throat. I was wearing a shit ton of concealer to cover them, utilizing a whole palette of colors to cancel out the ones embedded in my skin.

Thankfully, my throat wasn't sore anymore, but the idea that someone might catch the shadows ringing my neck had me wanting to hide away until they were gone for good.

Of course, Darren was never embarrassed by his handiwork. In fact, he often appreciated the marks he left behind, grinning from the memories they reminded him of.

Seemingly satisfied with his assessment, Darren pulled me to the left of the room toward what I assumed was a VIP section.

Three men were seated at a round couch on top of a raised platform, a red velvet curtain hanging along the outside to provide a shield of privacy from prying eyes. Two of the men had a set of beautiful twin blondes hanging from their arms, looking like absolute supermodels with their sky-high heels and tight, low-cut dresses.

The third man had his arm wrapped around another brunette woman, though she was significantly older, possibly in her early fifties. But while the twins were sickly thin, this woman was built like a tank.

The prominent muscles in her arms stood out from her black sleeveless dress, her shoulders well-defined and expertly toned. She wore a pair of

strappy black heels that added an additional three inches to her already impressive height.

The laces of her heels curled all the way up her powerfully built calves, stopping just below the knees that connect to impressive quads. I was willing to bet she had a six-pack hidden behind that dress too. It was fitting that the man next to her was equally in shape.

I found myself instantly entranced, shamelessly envious of this gorgeous powerhouse of a woman. While I considered myself pretty well-muscled and toned for my size, I had heavy doubts Darren would ever allow me to build muscle like hers.

Leading me to the couch, Darren sat me down next to him, his arm wrapped neatly around my waist as he introduced me to the men. All three women smiled at me, the only introductions we would likely get before we all turned back into pretty accessories.

The men thankfully paid me little attention beyond the pleasantries, allowing me to turn my gaze back into the dancing crowd not more than thirty feet in front of us. I needed to focus my attention elsewhere before I got caught staring at the older brunette like a goddamn idiot.

That was when I noticed Scott suddenly standing to my left, opposite Clive and Owen, watching the crowd as well.

“Where did you come from?” I asked in annoyance. I hated how easy it was for Scott or Darren to suddenly materialize out of nowhere, the skilled silence of it a talent I envied.

“I’m always around,” he replied with a wink before nodding to Darren.

Accepting my new boring position as a fixture to my seat, I sat back and people-watched while Darren chatted with the other men. I observed the twins next to them making a constant effort to keep their hands active, either running them along the men’s shoulders or chest, or rubbing their thighs. It was impossible not to see their cocks hardening in their pants.

What the hell was the point of this whole thing? The music was too loud and they were surrounded by distraction.

Stealing a moment when Scott was answering a text, I tapped his side until he glanced down.

“What the hell is the point in meeting at a club? You can’t hear shit,” I practically shouted over the music at him.

Pocketing his phone when he finished, he turned to me. “That *is* the point. You never know who else might be trying to listen in,” he said as he tapped his ear.

I guess that makes sense.

Deciding I’d had enough of sitting in silence, I gently stroked my hand down Darren’s thigh to get his attention. His large palm covered all of mine, trapping my hand in place before turning to look at me.

“I need to use the restroom,” I said discreetly into his ear.

Without a word, his eyes sought Clive’s and then nodded in my direction. Darren then gave my hand a slight squeeze, his gaze returning to me in silent warning. Like I even needed it anymore. He then released my hand and continued with his conversation.

Scott moved aside, allowing me to exit the booth and pointed in the direction of the restrooms. I tried hard not to B-line for the doors, but I was eager to stretch my damn legs and practically left Clive and Owen in my dust. But just as I was about to turn the corner, I noticed a whole group of girls enter the restroom.

Fucking great.

Keeping my stride, I entered the bathroom to find the majority of the girls in the lobby, surrounding one who looked like she was hyperventilating.

Mind your business, Jaden. Just mind your fucking business.

Without a second look, I walked passed the girls and into one of the stalls.

“Why didn’t you just do as you were told, Bethany? This is what happens when you don’t listen,” I overheard someone say.

Crying was the response that bounced off the walls.

Just do your business and get the fuck out.

Flushing the toilet, I made my way over to the sink to wash my hands, the incessant crying making my whole body vibrate with tension.

“I know, I’m sorry. I tried the best I could,” the voice cried. “Ah! Don’t touch it! It fucking hurts so much!”

Grabbing some paper towel, I dried my hands.

“Well that’s what you get for arguing with the man! You should have just complied!”

I sighed with contempt as I turned to the mirrors to finger-comb my hair back into place, wiping a small speck of smudged mascara.

“I wasn’t trying to argue. I was just trying to—”

“It doesn’t matter, Bethany. You’re just gonna have to deal with it until the doctor arrives in the morning. Just suck it up before you make things worse for yourself. You know damn well who’s in town tonight. You don’t want to draw his attention with your stupidity.”

I sighed internally. *Goddammit.*

Walking away from the sink, I headed back into the lobby to find the girls still packed in. Black mascara ran down the clearly injured girl’s cheeks while her hair stuck to parts of her face. Her hand clung to one of her shoulders while her body remained hunched over as she sat on one of the couches.

“Okay, what happened?” I asked aloud.

All the girls that were trying to calm her down suddenly silenced themselves as their eyes turned to me.

“Piss off. This doesn’t concern you,” one of them said.

I cocked a brow at her rudeness. Taking another few steps closer to the group, I could finally see what the problem was.

Her shoulder was clearly dislocated.

“Hey, what are you, deaf? I said mind your fucking business!”

“Are you planning on fixing her dislocated shoulder yourself or just berating her for it?” I asked, uninterested in her attempt to dismiss me.

All the girls looked amongst each other, completely unaware of what to do.

“Can you help her?” one of them asked.

“Shut up, Angela, we don’t need her help.”

“I can fix it,” I countered.

“You can?” the injured one asked.

“Madison, maybe we should let her help,” another one suggested.

“She’ll be fine,” Madison told her before shifting her gaze back to me.

“Now move. The fuck. Along.”

“How about you back the fuck off and let me fix her fucking shoulder? Or would you like to draw more attention with a medic and security when I knock you the fuck out?”

That was the last thing I needed to be doing after what Darren had just put me through, but my false threat seemed to shut her up long enough for her to consider my warning.

“Move,” I ordered, shouldering past her to kneel in front of the injured girl. She was wearing barely-there scraps of purple lingerie and several bruises to match. “I can fix your shoulder if you let me, but it’s going to hurt like hell.” A gentle nod was all the consent she gave. “Try not to scream,” I cautioned.

Pulling on her arm, I quickly applied the right amount of pressure, tugging on the limb in the right direction until the ball popped back into its socket. Her entire body jolted, her scream muffled through her gritted teeth as she attempted to calm her breathing down.

“Try not to use your arm for a while if you can. Keep it as relaxed as possible,” I told her. She nodded, her jaw tight as she held her arm in place.

“Thank you,” she murmured with a sniffle. Looking at her now, I sighed in sympathy. She couldn’t have been more than nineteen years old.

I was about to suggest some painkillers when my arm was suddenly wrenched back, forcing my body to stand.

“You did your fucking job, now get the fuck out of here,” Madison snapped, giving me a shove toward the door.

Let it go, Jaden. Just let it fucking go.

Raising my hands in surrender, I backed off. “Fine, I’m gone,” I said, deciding I didn’t need to risk drawing more attention to them than any of us needed.

“What the hell is going on here?” came a sudden screeching feminine voice behind me. “Why aren’t you all out there working?”

All eyes turned to find a very tall woman with monster red heels and thick brown hair standing in front of the exit of the bathroom.

“Lucinda,” Madison answered. “We were just trying to help Bethany. She was accidentally injured by a client.”

Lucinda marched over to where Bethany was still sitting and looked her up and down. “What the hell happened to her?”

“She had a dislocated shoulder. I fixed it for her,” I chimed in, hoping to defuse some of Lucinda’s growing suspicion.

Lucinda’s large brown eyes and bushy brows bounced my way. “And who the hell are—” She stopped mid-sentence as her eyes ran up and down my body before they finally stopped on my hair. “Well, isn’t this a lovely surprise. It’s not every day we’re graced by the presence of royalty.”

Ah, dammit.

All the girls moved around the room to get a better look at me, clearly trying to figure out who the hell I was.

“Who is she?” one of them asked.

Lucinda smirked like some kind of she-devil about to out a secret identity.

“Ladies, allow me to introduce you to *the* Mrs. Jaden Davis.”

I rolled my eyes at all the audible gasps that followed. The “oh fucks” and “I’m sorrys” pouring out over the girls had me pinching the bridge of my nose to release my blooming tension headache. My reputation really was making its rounds.

“Alright, everyone relax. I’m not here to bust anyone’s balls,” I said over the growing panic.

“Mrs. Davis, I am so, so sorry,” Madison began, her voice rushed with fear. “I meant no disrespect. If I had known who you were, I would have never—”

“Yeah, yeah, I know, it’s fine,” I said over her, hoping to dispel the awkward groveling.

“You’re quite the legend out here, Mrs. Davis,” Lucinda commented, taking several steps closer, her leopard print bustier looking like it was ready to burst wide open. “The wife of our generous benefactor, making a reputation for herself all on her own. I can’t imagine how you’ve managed the things that you have given the kind of man your husband is.”

I didn’t like the drawl in her voice. It felt like she was taunting me somehow.

“And for someone so...” Her eyes gazed up and down. “Petite.”

Was this bitch trying to insult me?

“Well, when you’ve got a body count like mine, size obviously isn’t an issue, now is it?” I deadpanned. People just loved to remind me that I was short. And I loved to remind them I could still kill them all the same.

Lucinda’s eyes widened with her smile. “Indeed.” She stepped even closer. “Well, if that’s the case, maybe you can help refute some rumors we’ve been hearing over the past few months.”

I cocked a brow. “Rumors?”

“Oh, yes. The one where Mr. Davis purchased you himself at his very own auction?”

I gritted my teeth, my jaw set to grind the back of my molars to dust.

“I didn’t realize that was a rumor,” I replied.

“So it is true,” Lucinda pressed, her red lipstick smile looking like a fucking bullseye.

“Yes,” I stated flatly.

Her eyes lit up. “Ah, see, girls!” she gestured to me. “There is hope for you yet. Play your cards right and you could snag a wealthy powerful man just like she did!”

I nearly threw up in my mouth when I saw the smiles form on some of the girls’ faces.

“Okay, no, no, no,” I argued, turning to address the girls. “My life is not some rags-to-riches romantic fairy tale. The life I live is incredibly *dangerous and brutal*,” I said, pointing at the makeup-covered bruises around my neck. “I have no privacy. No friends, no one I can trust. Zero choices or autonomy.” I then turned my wrists over to show Darren’s name on my wrists. “I’m property to him,” I emphasized. “And I’ve had to learn how to do some pretty terrible things just so I can survive because people are constantly trying to kill us. Trust me, 10 out of 10 would not recommend.”

They were silent for a moment, their eyes bouncing all over me, from my tattoos to my collar, wrist and ankle cuffs, to the diamond ring on my finger.

“But you’re taken care of, right? He still keeps you safe? Comfortable?” one of the girls asked.

The idea was so fucking laughable I actually snorted at the question.

Define comfortable.

Considering what my own “husband” had put me through just days ago, comfortable was a spectrum that shifted almost daily. And safety? There was no such thing.

I'd literally been shot on his own property by his own guard. *By accident.* He was the very reason I would never be safe so long as I was tied to him.

"Sure, if you consider being kept under constant lock and key, beaten when you step out of line, and getting shot at on multiple occasions comfortable and safe."

Madison scoffed. "So not much of a difference then."

"At least you only have to fuck one man a night," someone else muttered.

"And you're basically a queen now," another added.

Fuck. How was I losing this argument?

Was I truly in a better position than they were? I guess, if I was really comparing, they were probably just as free as I was, but their obligations were to more than one man a night. And in truth, their cages were probably a lot smaller and not nearly as luxurious as mine was.

But did their customers torture them physically, emotionally, and psychologically on a daily basis because they enjoyed it? Did all of them take pleasure in their tears? Their screams? Did they make it last for days at a time? Did they threaten their families? Rewire their brains so they became literal robots?

I seriously fucking doubted it. Right?

Testing the already hot water, I voiced the question I was afraid to ask.

"Are you all here willingly?" I asked. "Can you leave this job if you want to?"

Most of them seemed to hunch in on themselves, their silence and deflection a deafening answer.

"Of course they can, but they have debts to pay off," Lucinda offered in response. "They are free to pay off those debts however they like, but if they want to beat the interest rate, this is the fastest and most efficient way to do it."

Sure, it was.

I nodded in disappointment. It was just another scheme these poor girls had fallen into and would likely never get out of.

“Besides, we provide them with housing, food, security, healthcare. What kind of creditors provide that for their debtors?”

The kind that seek to trap their debtors into permanent detrimental reliance?

“I’m sure that kind of *generosity* is just invaluable,” I replied sourly.

“They are very well taken care of,” Lucinda affirmed.

Until one of their clients completely lays them out.

I snickered. “Well, that’s excellent news then,” I countered quickly. “Because Bethany here is in need of medical treatment for a dislocated shoulder thanks to an abusive client. Since the safety of the girls is so important to you, I’m sure that client will be penalized for disrupting the flow of business when they negligently damaged one of our own, costing us the rest of her earnings for the night.”

I steeled my gaze at Lucinda, daring her to challenge me.

A nervous laughter left her lips. “Of course. I’ll see to it personally.”

“Right now,” I demanded. “I’d like to be able to tell my husband that management is taking care of the staff that provides such important revenue for his business. We don’t like revolving doors when it comes to our employees.”

I could see the twitch in her eye before she smiled again and pulled out her phone.

“Of course.” Dialing the phone, she placed it to her ear.

“Speakerphone, please,” I added snidely.

Lucinda smiled again, removing the phone from her ear and placing it on speakerphone. Someone picked up after just two rings.

“Yes, Lucinda?” a woman’s voice answered.

“Bethany’s last client of the night,” Lucinda began. “Dock him a grievance fee and have his membership suspended for the rest of the month. Alert security to have him removed from the premises immediately.”

“Yes ma’am,” the woman’s voice said and the two hung up.

“Very good,” I said, my hard gaze locking with hers. “I’m glad we got that cleared up.”

Lucinda’s smile was so forced it was amusing to watch.

The door to the restroom suddenly slammed open, and Clive’s agitated face appeared.

“Jaden! You’ve been in there for like an hour. Let’s go!”

Ignoring him, I turned my gaze back to Lucinda. “Sorry, gotta run. *Really* nice meeting you.” I turned back to the girls, wishing I could do something more to help them, but I knew they were just as stuck as I was. “Good luck to you all. Stick together. You need each other more than you know.”

With that, I strode passed Lucinda and made my way back out into the VIP area.

“Jesus Christ, what the hell were you doing in there?” Owen asked me.

I shrugged. “Just taking care of business.”

As we neared the booth, I could see a heavyset man arguing in the crowd as he was escorted by two guards toward the exit of the club. I smiled at my little power move, glad that I had some sway in this industry, however little it might be.

TAKE

Getting back to the booth, I caught Darren's side-eyeing glare and my confidence swiftly wilted away. Sliding in next to him, I schooled my features and found myself wrapped in his arm, bringing me closer so his mouth could reach my ear.

"Next time, I'm going to start a timer," he warned.

I groaned internally. "I was cornered by a woman named Lucinda."

Darren's gaze darkened as he peered down at me. "What did she want?"

"To taunt me, it seemed."

Darren's features hardened before releasing me from his grasp. "I'll take care of it."

I furrowed my brows at his answer. "What does that mean? Take care of it how?"

"Don't worry about it," he said, his tone dark enough to tell me the conversation was over. He then grabbed a drink that had been placed on the table and handed it to me. "Here." Taking the glass, I admired the work of the bartender. The magenta-colored liquid swirled with edible glitter, topped with a large ring of lime and an edible flower with purple and white petals. The drink actually looked...pretty.

"What's this?" I asked, swirling the drink in my hand.

"Take a sip and find out."

I held the glass to my lips and took a cautious sip. A burst of citrus candy hit my tongue, the burn of whatever spirit used practically nonexistent.

“That’s actually really good,” I commented, taking another sip as I relaxed against him.

“Good,” he said with a grin, then turned back to his conversation with the other men.

Sipping on the drink, I allowed my eyes to wander again, bouncing back and forth from the dancing crowd to the gorgeous women in our booth. They too were drinking the same drink as me, the twins smiling and swaying their bodies slightly to the music.

When my eyes suddenly locked with the older brunette, I felt my stomach shrink as she winked at me.

Don’t be weird, Jaden. Smile back.

So I did just that, returning a small grin. She seemingly took this as an invitation to rise from her seat, drink in hand, and crossed the section in my direction.

I could see from the corner of my eye Clive shift closer to the booth like he was thinking about shooing her off, but the deadly glare I sent him kept his large ass in place.

When she plopped down next to me, she crossed her legs and held up her drink.

“Cheers,” she said, holding out her glass. I smiled, lifting my glass to clink it against hers.

“Cheers,” I replied before we both took a sip of our drinks.

Fuck, why is this drink so good?

“I’m Michelle,” she stated, holding her hand out. I took her hand and shook it, noticing the strong grip she used in the gesture, not to mention the giant diamond ring embellishing her ring finger. The thing was bigger than mine.

“Jaden,” I replied. “It’s nice to meet you.”

“I know who you are. I’ve heard a lot about you.”

Oh God, not again.

“I can’t guarantee it’s all true,” I replied, having absolutely no idea what has been said about me.

“I hope it is. I’d like to think there’s more than one woman with a spine in this industry.”

Without failure, Darren’s hand spread itself over my leg, his fingertips pressing into my skin in subtle warning. Glancing up, he wasn’t even looking at me, his head turned in the other direction as he continued his conversation.

The man was ridiculously well-tuned to literally everything around him. Even when you thought he wasn’t paying attention, naturally, he always was.

“I can’t imagine there’s much room for womens’ spines around here with the male ego hogging up all the space,” I added, taking another sip of my drink.

Michelle laughed, nodding in agreement. “Too true. Though some of us learned how to shove our way through. Others just don’t have the brain capacity.”

“Is that what you did with all that amazing muscle you’ve built?” I asked, hoping it wasn’t a weird question.

She chuckled. “Most men don’t prefer a body like mine. It makes dealing with them much easier.”

“I’m honestly jealous,” I replied, shamelessly admiring her hard work.

“Thank you. Though it probably pales compared to your hair. It’s beautiful.”

I could feel myself blushing. What the fuck was wrong with me?

“Thank you,” I said, taking another sip of my drink as she did the same.

“Is that your natural color?”

I nodded. "Yeah."

"It's gorgeous. Never change it."

"I doubt he'd let me, even if I wanted to," I said, gesturing with my head to Darren. Which was stupid because I knew he could hear me, evidenced by the fact that he was squeezing my thigh.

What the hell is in this drink?

My chest suddenly grew hot with suspicion, the weight of the now near empty glass convincing me to return the drink back to the table.

"How long have you two been married?" I asked.

"Fifteen years."

"Wow. So you've been in this game for a while, huh?"

Michelle shrugged, taking another swig from her glass. "I've been in this game my whole life. Born and raised in it."

I furrowed my brows. "Yet you're not like any of the other women I've met." So far, I'd only ever encountered the meek, the dumb, and the slaves.

"I was raised by a single dad. Turned me into the son he never had."

I paused at her answer, finding it completely unexpected, but also hopeful.

"Did that make life easier for you?"

"In a way," she answered with a nod. "I certainly received more respect than the other women, but that was mostly because they knew they'd end up with a mouth full of bullets if they didn't."

I smiled, a stupid giggle suddenly leaving my lips. Slapping my hand over my mouth, I widened my eyes at the fact I just giggled like a child. But if Michelle noticed, she didn't act on it. She just smiled back at me as she sipped her drink.

"I like you," she said, eyeing me up and down with approval. "How long are you in town for?"

Darren abruptly turned around then, his hand clamping down on my leg while his eyes blazed with caution at Michelle. When all she did was smile

sweetly back at him, I think I instantly fell in love with her.

“Michelle,” Darren said, a tone of warning mixing in that single word.

“Darren,” she returned with a cool nod. “Enjoying your stay so far?”

“Cut the shit, Michelle. She’s not interested.”

My brows furrowed as I turned to him. “Interested in what?”

“Oh, I bet she’d be real interested by the end of the night,” Michelle drawled, a sly grin curling the corner of her mouth.

“She’s off-limits. Even to you.”

A sarcastic pout replaced the smirk on Michelle’s lips. “Why not let her decide for herself?”

“Decide what?” I tried again.

“Because she’s mine,” he growled. “Now, back off before I have to involve your husband.”

Michelle rolled her eyes and downed her drink, slamming it onto the table.

“Fine, fine. Don’t share. But at least let me take her for a dance then. She’s going to need to let loose any minute now.”

What the shit? Why would I need to do that?

And then like fucking clockwork, I felt a lightness floating through my limbs, a dubious sense of joy tugging at my lips. Awareness snapped my attention back to the damn glass on the table, irritation braiding itself with the odd rush of endorphins.

I felt my shoulders begin to sway to the music, my movements instantly drawing Darren’s interest back to me. The wolfish grin curving up his face was all the confirmation I needed.

“Goddamn you,” I managed to growl before giggling my annoyance.

Darren planted a quick kiss against my temple. “You were too tense. You should relax.”

Why? So I can make an ass out of myself for your entertainment? No thanks.

“What did you give me?”

“Nothing you won’t enjoy,” he answered, then took my chin in his hand and pressed his lips to mine, completely ignoring Michelle. I loathed the way his kiss warmed my stomach, sending a rush of blood to my pelvis where it collected and pulsed for attention.

Damn him and his skillful tongue, pushing me to an edge that promised pain, pleasure, and guilt. If he kept kissing me like this, then we’d be bound for one hell of a display for the unsuspecting crowd and his business associates.

Sensing the same dilemma, he finally released my lips, groaning as he did.

“What exactly am I not interested in?” I asked, finding my words difficult to form.

Darren leaned down into my ear. “Michelle swings both ways, and is a popular dominatrix at the club she and her husband own.”

“Oh...ooohhh,” I sang, understanding suddenly clicking in my head. “I can see it. She has an amazing body that I’m totally jealous of. I want muscles like that.”

Fuck, why am I admitting this shit?

Darren frowned down at me. “No. Your body is exactly the way I want it. You’re lucky that I actually find your little four-pack to be as adorably sufficient as it is.”

I scoffed at him, waving him off with the sway of my hand. But then movement behind him caught my eye as I watched the twins rise from the couch, giggling as they did.

“Come on! Come dance!” they called enthusiastically, their hips moving playfully with the music.

Michelle then turned back to Darren, a knowing smile on her face.

“Come on, Darren, let the girl dance,” she teased, standing up and stepping down from the booth to the floor. She then held out her hand in

silent invitation.

And goddammit, I actually wanted to. I wanted to unleash my body to the music and dance like I had when I was in my early twenties. When not a single obligation could breach the strength of the alcohol and endorphins running through my veins. When the world of responsibility melted away for just a few blissful moments.

A heavy sigh hissed from Darren's throat, the telltale sign of his begrudging approval.

"Go on," he relented, nodding toward the crowd and the women still waving for me to join them. "I know you want to."

I did want to, my teeth biting into my lip as I watched the dancing sea of bodies entice me more and more. But was it even a good idea?

Darren groaned again as he grabbed my chin. "Go," he ordered, "before I change my mind and fuck you over this table until you scream."

"Okay," I murmured, my eyes connecting with Michelle and the women waving me on. But the second I moved to stand, the steel grip of Darren's hand around my arm pulled me back down. "What the—"

"Stay where I can see you," he warned, his voice sharpened with that terrifying sternness I hated hearing. "Do not go too far."

I nodded, my hand reaching out behind me for purchase while my eyes remained locked with his, fearful that the second I looked away again, he'd pounce. But the action was short-lived as Michelle grabbed my hand and yanked me out of the booth.

In a matter of seconds, I found myself swallowed by the swarming crowd, the scent of sweat and alcohol perfuming the air. The women circled me, their hips swaying to the fast beat of the music as they ran their hands down my arms, encouraging me to move with them.

With the drugs now fully influencing my system, it was uncharacteristically easy to let go, to allow my mind to wander away from my guard and focus on matching my body to the rhythm of the bass. It was

all-consuming, the atmosphere surrounding me alive with an infectious energy that had me casting aside all my afflictions and vigilance.

Before long, I was grinding my body against the other women, joining with their movements and surrendering to the drugs swimming through my blood. I could feel myself giggling like a fool at the oddness of feeling so light and carefree.

I danced for several songs, losing track of time and all my accompanying fucks. I hadn't danced like that in years, and it made me want to relive that feeling until I was so delirious with endorphins I couldn't see straight.

But then it all came crashing to a halt the second my eyes glanced back toward the VIP section and locked with Darren's. The way he was watching me, with such dark intensity, with such possessiveness, it made me second-guess myself and stumble back from my group.

That single misstep put me in the trajectory of a large woman rushing through the crowd, bumping me to the side and right into the back of a rather short man. His shoulders immediately hunched before he turned around with a mean scowl on his face, wearing a dark soaking-wet shirt, and clutching an empty glass in his hand.

"Oh, shit, I'm so sorry," I said, eyeing the shirt now sticking to his chest. "I didn't mean to—"

"Watch where you're going you stupid bitch!" he shouted, then slapped me across the face.

With my head jerked to the side from the force of his hand, I stood there absolutely stunned. My cheek stung, but it was almost laughable compared to the power of Darren's hand. The drugs had clearly reduced my reaction time since he actually landed that slap, but certainly not my counter moves.

Growling, I reared back and slammed my fist across his face hard enough to throw him off balance, my knuckles smarting from the impact.

The slight exertion threw me off balance too, my body stumbling back into place before he regained his footing.

Confused, he tapped his cheek, his eyes widening at the sight of the blood spotting his fingers from where my engagement ring had cut into his face.

“You fucking cunt!” he roared, rearing his elbow back for another strike.

Before it could connect, his fist stopped short against a large palm that reached out well above my shoulder and closed around his hand.

Dazed, I peeked up at the dark looming presence now engulfing my space. But the unexpected shiver that ran down my spine was nothing compared to the heat of the murderous rage blazing in Darren’s eyes as he trapped the man’s fist in place.

Suddenly, an ominous wall of dangerous men rapidly emerged at my back, crowding around me like a massive human shield.

“Hey asshole, let go!” the guy yelled as he tried to pull his arm away fruitlessly, but immediately froze the second he looked all the way up at his opponent. Recognition caused all the blood in his face to drain away, unmistakable horror reflecting back from his glossy eyes. “Oh shit,” he murmured.

Without sparing me a single glance, Darren wrapped his hand around my waist and pulled my swaying body behind him right into Clive’s grasp.

Snatching me up like a fucking rag doll, Clive quickly whisked me away in the direction of our table, my feet stumbling along to keep up while Owen laughed at my six. Dragging me up, Clive planted my ass back on the couch at our table and pointed down at me.

“Stay,” he ordered sternly and glanced back around at the loud commotion heading our way.

“I’m not a fucking dog,” I muttered with a frown, my upper body wobbling from side to side. Grabbing the back of the couch, I held myself

steady as the room spun around me.

The next thing I knew, Darren was slamming my assailant down on top of our table with such force, it creaked beneath him. The velvet curtain was then quickly swung around the booth, closing the area off to the unsuspecting crowd still dancing away just outside.

I glanced across the way at Darren's business associates who were watching the scene like they were about to see a tiger devour its next meal.

Darren clutched the man by the lapels of his jacket, easily holding him down as he struggled and cursed.

"Get the fuck off me, man! Maybe you should keep your bitch in check next time and she won't get smacked!"

I closed my eyes and cringed at the sheer stupidity, the guy just digging a much more painful grave by the second. I'd seen plenty of times where they start scared, then try to get tough, then go to straight stupid right before they turn to apologizing and pleading for their lives.

Darren said nothing, his menacing gaze fixed on his squirming prey that he easily kept pinned in place with one hand. He then casually held the other one out to Scott. Answering Darren's silent command, Scott pulled out a long hunting knife from his belt and placed it in Darren's waiting palm.

Oh shit.

"Wait! What the fuck are you—ah!"

I sucked in a breath as I watched Darren calmly and slowly bury the knife right between the man's ribs, his screams muffled by the blaring music beyond the curtain. Ripping the knife out, Darren did the same thing to the other side, puncturing both lungs, and causing the man to howl in pain.

"Stop! Stop! Ah!" he wailed. "I'm sorry! I didn't recognize her! Let me go! Please!"

In his agony, he jerked his head back and forth, only to stop when he found me sitting in the booth not more than three feet away from him. Desperation wilted his resolve, his eyes pleading for mercy as if I had even a drop of influence in the situation he caused.

I couldn't even sit still thanks to Darren, and this guy was looking at me like I could save him from a fate he had sealed himself the moment he swung at me.

"Please! I'm s-sorry!" he wheezed, coughing up enough blood to paint his chin red. "I shouldn't have hit you! I didn't r-recognize you!"

His gaze held mine as he whimpered, glossy red eyes full of hope that I might somehow stop this. But all I could do was slowly shake my dizzy head at him, merely seconds before Darren's fist connected with his jaw, turning his head away from me.

"Do not even *look* at her," Darren seethed, his teeth bare as the man pleaded underneath him.

"I'm s-sorry! It was a m-mistake!" he wheezed again. "It'll n-never happen again!"

Darren's gaze sharpened. "Obviously."

And then he drove his fist into the man's trachea—once—twice—and a third time in rapid succession, completely obliterating his windpipe.

With bulging eyes, the man clutched at his throat, gasping for the air Darren had permanently denied him, choking on the final remnants of his fleeting life.

I glanced up at Darren, my unfocused vision incapable of missing the fire in his eyes still blazing with the kind of wrath I had become well acquainted with, as tame as this display was.

I could see the deep satisfaction he took when he witnessed his prey take his final pained breath before his body grew lax against the table.

When Darren turned away, two other men I hadn't noticed before stepped up and pulled the man off the table to drape his arms around their

necks. They dragged him away from the curtain as if he were just another drunk patron being tossed from the bar, his dark shirt concealing the blood underneath it.

Without looking back, Darren's gaze landed on me, the dark possessive look in his eye locking me in place. Scowling, he sat down next to me only to reach over and lift me into his lap to straddle his hips. He then glanced back over my shoulder, prompting Scott to immediately usher everyone out of the booth until it was just the two of us behind the privacy of the curtain.

With everyone gone, Darren's eyes softened slightly as he sighed, his hand taking my chin and turning my offended cheek for his review.

"I hope you enjoyed your time out there," he murmured, his gaze focused on my skin. "Because it's never happening again."

I frowned as I pulled away. "What? Why? Because of that?" I asked, my voice an obvious whine in my drugged-out state, my body unsteady as I pointed in the direction behind me.

Darren's jaw tightened as he slowly dragged his thumb and forefinger along my cheek.

"No. Because it's too damn distracting," he answered. "I could barely keep my eyes off you."

I huffed a laugh at the compliment, but shook my head at the consequence of it. "But I was having so much fun."

"Only because I drowned out your inhibitions with drugs."

"*This time*," I emphasized.

"The *last* time," he countered.

I sighed in frustration. "You know, you're really being a buzzkill."

He sat up more, clutching my upper arms. "That's not the only thing I'll kill if you don't heed my warning," he rumbled, his gaze darkening.

My shoulders slumped in disappointment, but Darren remained unaffected by it, steadfast in his ruling. "Maybe this could have been

avoided then,” he added, running the pad of his thumb along my offended jawline.

“I’m fine, you know,” I said, my hands pressing against his chest to hold myself steady.

“Doesn’t matter,” he clipped, his fingers moving to brush my hair behind my ear.

His eyes then slid down at my hands clutching his shirt, a proud smirk snaking up the side of his face. Taking my left hand, he pulled it up and tilted my ring toward the light, revealing the deep red smudge coating the sharp points of the setting.

“Good girl,” he praised and then yanked my mouth to his.

And just like the good girl I was, I gave him exactly what I knew he needed at that moment.

With my hands clutching his shoulders, I poured myself into that kiss, letting it warm my blood until I was hot with need and drunk with even more inhibition. The drug still racing through my system made it easy to disconnect from reality and focus on the now.

With every swipe of his tongue, the confidence to experiment with an incredibly dangerous man grew at an alarming rate.

Deep down, I knew the power I held over him. I’d tasted it plenty of times but never really *fully* indulged. Fear kept me at the edge, reminding me that if I crossed the line, I might lose my footing and stumble into the arms of a monstrosity I’d foolishly created and couldn’t control.

The memory of my crawling for him in our bedroom came to mind. I was the one on my hands and knees on the damn floor, but I could see that man’s fucking soul bowing to my sway, his focus entirely mine to dominate.

And that really pissed him off.

I hadn’t said a single word, but he punished my mouth with his cock all the same, furious that he could be so easily seduced by me. We both got our

egos bruised that day.

But if Darren thought I was seducing him then, he had no idea what I was capable of when the gloves of caution were finally ripped away.

And truthfully, neither did I.

But he'd just recently given me permission to find out, hadn't he? To lie to him? To make him believe it? He was practically begging for me to claim him, to own him so completely.

And if there was one thing I was damn good at, it was giving Darren exactly what he needed. So own him, I would.

With opportunity striking the match, who the hell was I to withhold the kerosene?

With Darren's lips influencing a reaction I'd normally fight to constrain, I followed through on my drug-induced instinct.

Instead of fighting for the sake of stubbornness, instead of submitting for the sake of survival, I took my power and matched him, meeting him passion for passion.

And fuck, did he notice.

On a deep groan, his hands dug into my hips, his chest pressing against mine like he couldn't get me close enough. Pushing up on my hips, I raised myself, forcing him to crane his neck to meet my demands, just like I had in that bathtub.

And for a moment, I could feel him giving in.

The more I touched him and the more I shifted my hips into his lap, the more I could feel him slipping deeper and deeper into the palm of my hand.

The man thought he was letting me run the show, thought he was still in control, but power didn't always come in the form of physical strength.

Sometimes it came in the form of a single kiss. A single touch. A single glance.

And in the open palms of a desperate man, that power was mine for the taking.

And I. Fucking. Took.

Darren's erection pressed into my pelvis, the bulge looking like it was ready to rip through his pants. Raking my nails down his chest, he growled into my mouth when they reached the hard length of his cock.

"Belt. Now," he ordered, his voice thick with lust.

After practically shoving my tongue down his throat, my hands reached for his belt, releasing the buckle and immediately attacking his zipper, yanking it down in quick succession.

Pulling back, Darren grabbed the already low neckline of my dress and ripped the fabric wide open, my bare breasts spilling out into his waiting hands.

I gave vibrant life to the moans I normally revolted at revealing, letting them compete with the booming music just outside the curtain.

Darren's groan vibrated through my skin as he took one of my nipples between his teeth, his tongue slathering against the sting that sent my blood rushing straight to my clit.

"Oh, fuck," I moaned, arching my back and pressing more of myself into him.

I ran my hands through his hair, gripping and tugging, completely ruining the style he'd combed it into earlier. Tightening my fist, I yanked him back by his hair, a hiss fresh on his lips that I cut off with my own, attacking his mouth like it was mine to devour.

He responded in kind, his hand reaching for the hair just above my nape and wrenching it down, tipping my chin up and exposing more of my throat. He kissed his way down my jawline, biting and sucking hard enough to leave behind the marks he would admire in the morning.

I shivered. He had just crushed a man's throat with his fist mere minutes ago, and now here he was worshipping mine with his mouth. The thought drove me wild.

Darren was so damn dangerous, so callously lethal, so fiercely intelligent, and he was mine, whether I wanted him or not. And it was time I exploited the shit out of it.

Taking his cock in my hand, I quickly sheathed his length with my pussy, taking what I wanted from him in this very moment. A growly moan left his throat, his fingers tightening in my hair as he kept me from moving any farther.

“You greedy little brat,” he rasped, his voice grated with lust.

“I’m fucking taking what’s *mine*,” I snapped, and shifted my hips, dragging myself along his thick shaft, my pussy singing with satisfaction.

“Fuck,” he groaned and released my hair. “Then take it, Jaden. Ride me for as long as you can.”

On cue, I pressed my hands to his chest and shoved him back against the couch. Gripping his shoulders, I did just that, slamming myself down and riding his dick to chase my own pleasure.

I moaned and gasped with each stroke I gave myself, my pussy clenching desperately around him.

God, he felt amazing inside me, or was it the power I wielded that gave me this euphoria? I didn’t have much time to think on it because the second he pinched my clit between his fingers, I came undone all over his cock. My orgasm rushed through me in waves of ecstasy I wanted to ride forever.

And Darren made sure of it, his hands clutching my hips to continue bouncing me on his cock.

My thighs were on fire, but I didn’t care as I chased the final remnants of my orgasm, grateful for Darren’s sudden assistance. But before I could regain a single breath, he swiftly rose from the couch and slammed my back onto the table.

Leaning over me, he clutched my throat in his hand and thrust in deep.

“My turn,” he sneered, then drew back to grab both my knees and wrap my legs around his waist.

With his hands clutching my thighs, he sank into me with such savagery, I screamed for mercy. But there would be none as Darren pounded into me, rocking the already compromised table within an inch of its life.

Fire blazed through my veins, burning up my oxygen and energy as I grasped the table. My body was incapable of anything else as Darren slayed me with his cock. My breasts bounced with each thrust, capturing all of his attention while his fingers dug into my thighs.

“Fuck, you are so perfect,” he rasped, picking up his pace. “And so fucking mine.”

Pressing in deep, Darren stilled as he came inside me, his hands pressing into the table as he leaned over my body. His eyes traveled up my frame until they connected with mine, and a dark look suddenly shadowed his features.

Sliding his arm under my back, he pulled me up and then sat us back down on the couch, my legs straddling him while my upper body lay flush with his.

Taking my face in his hands, he positioned me so that we were nearly nose to nose. Our chests heaved in sync, his cock still planted deep inside me. With the drugs now filtering away with the adrenaline, my mind became clearer, the aftereffects of what I’d just done slowly sinking in.

I realized for the first time that I couldn’t read Darren’s expression, the uncertainty of my actions causing the heat in my body to deplete. I tried not to shiver as I watched him, those deep blue eyes studying me in a way that felt like some kind of threat.

Brushing back the loose hair from my face, Darren’s gaze held me captive, a look that was both hard and soft, hot and cold, dark and bright. I couldn’t pinpoint one single emotion to respond to, leaving me staggering for a sign from above. But it was the below that finally answered.

“Tell me you love me,” he commanded, his deep voice smooth with warning.

I felt my heart jolt in my chest, my stomach twisting with anxiety at the prospect of speaking those hideous words. But this was the grave he’d dug for us, and I had no choice but to bury myself with him for as long as it took.

“I love you.”

His lips curled into a victorious grin, like a king who just claimed the throne he’d fought for and won. And though I knew I would end up speaking those words for as long as he demanded them, one real truth sliced at my heart.

No matter how many times I said those words to him, even if I ever tragically meant them, I knew there would never be a time when I would ever hear him say them back.

HELPLESS

My heart fluttered in my chest like a butterfly on crack. I hadn't been this nervous since my own damn wedding.

I felt absolutely ridiculous standing in this obnoxious gown next to Darren in the elevator while he exuded his usual calm and collected demeanor in a custom-fitted black-on-black tux.

And here I was stressing about potentially tripping in these ridiculous heels on the shimmering floor-length emerald-green chiffon that wrapped high around my throat, conveniently concealing the fading bruises.

The sheer glittery sleeves stretched down to my wrists, intricate dark green lace beading cleverly placed to hide my brands of ownership. The sweetheart cutout teased a tasteful amount of cleavage while the bustier cinched too tightly at my waist.

Or maybe it was just my own panic that was making it difficult to breathe.

"Jaden."

"Huh?" I nearly snapped, my stupid dangle emerald earrings swinging against my jawline.

"You need to relax. It's a charity gala. Not a firing squad."

I exhaled harshly. "Give it time," I murmured back.

No one said it couldn't morph into one.

Darren paused for a moment, cocking his head to the side and turned to me.

“I’m sorry, but didn’t you just not so long ago take on an entire security team of at least ten men and blow up their entire storage facility?”

My blood rushed at the memory. God, that felt like forever ago now.

“Yeah, I did that,” I replied with a reassuring nod.

He gave me a knowing smile. “Then I think you can handle this.”

“I just feel ridiculous.”

Darren gazed down at me from the corner of his eye, the snideness of his grin twisting into something warm and almost pleasant.

“But you look so damn beautiful.”

And then the elevator doors opened and the chaos commenced.

Swarms of people were everywhere. Colorful gowns flowed in all directions, men in expensive suits and tuxes, noise and chatter mixed with glasses clinking.

I had so much to pay attention to that my situational awareness went into overdrive to assess for threats and potential exits. But then a large, warm hand grasped my own, and suddenly, I remembered to breathe.

The first exhale was all the relief Darren waited for before tugging me along to the bar and ordering me a glass of champagne and a bourbon for himself.

A shot of tequila would have been more appreciated, but I accepted the glass with a long, discreet sip. My eyes glazed over the crowd, finding Scott, Clive, and Owen drifting along the outskirts, popping in and out of my peripherals but never far.

“Better?” Darren asked as he leaned casually against the bar and brought his glass to his lips.

“Yes, thank you,” I answered after my third sip, but my voice was not convincing.

Darren chuckled. “What could you possibly be afraid of here?”

My eyes bounced up to his.

You... Always you.

I shrugged my shoulders. “I don’t know, and I think that’s the problem. I feel unprepared.”

“Unprepared to do what? Behave and look pretty? So far, you’ve done a phenomenal job of at least one of them,” he said, and his eyes darkened. “I don’t expect you to require additional motivation to achieve the other.”

I scowled at his unnecessary threat, then immediately trained myself to soften my expression, not wanting to attract attention. I didn’t want to think of the things he would provide to motivate my behavior, especially knowing how much he would enjoy it.

I decided to swallow my anxiety down with the rest of my champagne, hoping it would make things marginally better.

But it wasn’t better. If only champagne could act as a decent painkiller with the meds I took earlier for the inflammation in my hip. All that dancing and fucking the night before had really done a number on me, and Darren’s preference in footwear tonight wasn’t exactly helping. I groaned internally at my weakness. I needed to get my shit together already.

Allowing my eyes to travel, I followed the sound of smooth yet rhythmic classical music being played by some incredibly skilled musicians, setting the scene for a soft evening. Couples twirled along the dance floor, moving in rhythm with the music.

What was this charity even for?

Darren cut my assessment short when he took my empty glass and placed it next to his on the bar. Taking my hand, he brought it up to his mouth and gently kissed my knuckles, his sensual dark blues locking with mine.

“Dance with me,” he said, a devious grin curving his lips. Naturally, it wasn’t a request

Ugh.

“Did we not just learn a valuable lesson last night about my dancing?” I chided as I pointlessly tried to pull my hand back. He kept it trapped in his own but lowered it to a more comfortable height. “I don’t want to cause another distraction.”

Darren smirked as he glanced down at my left hand, fingering my wedding rings. The same ones I had to scrub with a spare toothbrush last night to get all the dried blood out from between the stones.

“As long as you’re dancing *with me*, I’ll allow it,” he clarified, swinging his heated gaze back up to mine.

Darren didn’t wait for a response as he took my hand, wrapped it around his arm, and led me to the dance floor. I felt my nerves grate as my heels clicked against the hard surface, and I suddenly realized why this was so jarring.

The dress I was wearing, with sleeves long enough to cover my wrist tattoos. The embellished fabric around my throat to conceal the bruises from Darren’s hand when he almost strangled me to death just days ago. My hair and makeup professionally done. All of it added for one single purpose—to enhance the performance.

While this was a private event, I got the impression that it catered to a much more “lawful” crowd. People who were legitimate and didn’t secretly run criminal trafficking empires behind closed doors. Yet here we were, about to waltz right in like we belonged here. Like Darren was one of them.

It reminded me that even *he* was not immune to the required performances of society if he wanted to maintain an upstanding appearance outside of the criminal underworld he ruled.

The wolf in sheep’s clothing.

As we approached the dance floor, I recognized the song they started playing, the pretty strings of “Aurora” by Lindsey Stirling playing in the background. I had a playlist of just her music that I loved to swing my bō

to, the flow of everything so damn relaxing I could go on for hours without even noticing.

Quietly releasing a deep breath, I allowed Darren to pull my body into his and immersed myself into the performance alongside a dozen other dancing couples.

Smooth as water, he twirled me around the dance floor like he was made for it. He moved with a practiced ease, allowing me to follow his lead without effort or strain.

Even in the three-inch heels that barely allowed me to see over his shoulder, I glided over the floor without missing a beat. My body was automatically in tune with his, easily matching his pace and rhythm despite the dull ache in my hip.

For one small moment, I actually forgot about the performance and willingly spiraled away into whatever direction Darren chose to spin me.

When the song ended, the room stopped, an applause replacing the music as Darren twirled me for the last time, then pulled me into his chest. The clapping continued long after we stopped, and as I looked over, I noticed too many faces focused intently on us instead of the musicians.

“Why are they staring at us?” I asked quietly, nervous of the sudden attention.

“They’re staring at *you*,” Darren answered, almost smugly.

I frowned, glancing up at him. “What? Why?”

A warm grin curled up his lips. “When you look and move the way you do, how could they not?” He said it like he understood the compulsion, like he could sympathize with someone for once.

But they couldn’t *just* be staring at me. My gaze quickly hunted for my convictions, hoping he had to be wrong. And he was, catching the hungry looks of some of the other women in the crowd as they sized Darren up. And not so subtly either.

If they only knew.

Darren leaned down so that his mouth was touching my ear. “They’re all fantasizing about you right now, and I have half a mind to lay you out on this floor so they can watch me fuck you until you’re screaming my name and coming all over my cock.” His words made me suck in a breath, anxiously holding it to avoid reacting. “By the time I’m done, there would be no doubts left in their minds that you’re fucking *mine*.”

Without pause, he wrapped his hand around the back of my neck and kissed me like he was starving. His threatening words sent a shiver down my spine that made me hunch from the chill, my stomach clenching with apprehension.

It wouldn’t be the first time he fucked me in public, but it would be the first time with an actual audience.

When he finally pulled back, I could feel my lips swelling from the harsh flavor of his obsession, the taste of possession still lingering on my tongue.

His lips on mine had broadcasted a very clear message for all who could see, that we were both very much claimed by the other. And clearly it was enough to make everyone around us blush uncomfortably.

Thankfully, the musicians picked up their next song, causing the other couples surrounding us to start moving again, though some of them didn’t know how to focus on their own dancing partner.

I cursed under my breath. “I thought I told you I didn’t want to cause a distraction,” I grumbled quietly, then stepped back to flee. I had actually meant that part.

But naturally, Darren wouldn’t let me, refusing to allow me even an inch in the other direction as he tightened his grip on my body.

“You can distract *them* all you want, princess,” he said with a snicker. “As long as they understand I’ll kill them if they’re caught staring for too long.”

God, I wanted to roll my eyes.

“Then I suppose we should stop tempting them, don’t you think?” I whispered impatiently. “Unless you want to prove me right about the firing squad.”

A grin curved up his face as he chuckled softly. “Come on,” he teased, releasing his grip and ushered me off the dance floor.

Placing his arm around my waist, Darren led me back to the bar to get another drink and then headed to our table. But as he steered me through the crowd, I was surprised at the number of times we had to stop so he could chat with the people ignorant enough to approach him.

Or maybe they were secretly just like him, hiding in sheep’s clothing too so as not to disturb the innocent flock around them.

A few of the faces were recognizable, but the conversations were completely irrelevant, mostly small talk, legal business, and compliments of my hair color from other women. Sometimes the conversations weren’t even in English.

But I played my part as the perfect wife, speaking only when spoken to and very little, smiling when appropriate while Darren kept me nearly glued to his side. His arm was like solid steel around my waist, affording me zero chances to slip away.

I could tell he wasn’t interested in a single word spoken. His demeanor was more cordial than usual but still just as relaxed. He was effortless in his agenda, passing through conversation after conversation, each person totally bewitched by him, oblivious to the cold and callous killer he actually was.

It was almost sickening to watch, a true Oscar-worthy performance.

I was thankful when the charade finally ended, and we sat down at our table closest to the stage.

It wasn’t two minutes later when a mic was tapped. “Ladies and gentlemen, would you please take your seats? We are about to begin.”

Sounds of shuffling ensued as people moved to their tables, voices dying down as a woman stepped up to the podium at the center of the stage.

“Good evening, everyone!” she said enthusiastically, a wide bright smile plastered across her face. “Welcome to the sixth annual charity event for Hope After Human Trafficking.”

My blood froze in my veins, stiffening my entire body as my brain registered what had just been said. My tongue was suddenly dry and thick, my stomach caving in on itself while my heart battled for release from my chest. Panic was imminent.

I didn’t know how well I contained the horror in my eyes, but when I looked over at Darren, all I could feel was a familiar bucket of ice drenching my body. The sly knowing look on his face was a warning and a challenge to keep my shit together or there would be consequences.

But the little hamster running from wheel to wheel inside my brain wasn’t concerned with the consequences. It was too busy being confused over what the fuck was going on. How it was possible we were even here.

How the fuck did one of the biggest benefactors of human trafficking attend a charity event meant to help survivors from his very own influence? I was beside myself. Angered that I had once again been tricked into enduring another trigger for my PTSD over an event that was nothing but a cruel joke to him.

I was confused as to why he would even put himself in such a vulnerable position and make himself so well-known here. And then became disappointed in the fact that he still felt the need to torture me like this with at least a hundred other people around to unknowingly witness it.

I couldn’t even focus on the presenter’s speech until I suddenly felt the lights single in on our table.

“And a special thank you to our top benefactor, Mr. Darren Davis, for once again hosting this event at his magnificent grand hotel. You are truly one of a kind.”

Oh my God, I'm gonna throw up.

Darren smiled and raised his glass, nodding at the crowd as they applauded him. Fucking applauded. I didn't know how I managed not to stab him with all the spoons and butter knives on the table in front of everyone, but it was a strength meant for Zeus.

There would be words later. More than words. Fists, and blood, and probably a lamp or two. Squaring my shoulders, I released a slow deep breath, promising myself I would hurl the very first thing I could touch at his head as soon as we got back to our hotel room.

Noticing my reprieve, Darren leaned into my ear.

"That was a brilliant performance, my little queen. *Very well done.*" God, the cockiness in his voice was enough to get me to smile back just the same.

"Just wait till later," I whispered back.

"Oh, I'm looking forward to it."

The rest of the event was spent biting the inside of my cheek until the only thing I could taste was champagne and blood. Every word spoken by each speaker held me captive in my seat—the stories of survivors, the success of the charity, the impact it had made funding rescue operations against human traffickers across the country.

Lawyers, doctors, judges, police officers, social workers, and even federal agents all offered their insight into the vast industry of human trafficking.

I learned a lot more that night than I ever thought I would about the subject. One of the saddest things was learning that most trafficking situations were run by the people who knew their victims. Parents exploiting their own children, boyfriends manipulating their girlfriends with false love that eventually turned to violence.

Young, impressionable runaways; girls with debilitating insecurities; the impoverished, hopeless drug addicts; and the woefully naive—all things

traffickers used against them to coax their victims into a false sense of trust until they were trapped.

Aside from the parents selling their kids, the lover boy method was probably one of the most heinous forms of entrapment. Pretending to be the loving, doting boyfriend in an effort to get your victim to fall for you, then manipulating them into sleeping with other men for money.

It was a dwindling practice since it seemed to be less effective, but the alternative was always blackmail or violence. Imagine the sorrow of betrayal when you realized the person you loved, who you thought loved you back, who you trusted, was just using your body the entire time. And now it was too late to get out.

As awful as Darren's industry practice was, I was glad to know it accounted for not even a full .001 percent of human trafficking. The kinds of auctions he held were either damn near incomparable, or they flew so far under the radar that they were practically fiction.

No wonder his auctions were so profitable. His competition barely existed, at least in the United States. Or maybe it was because he made sure to snuff out anyone who thought to compete against him. I wouldn't put it past him.

Even with all the horrific stories of the survivors, their fight for freedom was inspiring, and it almost brought me hope—until the moment reality kissed me on the cheek and reminded me that even with all their work, Darren was still here, thriving in spite of it all. And I fucking hated him for it.

Dinner was difficult to sit through, the food turning sour in my stomach as I fought through each bite. Our table companions eyed my half-eaten plates, practically praising me for my "small stomach" and birdlike eating habit. Pacifying them was easy, but I knew Darren could see right through me.

The longer the night went on, the crueler it felt. So many survivors talked of freedom, the moment they were able to live their lives as humans instead of slaves. It was like dangling a carrot in front of me that I could never reach. They had escaped and survived, and I was still just presently surviving.

My fists bunched under the table, but I swore to myself my time would come. It would come just as theirs had. But when my time did finally come, it would bring the reckoning Darren's world unquestionably deserved.

The last speaker of the night was a young woman, most likely in her late twenties. She was a frail-looking thing—very pale with dark brown hair. Yet her voice was strong, steady, and assured. But as she spoke, the contents of her story became familiar, and it shook me to my core.

The memory of waking up in a dog kennel with no clothes and no idea how she got there. Being unknowingly auctioned off and then finding herself in the back seat of a van, bound for who the hell knew until she suddenly woke up in Mexico.

She had spent the next three years of her life down there until her captors mistakenly believed she had died from a drug overdose. She'd been left for dead in a fucking dumpster.

I couldn't stop my body from shaking, the tremors so strong I looked like I was shivering. Darren seized the opportunity to wrap his hands around my bare shoulders, the warmth of his skin soothing the tremors, but it did nothing for the knots in my stomach.

And just when I thought I couldn't handle another second, her eyes suddenly caught mine and then shifted two inches over. Her face quickly went white, her words stopping mid-sentence as she stared at the man beside me.

My heart froze.

She fucking recognized him.

It hit me like a ton of bricks, watching her recognize her trafficker in the middle of a speech, in front of dozens of people, during a human trafficking charity gala.

Her silence went on for several awkward seconds until words finally stumbled out of her mouth in an attempt to regain her composure. But there would be no recovery. She finished quickly, apologized, then rushed off the stage, disappearing behind the curtain.

My eyes immediately caught the predatory determination that hardened Darren's face. A single nod to Scott off in the distance was enough to put the man into action, igniting a whole new set of fears in my core.

"No," I whispered pleadingly, placing my hand on his arm, hoping to gain his attention. But a single warning glare from him was all it took for me to reluctantly remove my offending hand, but still I tried. "Please."

Taking my arm in his hand, Darren gripped it tightly, causing me to wince as he leaned into my ear. "*Behave*," he warned, kissing me quickly on the cheek, but his voice was so deadly serious, it made me sick with terror.

What was he going to do?

"Ladies and gentlemen, that concludes our evening. We once again want to thank you..."

My mind couldn't focus anymore, too busy doing backflips on how to prevent Darren from going after this poor woman, but I never even got the chance to try. He was gone before I knew it, completely disappearing like the shadow he was. I stood from my seat, my eyes hunting every square inch of the room for him like I might have some hope of stopping him.

And then Clive and Owen came for me.

"Time to go," Owen said soberly.

Swallowing back the dread coating my mouth, I stepped away from the table with shaky knees and allowed them to escort me back to the private elevator. The second the doors closed on us, I lost my breath.

“He’s going to kill that girl.”

They said nothing. The panic rose.

“I can’t,” I inhaled. “I can’t let him do this.” I started to fucking shake.

Both of them turned their heads to eye me over their shoulders.

“Don’t make me sedate you,” Clive threatened.

Desperation burst into fury.

“Goddammit, fuck both of you! I can’t—”

“What are you gonna do, huh?” Owen started, turning around to crowd me in the small space. “Follow him? Barge in and physically stop him? You know damn well the outcome of that.”

“I don’t care. I could warn her—”

“You’re too late. She’s already been tagged. Now, let it go.”

The elevator doors opened to our floor and instead of waiting for me to follow, they both took hold of my elbows and pulled me into the suite, releasing me only when I was back inside the bedroom.

“Stay in here and behave,” Clive warned. “Test me *once* and you’re out for the night.” And then he shut the door, locking me in.

“You fucking bitches!” I shouted back, kicking my heels off into the door. “I want my fucking dog!”

Camaro was still with the staff who tended to her when she couldn’t be with me. Now would be a good fucking time to bring me my emotional support boss into the room.

Moving to the dresser, I yanked at the back of my dress, searching for the fucking zipper so I could finally get out of the wretched thing. Desperate, I tore at the fabric, taking my frustrations out on the ridiculous gown until it was a mess of ribbons on the floor.

But it satisfied nothing.

Pulling at the drawers, I searched until I found one of my workout skorts and a tank top, and dressed myself in a mad rage. And then I paced

along the room for what felt like hours until my shoulders hurt from the tension.

Maybe it was better if I was sedated.

At least then I wouldn't have to feel like this. Helpless. Weak. Useless. Again.

I felt sick knowing I was tied to a man who was having an innocent woman killed somewhere in this very moment.

Marching my ass to the window, I ripped the curtains open, ready to yank the door wall open to step out for fresh air. Until I heard Clive yell from the living room.

“Jaden! I swear to God, if you open that door!”

I leaned my forehead against the glass in defeat and exhaled my grief.

Motherfucker. I could just kill them both, right?

And then I realized Camaro still hadn't been brought back.

“Where the fuck is my dog!” I shouted in return, really wondering where the hell she was.

My thoughts of turmoil and murder were then immediately interrupted when the power went out. All the lights in the room went dark, as did the light from outside the door. Glancing back toward the window, I could see the rest of the hotel was still lit, so it was only our area. That was a bad sign.

Moving quietly toward the bedroom door, I listened for any sound but couldn't hear anything distinct. The silence lasted far too long, making me grab the butterfly knife I'd hidden in my luggage.

Crouching again by the door, I could hear a commotion coming closer, the sounds of fighting and scuffling getting louder. And then, whatever the fight was suddenly clashed against the door until it finally gave way, and Owen crashed into a man beneath him, his fist raised in the air.

“Jaden, run!” he shouted as he began to strike the guy in the face several times. He looked like he had it covered, so I made a dash for the living

room only to get tackled to the floor. Pain spasmed through my hip and down into my leg, but the surge of adrenaline gave my body the distraction it needed to focus on my attacker.

Using the momentum, I curled in and rolled as best I could, keeping my feet tucked in, and then immediately kicking them out when I had the chance. My bare feet found hips and then pushed as hard as I could, throwing the person off me, giving me enough time to get to my feet.

I took advantage of his disorientation and shoved my butterfly knife right through his Adam's apple, splattering blood across my face.

All around me, fighting ensued. From the corner of my eye, Clive looked like he was losing his fight with one guy while Owen was still combating with another.

Where the hell were the rest of the guards?

A fist came into my peripherals, just missing my jaw as I ducked out of the way, countering with a swipe of my knife, slicing through air. Pushing my loose hair from my face, I caught the sight of a polished white grin looking back at me. It definitely needed some blood coating those teeth.

“The fuck are you smiling at,” I said, lifting my leg to kick him in the face.

He dodged the kick, but not the strike to his throat. Coughing and sputtering, he stumbled back clutching his neck until he collapsed to the ground.

But before I had the chance for a single breath, another gunman tried to pistol-whip me across the face. I fell back, twisting out of the way while kicking my leg out just in time to catch his jaw with my heel.

A sudden prick to my skin caught my attention, my adrenaline spiking even more upon seeing a small dart sticking out of my arm. My body went limp.

“Son of a...”

Fuck.

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CORRECTION



I walked casually down the empty hallway that my men had secured, three posted at each end and three more at the door I was heading for. Scott appeared at my side, striding in with a demeanor that emphasized the seriousness of the situation. And how it would be resolved.

This sort of problem had happened on occasion, but had it become increasingly rare since I'd led the operation. But when it did come up, correction was swift and satisfying.

A single nod to my men and the door to the hotel room opened, allowing me to walk through and find a very frantic woman inside. Her motions were so loud and chaotic she didn't even hear us enter.

"You know, a smart woman would have just abandoned her things instead of coming back for them." She stopped shoving her clothing into her suitcase, turning to face me in pure shock. "She would understand that her life was more valuable than her material possessions."

She stood in stunned silence as Scott and my men piled in behind me, filling the room and closing the door with a final thud. Her utter terror was palpable, thick and sultry as it permeated the room, feeding my inner demons.

“Hello, Natasha,” I sneered.

She stared back at me with wide doe eyes, completely frozen in place, as if moving would cause me to attack.

“You remember me,” she stated softly, her voice tight with disbelief.

“I remember *all* of you,” I corrected. It was difficult to forget some of my fondest memories, the sweet satisfaction of breaking down the willful and disobedient, witnessing their transformation before my very eyes.

Before Jaden, they were my greatest and most pleasurable symphonies.

“How did you get in here?” Natasha managed to choke out.

I cocked a brow at her. “I own this hotel,” I answered, stepping farther into the room. “Another fatal mistake on your part.”

“I’ll scream,” she threatened, retreating as best she could.

I nearly snorted as I observed the state of the room. It was a fucking mess. “That was quite the story you told out there. Has it really been five years?” I mused, reflecting on old times. How fortunate for all of them that I’d suddenly lost interest when a certain redhead entered my life. “It’s truly impressive, really, and very brave of you to come forward with your experience.” I turned my gaze back to her, pinning her in place. “But also very stupid. You were better off being dead, Natasha.”

Finding her spine, she stood a little straighter. “I did what was right. People like you need to be stopped.”

I chuckled this time, rolling my eyes. “Yeah, my wife feels the same way. You can imagine how well that’s worked out for her. Or how well that’s worked out for literally *anyone*,” I empathized.

Natasha’s brows furrowed in confusion, her silence weighing down the obvious. “If she’s married to you, then I feel sorry for her,” she said bitterly.

“You shouldn’t,” I replied. “She’s much better off now since she was in the same auction as you once. I’d say she got pretty lucky compared to your buyers.”

Natasha's face lit up in horror, her eyes becoming as big as saucers. "Lucky? Did you also rape her as often as you raped me?" she practically snarled, baring her teeth.

"Oh, definitely more," I answered. "Just like you, she also had a problem with obedience. But she was far more amusing than any of you ever were, which was why I decided to keep her for myself."

Her features tightened with disgust as she glared at me, hatred brimming in her eyes. "That poor girl," she hissed.

I waved her off with a smirk. "I'm honestly not sure what's worse. Being stuck with me or getting gang-raped every night under the rule of a Mexican cartel. I imagine the drugs at least helped to pass the time and numb the pain."

Natasha's lips twisted into a scowl. "I'd choose the cartel any day."

I laughed softly at her attempt to remain strong. "If only you'd been a little bit smarter and not earned yourself an ass beating the day before the auction. You might have ended up with someone who actually gives a shit about you. But you chose to devalue yourself at the worst possible time instead."

Slight trembles shook Natasha's body, her glossy green eyes watering in the corners. Her fists clenched at her side, her knuckles turning white, and just like that, I watched her turn right back into that frightened little girl who never stood a chance in my world.

"You really are a fucking monster," she whispered.

My lips curled at the obvious. "I'm aware. Now, what was the drug of choice Gael got you fixed on again? It was heroin, wasn't it?"

Natasha gulped back a panicked breath as my men began to crowd her, one of them pulling out a small plastic bag from their breast pocket and tossing it to Scott.

"What are you doing?! Let go of me!" she nearly screamed before she was restrained and pressed into the bed, her protests muffled by the pillows.

“You know, addiction is very difficult to overcome, especially during incredibly stressful times,” I said, my hands dipping into my pockets as I inspected the room. “I can’t imagine that describing the worst horrors of your life in front of a very large crowd wouldn’t retraumatize you into a very unstable mental state.”

“No!” A sob filtered through the pillows as Natasha’s body began to shake, her limbs fighting for the freedom she wouldn’t find.

Pulling out a large metal spoon and lighter, Scott held up the spoon while Brian carefully poured a large amount of the powdered heroin onto it. Removing the syringe from his pocket, Brian gently emptied the water mixed with citric acid into the spoon while Scott held the lighter underneath.

“Please, don’t do this! Not like this! Please!” Natasha cried from the bed, tilting her face away from the pillows. She struggled to lift herself, fighting as best she could to get away, but Alex and Jackson held her firmly in place.

“You should be ecstatic to go out like this, Natasha,” I countered. “All that euphoria you get to experience right before the light goes out? What better way to end your own life after all you’ve suffered, right?”

Heavy tears fell from her eyes as she continued to choke out inaudible pleas.

“I’m sure the world will understand.”

Once the heroin liquefied, Brian took the syringe and filled the barrel, tapping it lightly to remove those pesky little air bubbles.

“You piece of shit! You know you don’t have to do this!” she cried, panic flushing her pale skin.

“Oh, but I actually do,” I replied affirmatively. “With all your wear and tear, I doubt you’d sell twice.”

More tears. More pleas.

"I'll disappear! I promise! I won't help anymore! I didn't even know your name until tonight!"

I shook my head at her desperate attempt. "Sorry, but I don't like loose ends," I answered. "They have a tendency to unravel the fabric."

"No! No! Don't!" Natasha screamed as they flipped her on her back and tied the rubber tourniquet around her small bicep. The track marks covering both of her arms were extensive, and I hoped none of her veins had collapsed.

Pressing the needle into her skin, Brian injected the fatal dose of heroin into Natasha's bloodstream, the effects of which were nearly immediate. Her struggling ceased as her body grew limp, her eyes glazing over while her head fell back into the pillows.

It only took about five minutes before her breathing started to slow, the rising of her chest lessening with each breath. After rubbing the spoon clean of his prints, Scott placed it between Natasha's fingers. After ensuring her fingerprints were in place, he set it down on the nightstand, along with the syringe, empty plastic bag, and cheap lighter.

Between that time, my men swept the room, checking for anything else that might indicate who else Natasha had collaborated with, if at all. Scott went through her phone while Jackson checked her laptop, cleaning anything that might need scrubbing.

Her things were removed from her suitcase to be placed back around the room, appearing as if she had no intention of leaving so quickly.

But a notification from Scott's phone stopped him in his place, his eyes sharpening as he studied the screen.

"What now?" I asked as I stood from my seat at the small kitchen table.

He smirked. "Matt's been sighted again."

Fucking finally.

Dean and his team had somehow lost Matt last night, having no idea how he managed to disappear on him. Matt was very familiar with Chicago,

so it didn't surprise me that he managed to somehow slip away. Regardless, Dean's failure would not go unpunished, especially now that there was zero knowledge that Matt was even still in the city.

The timing was becoming aggravating though. The fucker wanted me out here, and here I was, ready and willing to grant his death wish, and he was nowhere to be seen. He had no problem showing up uninvited to a business deal at another club, but hid when I actually tried to draw him out at another.

Come on, Matt. I'm right here.

"Where?" I asked, moving closer to see the image on Scott's phone. It wasn't a very clear one, the darkness shadowing much of his features, but the hair and body shape looked right. He stood with three other men next to a building, the surrounding area looking like an old shipping yard. "Where the hell is that?"

"Apparently, it's off the Calumet River. On the other side of the city," he answered with a groan, the distance not exactly convenient.

"Who sent you this?"

"Your boy. Dean's waiting for your orders."

About time.

"Get a team out there now. Dean is not to let Matt leave while they've secured the area," I ordered, ready to finally finish this. "Let's go get him."

With Natasha's pulse practically nonexistent, we left the room as if we'd never been there and quickly headed to the underground garage.

Scott phoned in the order for the nearest team to secure the area while two armored Escalades pulled up just outside the elevator doors. The driver of the second one got out, Scott replacing him as I slipped into the front passenger seat. The rest of my men took the first SUV, leading the way as we barreled out of the garage and down to the docks.

It took us nearly thirty minutes to get there, my team having only beaten us by fifteen minutes, but the area already looked more than contained. It

looked like a fucking ghost town, not a single sign of conflict anywhere. It couldn't have been that easy.

Exiting the car, we were met by the squadron leader and his second, their rifles and uniforms looking barely scuffed or used.

"Sir," Russel said as he greeted me with a nod. "We've swept and secured the area, but the place is empty."

I immediately scowled. "What? I told Dean not to let them leave. Where the fuck is he?"

I may just beat the man to death for failing me twice in twelve hours.

Russel exhaled as he glanced down at the ground. "You're going to want to see this, sir," he replied gravely.

I almost rolled my eyes.

Fucking great.

I shook my head with agitation as we followed him around the corner to another building closer to the canal, a rusty black door barely clinging to its hinges. Three of Russel's men stood guard outside the door, nodding to me as we passed through and into more darkness.

The smell of mold, dust, and rot saturated the air, my eyes catching the five other men standing around the room before they landed on the five others lying still on the floor. Stepping closer, recognition filled my chest with enraged disappointment.

Dean and the four other members of his team were lined up next to each other on the floor, their bodies so riddled with bullets that it was a miracle their faces were still intact.

"What the fuck," Scott muttered under his breath, but when I glanced at him, he wasn't looking at the bodies.

When I followed his line of vision, fury seethed through my muscles as I caught sight of a familiar message written on the wall.

Still one step ahead of you.

Motherfucker.

Stepping forward, I crouched down to Dean's body and pressed my hand to what was left of his shoulder. My blood became nearly as frozen as his. He'd been dead for hours, which meant that text couldn't have come from Dean.

This was a setup.

"Call Clive. Now," I ordered, standing from my crouch and waving for my men to circle back with me. "Burn this place to the fucking ground," I told Russel as I pulled out my own phone and dialed Owen.

The unbridled violence coursing through me grew colder with each unanswered ring, Scott having just as much success with contacting Clive. None of us could reach anyone.

Fuck!

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PLOT



A smack to the face woke me from my blissful unconsciousness.
“Ow,” I muttered under my breath as my cheek smarted.

The stinging pain made me wince and groan until my eyes could finally focus again. My hip ached something fierce while my leg buzzed with annoying sharp tingles.

Testing my limbs, I found my wrists tied to the arms of a chair and sighed in irritation. This was going to suck.

At least they left your legs free.

Yeah, their mistake.

Lifting my stiff neck, I struggled as my eyes adjusted to the darkness, my only visibility granted by the city lights outside. My vision bounced in several directions until they finally settled on Clive and Owen, both also bound to chairs in front of me, duct tape over their mouths, and looking like complete shit.

Fuck.

If they were down, then I was completely on my own until Darren came back from being an absolute fucking monster elsewhere. Hopefully, he was already on his way because I had no idea how long I could keep whoever

these people were occupied without actually killing me first. But I had to try.

“What the hell is going on?” I asked aloud, finding several more men standing guard scattered throughout the shadowed room. Then the man whose jaw met my foot earlier walked into the room.

“She wakes,” he declared, his hands coming together in a single clap.

I sighed quietly to myself, attempting to keep my anger at bay. “Who the fuck are you?”

He shrugged and took a step closer. “Oh, I’m just the hired hand, but you can call me Smith.”

“The fuck do you want, *Smith*?”

His dark hair fell over his brow, reaching well past his shoulders in long, greasy strands. A single gold tooth caught the moonlight when he opened his mouth and smiled.

“I’d watch it with that attitude, baby girl. Maybe you’re not used to dangerous cities, but around here, that kind of disrespect can get you killed real fast.”

I frowned at him, tilting my head. “Bitch, I’m from Detroit. Don’t lecture me about dangerous cities. Now what the fuck do you want?”

He chuckled as he took a few steps closer, his hand dipping into his pocket and pulling out a decent-sized switchblade.

“I heard you were a feisty one. I like that.”

I growled in frustration. “I’m not going to ask again.”

He flipped the pocketknife in his hand. “You’re in no position to be making demands, sweetness, but for the sake of time, I’m only here to collect some information from you. That’s all.”

I almost snorted. “Well, you’re barking up the wrong tree. I’m deliberately left out of the team meetings for a reason.”

“Oh, I think you might be surprised at how much info you actually hold in that pretty little head of yours,” he argued. “In fact, I’m willing to bet it’s

only going to cost your bodyguards all of their fingers to find out.”

I chuckled when I saw Clive and Owen both roll their eyes.

“Well, that *is* one of their job duties, so by all means, waste your time long enough for Darren to return.”

He tsk’d, shaking his head. “You would have me torture and kill them just to protect your murderer of a husband?” he accused, pointing at Clive and Owen.

I leveled him with a glare. “Dying for me is literally their fucking job. What, you think Darren would spare them if I got killed on their watch?” I laughed and shook my head. “He’d make their death twenty times worse than anything you could possibly do to them. So you’d actually be doing them a favor.”

Now, he looked frustrated.

“So like I said before, I don’t know shit about shit.”

Smith took a few steps toward me. “Alright then, let’s test your theory.”

He marched over to me, raising the blade over his head.

I braced for the impact, but instead of pain, I heard two muffled gunshots echo from a silencer behind me, piercing into Smith’s gut and chest.

“What the fuck?” he grumbled, the look of shock and confusion painting his face before he fell to the floor with a loud thump. None of the remaining men in the room even flinched at the shooting, no one moving to help him or return fire.

What the hell was going on?

“Sorry about that little display. My phone call took longer than I expected,” said a familiar voice from behind me.

I knew that fucking voice.

The last person I expected to see walked from around my chair and leaned over me, a smug smile across his face. He gave me a little finger wave with his black leather gloved hand.

“Matt?”

His grin widened as he tucked his gun back into his holster. “Hello, Jaden,” he taunted. “Comfortable?”

“What the fuck is this? Why did you just kill him?”

He stepped away from the chair, placing his hands in his pockets, and turned to snicker at me.

“Like he said, he was just the hired hand.”

I scowled at him. “Where’s Darren? How did you even get in here?”

Matt sighed like he was annoyed, the shadows of the room hiding his eyes as he leaned against one of the broken couches.

“He’s about to be busy for the next hour or two. So we have plenty of time to chat.”

I furrowed my brows, my muscles tensing from his words. “Why? Just so you can send Darren a stupid message?”

He scoffed and rolled his eyes. “Actually, I’m here to *forward* you a message.”

My brows furrowed deeper.

“You see, I was recently visited by a ghost,” he added. “A very young, pretty, *blonde* ghost.”

My stomach instantly dropped, my eyes widening with shock.

Oh no. He found her first. Fuck!

“What the fuck did you do?” I snarled.

Matt marched toward me in three steps and backhanded me across the face.

“What did I do?! Do you have any idea what *you’ve* done?!?” he roared down at me.

I spit out the blood that burst into my mouth. “You mean saved her from a life of sexual servitude? Yeah, shame on *me*.”

He scoffed dramatically. “Oh please, spare me your hero complex. I don’t have time for that shit.”

“What have you done with her? Where is she?”

Matt scoffed. “I haven’t done anything with her because I don’t *have* her,” he snarled. “Yet.”

I glared at him, my wrists straining in my binds, but I took solace in the relief I felt knowing Kayla was still free of him. “What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

Matt placed his hands over his hips, sucking in a breath like he was having a hard time finding the words.

“Kayla has apparently teamed up with your old boyfriend to take Darren and his organization down.”

My brain froze, and my heart stopped. No way I just heard that.

“What did you just say?”

He dipped his chin, his gaze all business. “You heard me loud and fucking clear.”

I blinked, looking away to stare off into space as my reality shifted on its axis.

Was this real? Had this really happened?

No, it could be a trick. Don’t fall for it.

“Prove it,” I demanded.

Matt folded his arms across his chest, exhaling heavily. “Jason said you would know what Wily Wilder meant. Something about stealing a class pet from school or something?”

My breath caught in my chest, neurons firing in my brain like a pinball machine, bouncing against the walls, struggling to make a connection. Wily Wilder was a nickname I’d gotten in the second grade when my teacher caught me trying to sneak the class pet out of the classroom by hiding it in my backpack. But the little danger noodle slithered through a hole in the fabric and plopped out right onto my teacher’s desk as I headed for the door. The nickname stuck when I got caught for the third and final time.

“He also said that walking away from you in that bathroom in Rome was the hardest thing he’s ever had to do.”

My stomach dropped, the memory causing my eyes to water from an emotion I couldn’t afford to lose myself in right now. But I just couldn’t help it—hope and relief fluttering in my heart like a storm of freed butterflies.

She did it. Kayla found Jason. She actually made it out! She was safe!

“Holy shit,” I whispered to myself, my heart rate jumping through the roof. And then I grinned up at Matt like a goddamn fool. “That’s fucking awesome!”

My hype was only slightly compromised when Matt’s fist connected with my other cheek, the blow rocking my chair.

“Silence!” he bellowed. But even as the fierce pain radiated throughout my skull, I couldn’t stop the joyous laughter rolling up my throat.

“Did you just say silence? What are you, a Disney villain?” I chuckled through the sting.

“You took away the one thing that I actually gave a shit about in this world, so it probably wouldn’t be wise to celebrate in front of me, especially since those two are the only reasons you’re currently still breathing,” Matt warned, his voice rough like gravel.

And still, as my cheek began to swell, I laughed. “Yeah, forcing Kayla to sit on the floor and eat from your hand like a fucking animal just *screams* tender, loving care. Eat a dick, Matt. You never cared about her,” I retorted, unfazed. “You just wanted to own her.”

He looked at me like he wanted nothing more than to slaughter me, but I couldn’t stop smiling, practically dancing in my chair over the fact that Kayla had done it. Something we had planned had actually succeeded for once, and it made everything that Darren had done to me over it worth every torturous second.

Though, despite my hopes, Jason and Kayla teaming up with Matt was not something I had on my Operation Take Down bingo card. His involvement in all of this would surely make everything much more complicated. Could this asshole even be trusted? Was Kayla even safe with him around?

Matt shook his head as he watched the imaginary wheels in my head turn in every direction, a scowl curling in the corner of his mouth. “You know, I almost felt sorry when you got shot during your training exercise, but now I can see you very much deserved it,” he snipped, tightening his arms across his chest.

My humor and excitement screeched to a halt at the mention of my gunshot wound. “What.”

“At first, it was nothing personal, but that was before I found out you had an actual hand in Kayla’s escape and lied about it. You’re lucky Jason contacted me when he did. Otherwise, you might have already been dead by now, and he would be useless to me.”

My scowl morphed into something more sinister as I tilted my head at him. “Are you trying to tell me that “accidental” bullet I took was actually an assassination attempt orchestrated by you?”

Matt rolled his eyes. “Don’t be so dramatic, Jaden. The only thing I attempted to do was buy some moles and cause a little chaos, which I clearly did. But if that chaos ultimately led to your death, well, then that’s just the way the dice rolls.”

I felt my jaw crushing my teeth into dust from how hard I was clenching it. He was just so nonchalant about almost getting me killed. I hope Jason kicked the shit out of him for it, if he even knew.

“Does Darren know this?” I asked. He had never once mentioned any motive behind the shooting, let alone Matt’s involvement, and his temper was not worth the investigation.

Matt shrugged, a smug smile tugging on his lips. “Manipulating Darren’s newbies into thinking something was their idea was easier than I thought, so I have no idea what conclusions he came to. It’s just too bad those idiots lacked the brain cells to actually conceal their tracks. They could have really come in handy a few months ago.”

I felt my brows knitting together as I narrowed my gaze at him. Deep down, I knew getting shot couldn’t have been a freak accident, and it appeared that I was right. In the end, Matt didn’t realize the favor he had actually done me. What a twisted touch of fate.

“Well, Matt, if that’s the case, then I suppose in a weird way, I should be thanking you. That bullet took out one of my ovaries,” I informed him. “Which bought me some extra time in avoiding the prospect of motherhood. So...thanks for that.”

Matt cocked a brow as he stared back at me. “I imagine then, given the multiple months you’ve had to heal, your *extra time* is almost up.”

I nodded gravely at his clear understanding of my own fragile timetable.

Matt’s eyes glimmered with dark amusement as he dropped his chin. “It would appear then that the stakes in time have just been raised,” he sneered as he took a step closer. “So if you want my fucking help then I suggest you watch your smart-ass mouth and listen before I change my mind.”

I glowered at him. “You know he’s looking for her, right? He knows she’s alive.”

If Matt was so keen on protecting Kayla, then he needed to know to ensure she didn’t end up in Darren’s clutches too. I did not want him finding her.

He glared at me, hatred brimming in his eyes. “Of course I’m aware, that’s old news. But I am however curious if he ever discovered the part you played in it?”

I hesitated for a moment, wondering how much I should divulge, if it really even mattered at this point. Matt slowly tilted his chin up as he stared

down at me, cruelty curling in the corners of his lips.

“Judging by your silence and those pretty fading bruises around your throat, I’m going to say that’s a yes.” He chuckled, crossing his arms in front of his chest as he meandered through the room. “I can only imagine how he must have rectified that. But considering his methods, I hope he was exceptionally brutal.”

I snickered, tilting my head in a taunting manner. “He almost killed me.”

“Yet here you stand. Or sit, rather.” He actually sounded disappointed.

I shrugged, stretching the strain in my neck. “What doesn’t kill you and all that bullshit, right?” I mused. “So, what, you’re working with Jason and Kayla now? How the hell did that happen?”

Matt sneered as he turned toward me. “Believe it or not, Kayla actually came to *me*, seeking *my* help.”

My brows furrowed, unsure of how much I could genuinely trust his words.

“Is that so?”

“Yeah, it’s so,” he growled. “As it turns out, the enemy of their enemy is their friend.”

I snorted. “Oh, so you’re their friend now, is that it? Someone they can trust?”

Matt’s eyes hardened. “Trust doesn’t exist in our world. The only thing you can rely on is what’s in everyone’s best interest. And right now, working with them just so happens to be in *my* best interest.”

“How’d you figure that? What’s in it for you?”

“Never mind what’s in it for me. What matters is whether you’re going to join the cause. Or do you prefer to just sit on your ass and wait to be rescued?”

I scowled at the insult. I was the whole fucking reason a “rescue” operation even existed.

“Or,” he continued, a sly smile curling his lips, “have you finally grown to enjoy your pampered captivity? Those bruises might suggest otherwise, though. Or maybe you like wearing them?”

Pampered. Cute word for literal abuse.

My eyes slid over to Clive and Owen, their eyes flashing with warning and concern. Dread penetrated my gut like a spear when I realized what they were currently witnessing, but it pierced even deeper when I suddenly understood why it didn’t matter. And they already knew it. Even if it didn’t come from Matt, it would certainly come from Darren.

Ah, shit.

“Don’t look at me like that,” I told them. “You know damn well Darren will execute you both for whatever happens tonight, so there’s no sense in maintaining any loyalty now.”

Matt snapped his fingers in my face. “Focus, Jaden. We don’t have all damn night.”

I nearly growled at him. “How about you let me out of this chair first, and then we can really talk,” I argued, pulling against my binds in irritation.

Matt shook his head. “You’re exactly where you need to be.”

I scowled at him. “How the fu—”

“Shut up and pay attention. You need to convince Darren to take you to the country estate where you were married,” he interrupted abruptly. “And you need to do this within the next two days, because on that third day, we’re going to attack the country estate. So you need to make sure Darren is actually there for it to happen as planned.”

All I could do was blink. Had I seriously heard him correctly?

They were going to attack the country estate?

“Around noon, you’ll want to find a way to put as much distance between you and that house as you can. Unless you want to be in the middle of one hell of a fire fight.”

I shook my head to regain my stunned composure. “Wait. What? Why there? You know where he lives. Why not just attack his main home?”

“Because it’s a fucking fortress we don’t yet have the resources for. His country estate will be easier to attack.”

I furrowed my brow. “Then why didn’t you just attack him here? You’ve made it this far. Why not just finish the job?”

Matt rolled his eyes. “Because this is a fucking hotel and not exactly the best place for a battleground, Jaden. Not to mention, it’s also Chicago. You can’t just walk into someone else’s backyard and start pissing everywhere. We still live by a few codes, you know, and they help keep the chaos at bay.”

I cocked a brow, his excuse far too humorous to ignore. “Politics? Seriously? That’s your excuse?”

Matt groaned and pinched the bridge of his nose. “For fuck’s sake, Jaden, I don’t have time to teach you Underground Crime 101.” Maybe he didn’t, but I wasn’t going to lose out on the opportunity to frustrate the shit out of him while I still could.

“Okay, fine, and then what? What happens after I get him to the estate?”

“And then you can fuck off with your new life,” he answered, annoyed. “So long as you complete your part in this, you could finally be a free little bird in just a few days.”

A moment of silence allowed for a new understanding to attach—I could be free. In just a few days, I could be back with my family, back with Jason—a free woman. All I had to do was convince Darren to get me there.

“Wait, will Jason be in that fight?” I asked, my chest suddenly feeling tight. “What exactly did you discuss?”

Matt looked at me with strained irritation. “Jesus Christ, Jaden, what part of I don’t have time for all the goddamn details are you not getting? I can’t guarantee he’ll be there, I can’t even guarantee this operation will even launch,” he pressed. “Now, can you convince Darren or not?”

My eyes shot to his with an affirmative nod. I had to. There was absolutely no other choice. “Yes.”

Matt released a small sigh of relief. He had more faith in me than I did, but I would find a way to convince Darren. Whatever it took.

“Good,” he said with a nod, placing his hands in his pockets. “I didn’t set this whole thing up just for you to bitch out when it actually counts.”

I scoffed. “I think you could have found a much easier way to communicate with me. Jason was able to figure it out once, and he has even less resources than you do.”

Matt returned my chide with a wide sneer. “Yes well, a good cover story was needed for this situation. Plus, I just love fucking up Darren’s shit every now and then when the opportunity arises. I like reminding him that he’s not as invincible as he thinks he is.”

“I think you’ve succeeded,” I said carefully.

“Not quite,” he stated then waved his hand at the other guards. “There’s still one more matter to rectify.” Two of the men came forward with baseball bats dragging behind them, stopping just behind Clive and Owen.

“What are you doing?” I asked, panic spiking.

“I was hoping your dog would be here tonight, but my men can’t seem to find her. I thought her loss would have been sufficient payback, but since she’s not here...I had to improvise.”

My heart dropped into my stomach. “What?”

“You cost me my greatest treasure,” Matt growled, pure malice on his tongue, hate in his eyes, and pointed at my bodyguards. “And now they’re going to pay for it.”

My heart dropped as Clive and Owen looked back at me with nothing but solidarity and obvious understanding. They knew they were dead the second Matt walked into the room. He couldn’t let them live with everything they just heard, even if it was deliberate. And Darren wouldn’t have let them live simply for tonight’s failure to protect me from harm.

“I thought that bullet I took was payback.”

“Hardly,” Matt answered bitterly.

My mouth went dry. While Clive and Owen weren’t exactly my favorite people in the world, I had become fond of our banter and the routine we’d created over the years. And now all of that was about to come to a very violent end.

Both of them gave me a slight nod, implying their acceptance. They knew the risks of assuming the roles as my protectors, and they accepted anyway. I figured they would bite the dust on duty at some point. I just didn’t think I’d have to witness it like this. Nodding back, I signaled my silent goodbye to them, finding it to be harder than I wanted to admit.

With the snap of Matt’s fingers, the two guards lifted their bats and swung. I sat like a statue, bound to my chair, and watched as Matt’s goons beat my bodyguards to death with their baseball bats. For once, I had never been more grateful for the darkness.

The sound of wood beating against muscle and bone was far too distinct for my liking, my stomach souring with each swing. After all the training I’d endured, I could hide it well enough on the outside, but the inside never settled when I witnessed torture.

It took about two minutes before their bodies finally went limp, blood coating both of them, the bats, and the guards. When they were finished, they stepped away from what was left of my barely recognizable bodyguards and dropped one of the bloody bats near Smith’s body.

“Satisfied?” I muttered to Matt, not taking my eyes off my dead guards. I wanted to savor this rage for later—when I eventually killed this motherfucker.

Matt moved in front of me, glaring down with a raging fire in his eyes. “Not until I get Kayla back. And believe me when I say *I will*.”

I met his gaze head-on. “Is that what you think is going to happen? That you’re going to win Kayla back after what you’ve done to her?”

“It’s cute you think I give a shit about what Kayla wants,” Matt answered as he walked to the side of my chair.

“I’ll make sure she fucking knows that,” I growled up at him.

Matt chuckled as he gripped the arms of my chair. “Believe me, Jaden, she already does.” And then he yanked the chair up and shoved me over until I crashed sideways into the carpet, the impact making my damn bones rattle and my pelvis throb.

“What the hell!”

Matt then took the gun with the silencer and placed it on the floor near my hand, just barely within reach.

“Smith is your cover story,” he said pointedly, leaning over me. “I don’t care what you tell Darren. He has plenty of enemies, pick one. But remember what I told you. Third day at noon. Don’t fuck it up.”

I damn near hissed at him. “I’ll see you there, asshole.”

A smirk tugged at the corner of his lips as he stood. “For your sake, I hope not.”

And with that, he and his men walked out of my sight, leaving me alone with the mutilated bodies of my former bodyguards. My hip was aching from the pressure of my own body weight on my side, the dull throb growing into something sharp and unbearable.

Rocking back and forth in the chair as best I could, I managed to shift my weight back far enough so that the chair fell over until I was lying on my back.

I stared up at the ceiling, the smell of blood and death lingering in the air while my skin burned from the pull of the rope on my arms. My mind raced with anxiety as I contemplated everything that had just happened, everything I’d just learned. But I didn’t have time to process it all. Instead, I needed to take that information and do what I always did best.

Fucking plot.

SHADOWS



My body was on fire, my muscles preparing for blood and violence as I clenched and unclenched my fists. I was not normally accustomed to feeling fear, but the only time I ever truly felt it was when it concerned her. And goddammit, it was the most gut-wrenching feeling in the world.

We had bypassed every single traffic law known to man to make it back to the hotel. But during those long fifteen minutes of making a hundred unanswered phone calls and rechecking unresponsive security systems, dread had successfully seeped its way into my bones.

Jaden.

I didn't even wait for Scott to turn off the car before bolting from the passenger seat and heading for the elevator. The rest of the team barely made it in before the elevator doors shut behind them. As we ascended, I forced my heart rate to slow, filtering the adrenaline from my blood so I could focus on whatever the fuck I was about to walk into. And God help anyone who was left alive if they weren't my fucking wife.

When I'd first learned that she had been shot all those months ago, I at least had the knowledge that she was alive and being treated. But right now, I had no fucking clue what to expect, and not knowing was the true silent

killer. I'd endure every gunshot wound I'd ever taken, every stabbing, every broken bone a hundred times over if it meant I never had to experience it again.

Stepping out of the elevator on the floor directly below mine, we quickly made our way up the secret stairwell that led into the suite. Guns drawn, I cracked the door open, my instincts on high alert at how dark and deadly quiet it was.

The power had been cut.

I silently pointed two fingers to the right, signaling for two men to check in that direction, and the rest with me. Moving quickly through the darkness of the hall, I kept my back against the wall as we scanned the suite, my eyes then landing on the dead bodies of three of my guards.

Fuck.

Why hadn't any one of us received an alert from the security system?

Hurrying past them, I noticed their throats had all been slashed, which meant guns were avoided to keep things quiet. The bodies were still slightly warm, signaling that whatever had happened had not occurred too long ago.

Fuck.

Trekking swiftly through the shadows of the suite, my remaining team swept the rooms around me while my only focus stayed locked on finding Jaden. When I stepped into the dining room, the dim lights of street outside sparked an intense relief that suddenly slammed into me so hard it almost knocked me off my feet.

Halfway across the room, my gaze landed on Jaden, who was currently tied to a chair that had been tipped on its back, surrounded by death and destruction. She was attempting to chew at the knots of the rope that held her wrists to the arms of the chair.

I moved quickly, my eyes scanning in every direction for threats before I reached her and knelt, catching those sunken hazel eyes in her pale

bruised face. Lifting the chair, I righted it and carefully cut the rope away from her arms.

She rubbed her raw wrists while I studied her swollen and blemished face. My blood pressure shot through the fucking roof, my rage ready to hunt down and rip apart the walking corpses who were foolish enough to touch her.

“Are you hurt?” I asked, my voice barely containing my fury.

She shook her head, but I knew better than to trust her answer.

Taking her in my hands, I assessed every inch of her, searching for potential injuries despite her annoyance and fussing. Once I ruled out any need for immediate medical attention, my hands gently took her face and pushed back her tangled hair so I could see her eyes without obstacle.

“What happened?” I asked. “Where are your bodyguards?”

All she did was sigh and nod to something behind me. Turning my head, I found two more bloodied bodies secured to chairs. Furious disappointment pulsed in my chest when I realized they belonged to Clive and Owen, the state of their corpses in the darkness making them barely recognizable.

Fucking jackasses.

Having seen enough, I lifted Jaden out of the chair and carried her through the destruction of the suite and into the bathroom, placing her on the countertop.

Removing her clothes, she sat with feigned patience as I assessed her again with deeper scrutiny and a flashlight now that I’d removed all her barriers. Relief was swift when I only found bruising and some scrapes, but I didn’t like that her skin was ice cold to the touch.

Turning on the bathtub faucet, I drew Jaden a warm bath and placed her in the tub, hoping the warm water would help her relax enough to tell me what the fuck had happened. I’d review the security footage later when things were back online, but right now, I wanted to know exactly what was going through her head while it was still fresh.

“Come on, Jaden. Come back to me,” I urged gently, massaging her small frozen hand in my own. “I need you to tell me what happened.”

She finally shook her head and released a deep slow breath.

“He just wanted information,” she murmured. “But I know nothing. So he made me watch him kill Clive and Owen for being a *useless whore*.”

Wrath like a volcanic eruption rumbled in my chest, the insult striking her deep enough to puncture even me.

“How many were there?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know. There were three left when I came to. I don’t know how many they started with. I think some ran off once I managed to steal the gun.”

I released my own slow deep breath to keep my rage down. Now was not the time to lose my shit. “What else?”

She shrugged again. “The power went out right before they attacked,” she continued. “We all tried to fight the best that we could, but we were outnumbered.”

I’d already taken note of the four unknown dead bodies I’d passed through the living room, not including the seven of my own. There had to have been more to launch that kind of a successful ambush.

“Then I woke up in that chair and got really lucky when he leaned in too close to me. I kicked him in the balls and managed to wrestle his gun from his hand with my legs, and then the chair tipped over. By the time he got up, I had the gun in my hand and scored two shots while the others disappeared. I lost track of time before you came in.”

Lucky was not a word I favored.

“Stay here. Do not get out of the tub,” I ordered and stood to leave.

Storming out of the bathroom and into the living room, I knelt and looked over each dead body that had been left behind.

“Armenians,” Scott said as he stepped back into the room.

“Hired Armenians,” I added.

“Juan’s wife was Armenian.”

I stood and cracked the kink in my neck. “I know.”

Scott lifted his chin. “She okay?” he asked, nodding toward the bedroom.

I nodded solemnly, crossing my arms over my chest as images of what could have been flashed before my eyes. “She’s fine.”

“Good. Hopefully, she can fill in the blanks because we’ve got nothing. They cut the hardwire to the power. No alarms, no signal, no security footage.”

I pinched the bridge of my nose, releasing the growing tension in my forehead. This floor had an independent power source, so whoever it was had more information than they should.

FUCK.

“Jaden said she only saw three men when she woke, but there had to have been more. I had eight guards stationed here, including Clive and Owen. That should have been enough.”

Scott shook his head. “It doesn’t add up.”

No, it certainly fucking doesn’t.

“Matt was never at the docks,” I stated. “It had to have been a body double.”

“Sent to me to lure you away so they could, what, get to Jaden? Why?”

I shook my head. “I don’t know. She said they wanted information, but I’m not sure what kind yet. I’ll get more out of her later.”

“Do you think Matt was actually here?” Scott asked, his voice tight with suspicion.

I thought about it, and it was very possible, but it didn’t make sense. He wasn’t after Jaden. He was after Daniel. Why even bother with her? Unless he was still just trying to toy with me more, which also didn’t make sense since he lacked the time and resources.

I shook my head. “Jaden would have said so.”

Scott turned toward me. “You’re sure about that?” he asked, his tone cautious.

His doubt in her inflamed my already barely restrained wrath.

“After what I just did to her, she’d be pretty fucking stupid to make the same mistake twice,” I nearly growled.

Scott wisely stepped back. “Maybe she just didn’t see him.”

“*Maybe*. But it doesn’t make sense for him to goad me into coming here when he had no guarantee I would have even brought her with me.”

“Maybe he assumed you would bring her to the charity gala.”

Another maybe.

“Unless he found out later that she was here and took the opportunity. We arrived yesterday, so there would have been plenty of time to plan something,” he suggested.

“Opportunity to do what, exactly?” I pressed, crossing my arms as I walked about the trashed room in thought. “They didn’t take her or kill her, so what other advantage could she possibly give Matt that’s worth the risk or effort? She doesn’t know anything, and he knows this.”

Scott shrugged. “Who knows? He’s threatened Jaden before. Maybe he’s the one who sent the Armenians just to fuck with you. Or maybe they were supposed to kill her and failed.”

“Now *that* I could believe. But barely.” The reasoning still wasn’t strong enough to justify the risk of almost certain failure. *Almost*. “The same person who left me that message in Porto Rotondo has left me another, and it wasn’t just a coincidence. They had a hand in this.” I nodded to all the destruction around us.

“You think they’re working with Matt?”

My eyes glanced around the room, noticing all the shattered glass, broken furniture, and numerous bloodstains all over the place. The timing was too well planned not to be a collaboration.

I still had yet to determine the identity of this new enemy, my investigation in Vegas leading me absolutely nowhere. But I'd been too busy with other endeavors like two wars and a dead brother to avenge to give it any more attention than I could afford to.

My list of enemies was indefinite, and people added themselves to the list without me ever even knowing. But that was the nature of this business. You never really knew who you were going to inadvertently piss off.

"I don't know, but they certainly aren't working alone. Could be Matt, could be Miguel. Could be both for all I know."

Scott cursed under his breath as he rolled his shoulders. "The enemy of my enemy bullshit..."

I sighed in agreement as I ran my hands through my hair.

"Whatever the reason, the purpose of tonight was clear. They wanted to get to Jaden, and they did," I stated, my mind racing in far too many directions. "Whether or not they left empty-handed is another story we'll have to sort out later. But right now, I need to take care of my wife."

Scott nodded as he took out his phone. "What do you want me to do?"

I sighed again, rubbing the back of my neck to relieve some of the pressure. "Is Camaro still with her handlers?"

"Yeah. Do you want me to have her brought up?"

I released a small breath of relief and nodded. "As quickly as possible."

If Jaden lost that damn dog, I'd never hear the end of it. As much of a pain in the ass Camaro was in keeping her cared for, she was worth it if she kept Jaden happy and occupied. That was, until the day she became a liability, and Jaden started risking her life to save her instead of the other way around.

"Focus on getting the power back on first. Then have the place cleaned and the bodies identified. I want a full report before Jaden wakes up tomorrow. And figure out what the hell else happened that led to our systems failure."

Scott nodded at my request as I turned to head back into the bathroom to retrieve Jaden. But instead of storming right in like I imagined, I slowed to a stop to discreetly peer from behind the corner, watching her from outside the bathroom.

To my surprise, she'd actually remained in the tub like I told her to. But while her body obeyed, her mind rebelled from a thousand miles away. On the outside, she was catatonic. But on the inside, a storm was silently wreaking havoc within her heart.

My brand of vengeance was violent, cruel, and predictable.

Hers? Yet to be defined.

And as much as I hated to admit it, that made her a very dangerous wild card.

One that needed to be recycled back into the deck as quickly as possible before it got out of hand.

SWAY



The following morning was hard. My body was heavy with grief over the loss of Clive and Owen and the way they'd been taken from my life. After everything I'd gone through with them, their loss unexpectedly left a weirdly shaped hole in my heart.

They were shitheads, but they were *my* shitheads.

I'd built a complicated relationship with them, one that I would never recreate with anyone else. But if things went according to plan in the next few days, none of it would even matter anyway.

The hard truth was there'd be no room for them in my life when I finally broke free of Darren's grip. They likely wouldn't have survived the fallout anyway. Hell, they would have likely followed Darren's orders to the very end, no matter what I wanted.

At least it saved me from having to kill them myself, although I would have made it far less brutal, and much, much quicker. But my grief compared little to the pressure in my heart at the thought of my next incredibly time-sensitive challenge.

Convincing Darren to take me to the country estate.

Considering the trauma of what I had just gone through, I shouldn't have any issues so long as I played the correct role.

Darren grilled me for nearly an hour last night, extracting as much information out of me as he could since the cameras had captured absolutely nothing last night, and I was the sole survivor.

I tried to stick as close to the truth as possible, voicing uncertainties due to the darkness, and performing the exact story I had rehearsed in my head for what felt like hours while waiting for Darren to return to the hotel.

At one point, I considered trying harder to get out of that damn chair, but I figured the image would benefit me if he saw me still in the midst of trying to escape, hoping for an emotional advantage.

And it must have worked for something because Darren made sure Camaro was with me during his interrogation, a gesture I took comfort in... until the moment I had to open my mouth.

With every lie I spoke, I heard the phantom lash of Darren's belt striking my skin, the sickness of my betrayal shredding my stomach to ribbons. I could feel my throat literally start to close up at the memory of his hand wrapped around my neck, squeezing so hard I was sure death had finally come for me.

The more he questioned me, the more I could see the door of the basement creaking open in the back of my mind, threatening me with another round of horrors. Lying to him was now a terrifying act that was exhausting to conceal, yet somehow, I managed to pull it off. Or maybe I hadn't, and Darren was just waiting for another opportune moment to crush my spirit again.

My demeanor had honestly been all over the place—angry, scared, bitter, confused, vengeful—it all had its place, and for now, Darren seemed satisfied with my answers, or lack thereof. My exhaustion had somehow granted me enough clemency to adjourn his investigation for the night. Who knew what he might ask me today.

You'd think Matt would have given me a little more to work with to corroborate my story, but if our plans were successful, then Darren wouldn't have much time to act on my deceitfulness anyway. Because hopefully he'd be fucking dead, and I would be long gone.

I doubted I would even have to worry about Daniel coming after me. With Darren gone, it would probably be a lot easier for Matt to finally take him out.

Now, I just had to hope I was up for round two. But after what I accomplished with Darren last night and the other night at the club, I had faith in my abilities.

Considering my current disposition this morning, it wouldn't require much effort.

Forcing myself from the bed, I cracked my neck and stretched my arms above my head, yawning away my exhaustion. Getting out of bed was the last thing I felt like doing, but it was already nearing 11:00 a.m., and I needed to show some strength today if I was going to achieve my goal.

Standing, I reached for my robe, slipping it on and making my way into the bathroom. After washing my face and brushing my teeth, I took a good look at myself in the mirror.

Scrapes, bruises, and massive swelling overwhelmed my face and neck, the weight of which left my skull feeling way too heavy. My hair was matted on one side, and my eyes were red and irritated. With the state of my being, I doubted it would be difficult to suspect me of anything but sincerity.

After brushing my hair until my arms hurt, I exited the bathroom and changed into a casual black tank top dress and then called Camaro from her bed to follow me out.

Moving down the hallway, I noticed that all the mess from earlier had been cleaned up and replaced. It was as if nothing had ever even happened. But the moment I stepped out of the hallway and into the sitting room, I

locked eyes with six guards standing very stiffly throughout the room. No one said a single word, the silence too awkward for my liking.

“Morning,” I said carefully to all of them, my tone more than apprehensive.

“Good morning, Mrs. Davis,” they all said in return.

My heart cracked slightly at the realization that my routine was going to change now that I was two bodyguards short. Depending on how soon Darren found my replacements, I would have to acclimate another pair to my lifestyle and shit-stirring attitude. And that would be a new source of frustration.

“So, uh, anyone know where Darren is?” I asked aloud.

“He’s on a phone call.” I saw Scott from the corner of my eye. He walked into the room and folded his arms across his chest as he leaned against the wall. “He’ll be in once he’s done. In the meantime, you should eat something.”

Ignoring Scott’s comment, I slowly padded through the room, stopping momentarily to catch the massive blood stains covering the carpet. The same spot where Clive and Owen had died. My stomach soured at the memory. They could clean up the mess everywhere else, but not the bloodstains in the carpet?

Biting back my bitterness, I rounded the stain and made my way toward the dining room table to find a wide spread of breakfast foods. I was interested in none of it.

Scott lingered in the corner of the room, his arms still tightly folded as he remained in the same position. I could feel his eyes on me as I placed some fruit on my plate and sat down. He was watching me way too closely for some reason.

Camaro went to her food bowl while I attempted to swallow down some grapes. No matter how many times Darren had tried, my stomach just wasn’t meant for massacres.

“You’re lucky to be alive, you know,” Scott remarked as he maneuvered slowly through the dining room.

I paused for a moment, caught off by his comment. “I’m aware,” I replied, keeping my eyes to myself as I focused on my plate.

“I’m actually pretty impressed that you managed to steal a gun while being tied to a chair, *and* firing off two fatal rounds without experiencing any return fire. And in the dark, no less. How the hell did you pull that off?”

My stomach clenched as I reluctantly swallowed the grape I’d been chewing, making sure my movements were consistent and unbothered. Scott was fishing, which meant he was not totally sold on my lies. And if he wasn’t certain, then neither was Darren.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

“Like you said, I got lucky. Unlike Clive and Owen,” I answered before taking a sip of my orange juice. It soured in my mouth almost immediately.

“Clearly,” he clipped.

“What did you do with their bodies?” I asked, tilting the conversation.

“They were taken to an incinerator.”

I glanced back up at him. That was it? “Will they receive a burial?”

Scott cocked a brow at my question. “No.”

“Why not?”

“Because we don’t honor failures,” he answered in the obvious.

I scoffed and rolled my eyes. “Will their families at least be notified?”

Scott leveled me with a glare of annoyance. “They didn’t have families. They were both orphaned felons who ran security for their gang leaders before they went to prison for the attempted murder of their rivals’ kids.”

Jesus.

I nodded solemnly at the history lesson. “They never told me about their past.”

“Nor should they have. The less you know about them, the better.”

“Whatever,” I replied before reluctantly swallowing another piece of fruit.

Two minutes of awkward silence later, I’d eaten all I could stand and stood from my seat.

“You know you need to eat more than that,” Scott reminded me.

A scowl immediately formed on my face. “Fuck off, Scott. Today is not the day.”

He tsk’d. “Darren won’t be happy.”

“When is he ever?” I growled, bypassing him for the huge-ass outdoor patio while Camaro ran to catch up to my side.

Plopping down on the outdoor carpet, I pulled Camaro down to sit with me. I ignored Scott as he took a seat against the wall about twenty feet away. Apparently, he was the resident babysitter today.

“Come here, pretty girl,” I cooed to my dog. “You smell so nice and clean.”

Wrapping my arms around my Rottie, I shivered at the thought that I had almost lost her last night. I’d never been more grateful for her excessive grooming schedule.

If I had to watch my dog die too, I didn’t know what I would do, but it certainly wouldn’t involve letting Matt leave alive, rescue mission or no rescue mission. Camaro was the closest thing I had to a friend right now and the only one I could find comfort in.

For the next hour, all my brain would allow me to do was endure a playback of everything that had happened last night and everything I needed to do now. I’d witnessed a lot of brutal murders and torture over the years, but I don’t think any of them had been as painful to watch as Clive’s and Owen’s.

Shuddering, I hugged Camaro closer, and a single stupid tear found its way down my cheek.

“You didn’t finish your breakfast,” Darren said sternly from behind me.

Quickly swiping the tear away, I turned to find him towering over me, his hands in his pockets and a look of disappointment on his face. His eyes darkened as he caught my tear.

“You better not be crying over them,” he warned, his gaze narrowing.

I scowled up at him. “Don’t you dare scold me for it!” I growled, boldly pointing my finger at him. “They may not have been my favorite people, but they didn’t deserve to go down like that. I don’t care what you say!”

Darren sighed, his jaw tightening as he folded his arms across his chest.

“You should have known better than to form attachments with the men whose job it is to literally die for you. They failed you last night. And there are consequences to failure.”

I scoffed at his dismissal. “Except they *did* die for me, Darren. I’m alive, and they’re both dead because of it. A job well done, don’t you think?”

He shook his head. “No. The other part of their job is to keep you safe,” he retorted. “That was their biggest failure.”

“They did their best,” I argued, annoyance lacing my voice.

“And it wasn’t good enough, not to my standards,” he snapped. “Even if they had survived last night, they would not have survived me, and you know it.”

I whipped my head around to glare up at him. “Yeah? And just where the fuck were *you* the whole time, huh? After you so viciously flaunted that joke of a charity gala in my face like some kind of asshole, where did you run off to, huh? To go kill some poor girl who was lucky enough to escape your trade? Maybe if you had been here instead of pursuing *her*, we would have had a better chance at fighting—”

“You had better *watch* your mouth, princess,” he warned, his voice silencing mine with his terrifying lethal tone. “Loose ends cannot be ignored. I expect you to understand this by now.”

I turned away, unwilling to entertain his bullshit. “I do understand. And I hate you for it.” The memory of the helpless panic I’d felt knowing what he was going to do, and that there was nothing I could do about it was another ghost that haunted me. *She* would haunt me, and the guilt would eat at me forever.

Darren tilted his head back and sighed in frustration, but we both knew my hatred was of no consequence to him. He usually found it amusing.

“I made it quick, Jaden,” he said gently.

I scoffed harshly. The minor detail acknowledging his act was of no help at all.

“If that’s the case, then why did it take you so long to return, huh? You were in the same damn building for fuck’s sake. Where the hell were you?”

Hey dumbass, this isn’t getting you any closer to the country estate.

I could feel the heat emanating off his body as I stupidly pressed him for answers I had no business requesting. But I was angry for what he had done to that girl, and I wanted him to feel some form of regret for choosing to make her murder his priority instead of me.

And then suddenly, that hamster in my head started to sprint in that little metal wheel of hers.

If I could inspire just enough guilt, then maybe I could hustle some very important time-sensitive restitution...

“I’m not going to warn you again, little girl. You damn well know better than to ask me that,” he practically snarled, his eyes flashing with the promise of violence.

Little girl.

Darren always liked to remind me of how small I was compared to him when I pushed him too far. And the subtle advisement to shut my mouth before he did it for me usually did the trick. But right now, I refused to let him off the hook that easily and turned up the hysterics.

“You chose her over me!” I shrieked. “And I almost died because of it! I deserve a fucking explanat—”

I didn’t finish my sentence before I was suddenly yanked up from the floor and into Darren’s arms, my legs swinging up as he moved to one of the sun chairs.

Lying back against it, he settled me over his lap to straddle his hips, pulling my front against his chest so my cheek was resting against his shoulder.

I fully expected him to berate me, but only a sigh left his lungs, the sound heavy with grief and audible reluctance as he gently ran his palm up and down my back.

“You’re right,” he finally admitted, shocking me completely. “I should have been there, and I wasn’t.” I felt myself stiffen at his admission, taken completely off guard. Was he actually admitting to fault? “However, the empire I’ve built cannot guarantee your safety if I don’t defend it against even the slightest of threats that could jeopardize it. That is the nature of this life, and try as I might, I cannot always be around to protect you. Which is why I’ve taken such extreme measures to ensure your safety, and so far, only one of them has proven to maintain a 100 percent success rate.”

I grunted in response. “What’s that, locking me away all the time?” I added sarcastically, my tone unamused.

“No. It was training *you*,” he answered pointedly. Pausing internally, I suddenly felt compelled to sit up and look him in the eye for this one, sure I had heard him wrong. But he continued unfazed. “You’ve managed to save yourself without me or anyone else’s help more times than I’d like to remember, and I owe that to your ability to strategically utilize everything I’ve taught you.” Wait. Was he...was he actually acknowledging my capabilities? First, I’m right, and now I’m skilled? What the hell is happening? “This is going to go straight to your pretty little head, but you’ve turned out to be quite the little protégé,” he snarked. “I’m actually

very proud of all you've managed to do by yourself, even if it doesn't seem like it."

Protégé...wow.

I dipped my chin, leveling him with a serious expression, remembering something he had once forced me to choke on not too long ago. "But not enough to admit I don't actually need you to survive anymore."

The energy from his body turned dark, his eyes brewing with a storm that promised so much degradation for that bold little comment. Slowly, he leaned forward from his seat, causing me to slightly lean away as he captured more of my space.

"I would never be so bold as to presume such a foolish claim," he nearly growled, the deep timbre of his voice matching the intensity of his gaze. "And I am not willing to taunt it so recklessly."

I couldn't mistake the double innuendo if I tried. But he was right. I was reckless, and stubborn, and foolish, and fresh out of fucks to give for any of it. And my ability to still meet him eye for eye said it all, the curl of my lips deviously unapologetic.

"I honestly thought hell would freeze over before you finally gave me even just a crumb of validation," I replied.

"Feeding your ego is counterproductive. I push you as hard as I do for a reason."

"Well, I'm glad to know I'm at least finally worthy of your acknowledgment," I said, my tone taking on a sarcastic lilt.

He nodded. "Yes, and now that I *have* inflated your ego, I'm afraid I'm going to have to deflate it."

I frowned at him. "What do you mean?" I nearly screeched, tilting my head. "Don't backtrack *now!* Not when my praise kink is nearly satisfied."

Darren shook his head. "You are such a fucking brat," he scorned, rolling his eyes, but entertained my humor anyway. "Leaving you satisfied

in that demand would devastate the cause of keeping you striving for my approval. So if that's what you're after, then this next leap should be easy."

I cocked a brow at him. "What are you talking about?"

He took his hands and wrapped them around my hips, clutching me tightly. "You need to understand that things are about to change. And all that validation I just gave you needs to be packed away along with your pride because as this war escalates, I expect your survival strategies to adapt accordingly."

Pushing aside my irritation, I considered my words carefully, vying for the right opportunity to present itself.

"What the hell is it you want me to do?"

Darren's gaze was hard, his eyes so intense it made me fight a shiver from erupting up my spine.

"I need you to keep yourself safe."

I rolled my eyes at the obvious. "That's usually my first objective."

"No, it isn't. When your fight or flight gets triggered, you always choose fight. And I am telling you to choose the latter."

I cocked a brow, surprised by this new demand. "You want me to run?"

"Yes. Run. Hide. Don't look back."

"That's pretty counterproductive, don't you think?"

He shook his head. "I can't focus on the fight if I don't know whether or not you're safe. So from now on, your objective is to accomplish that. Get yourself to a secure location and stay there until I come for you. Is that understood?"

I jerked back in utter disbelief. What the fuck! After gifting me with those hearty breadcrumbs of sweet, sweet validation, he wanted me to just dump it all in the trash and hide like some fucking mouse?

After everything I had endured, now I was expected to just sit the fight out, shelter and hide like a good little girl? Fuck that.

“You want me to hide until you come get me? What if you never come? What am I supposed to do then?”

His eyes blazed like I had insulted him. Hooking his two fingers under my collar, he jerked me forward. “I will *always* come for you. Never doubt that, Jaden. *Ever.*”

I groaned, irritation burrowing at my temples. “Okay, but what good will hiding do when you literally just said that the only measure with a 100 percent success rate has been *me*.?”

“So far,” he clipped, steeling his tone as he released me. “That doesn’t mean it’s the primary method of defense. *It’s the last resort.*” I scoffed at his reasoning, looking away to focus on anything else other than his stupid face. “I’m not arguing with you about this, Jaden. There will be serious consequences if I find out you disobeyed me and stuck around to fight instead of actively trying to flee. Do not test me on that.” When I refused to look at him, he took my chin between his fingers and pulled my gaze back to his. “Say you understand,” he ordered, his voice hard and uncompromising.

I huffed an agitated breath as I stared him down. This conversation was not going in the direction I had planned. But if I stayed true to my goal and redirected, then none of this would even fucking matter anyway. So there was no reason to get upset about it.

“Fine,” I grumbled. “I understand.”

“Good,” he replied, releasing my chin. “I can’t afford to have you at risk all the time.”

I tilted my head, frowning slightly. “Are you anticipating more attacks while we’re away from home?” I asked carefully.

“You should always anticipate an attack, no matter where we are. Especially when we’re at war.”

“I do, but that makes for a very exhausting life, you know.”

“It’s the life we live,” he declared.

Or the life one of us was forced to live.

“Fine, then how much longer are we staying here? I can only stand to see the bloodstains on the carpet from Clive and Owen for so long.”

Darren groaned, a flash of agitation in his eyes. “You weren’t supposed to see that. I specifically ordered for it to be covered up before you woke up.”

“Well, it wasn’t.”

His eyes swung over to Scott’s, glancing at him with a silent, but fierce displeasure.

“I’ll take care of it,” Darren affirmed, and I suddenly wondered if that meant he intended to add to the stain before having it removed. I seriously hoped not. I’d seen enough of what he does to people who fuck up around me, and I didn’t want to contribute to it anymore. Unless it would somehow work in my favor. “We won’t be here much longer,” he added. “The jet is being prepared as we speak.”

I sighed in disappointment, resting my head back down on his shoulder, snuggling in close for dramatic effect. “I was really looking forward to this change of scenery.”

Darren exhaled, rubbing his hand up and down my arm softly.

“I know. But I want you home where it’s safe, so I can focus on what I need to do.”

I groaned, tired of everything revolving around keeping my stupid ass “safe” when I had other reckless motives to push. The thought of actually going back to the estate already made me physically ill.

“Does it have to be that home? Can’t we stay at one of the other ones? Just for a little while?” And just like that, my heart already skipped a beat.

Darren sighed greatly, the weight of my request difficult for him to ignore after this weekend’s epic failure. But I knew my simple complaint would be enough to at least get the wheels turning in his head. After a moment’s pause, he finally spoke again.

“Which one?” he asked, his tone hard and serious, like he was mad at himself for giving in and entertaining my silly whims.

His question made me think back to my working days during settlement negotiations. You usually demanded as much as you could, which was most often much more than what the case was actually worth to get the realistic amount in the end. The same could easily be applied to just about any scenario.

“How about the one in Anchorage? I could finally do some snowboarding,” I suggested.

Darren immediately scoffed like I’d hoped he would. “I am not flying out to fucking Alaska right now, especially from Chicago. Try again.”

I feigned my disappointment with a huff.

“Well, aside from the yacht and private island, the only other place I know of is the country estate. And that isn’t much for a change of scenery.”

My stomach instantly plummeted at the mention of my deception, the treachery splintering through my spine like thorns growing on a rose stem. I hated how he had successfully conditioned me to feel so much fear from lying that my body would physically punish itself whenever I did. And here I had done it twice now in the last twelve hours.

Darren scratched the side of his jaw, silently deliberating to himself while I tried not to hold my breath.

“No, but it would be a lot closer,” he mused.

My eyes quickly wandered away to focus my anxiety on something else to soothe it, Camaro being the next best thing. “I’d honestly settle for anything at this point,” I added, absentmindedly. “But I guess it would be nice to see the horses again.”

Darren was quiet as he mulled over the options, the easiest of which was just to tell me no like he usually did. When he said nothing, I wrapped my arms around his neck and gently pressed my forehead to his.

Running my hands down his chest, he sucked in a slow deep breath, a low hum of appreciation rumbling up his throat as he nudged his head against mine.

“Please,” I whispered, my voice desperately sweet while my stomach secretly ate itself alive.

Pulling away, he met my gaze, the sharpness of his stare cutting me deep, making me fear he could see right down to the core of my scheme.

“And what do I get in return for doing this enormous gesture for you?”

I leaned in close, a smirk hot on my lips. “How about I fight you for it?”

Darren huffed a short laugh, a dark chuckle rolling from his throat. I didn’t miss the quick flash of heated desire that flickered across his deep blue eyes, the promise of a rough afternoon headed my way.

Clutching my waist, Darren swiftly stood, taking my weight with him without effort. Planting my bare feet on the floor, his hands cupped my face as he leaned down to kiss me. I moaned into his lips, letting him feel what would be my impassioned gratitude, and praying he wouldn’t notice the tremble in my spine.

Releasing my mouth, he pinned my gaze in place, that deep blue swallowing me whole while his thumbs rubbed along my cheeks.

“Alright,” he finally said. “Be ready to leave in an hour.”

And with that, he turned away and headed back into the suite, Scott waiting for him at the door. For a split second, Scott’s gaze locked with mine, a strange look in his eye before he turned away to follow Darren back inside.

I dismissed it just as quickly, far too busy keeping my elation and surmounting panic to myself. Because holy shit, I had actually done it. Again.

Hook. Line. And fucking sinker.

Now, I just had to make sure we stayed there for the next three days.

DRIVE

The jet landed an hour ago, and my body was vibrating like I was still inside it, my nerves rattling me to the core. Everything inside me hummed with anticipation knowing what I had miraculously managed to do —line us up for a full-scale combative assault. My mind was running up the walls with ideas of what could happen in the next few days.

Destruction.

Death.

Freedom?

Maybe. It seemed way too easy. Could I really just bench myself and assume that everything would go according to plan? Fuck no. I wasn't going to let anyone fuck this operation up. I had to be there to make sure the agenda was met. Hell, maybe I'd finally get the chance to kill Darren myself if the opportunity presented itself.

No one would give a fuck about me if they thought Darren had been killed from all the fighting. I could just quietly disappear, especially since Darren had just told me that was exactly what I was supposed to do now anyway.

But what if Jason was planning on engaging in the fight? Matt couldn't confirm if he was, so there was only a chance that Jason would be there. Although I couldn't imagine Jason would want to sit out on any operation

that would lead to my rescue. He'd want to be right in the middle of it. So that was where I would be. Front and center.

And then I would find him.

My plan decided, I figured I would need to take the edge off and have some fun with my dog before the shit finally hit the fan. I needed something to distract me before my anxiety literally ripped me apart. But as I got closer to the back parlor, I overheard Darren speaking to someone with enough aggression to make me halt in my tracks.

“What the *fuck* are you talking about, Daniel?” Darren growled, his elevated voice making me cringe back against the wall.

“I don’t know how it happened, but as of this morning, the money is gone,” a voice said from what sounded like a cell phone. Daniel’s voice, I suspected.

“How the *fuck* is that even possible?” Darren growled.

“Still trying to figure that out.”

“Were you monitoring the system? Watching the accounts?” Scott asked.

“Of course, I was!” Daniel shouted back. “But then...”

“But what!?”

An audible sigh full of exhaustion and hesitation filled the air. “Toward the end of the night, one of the buyers got sick in the viewing room. He was throwing up blood all over the place and then started seizing on the floor. He fucking died. And the whole thing probably cost us about twenty minutes to assess if we were all next or if it was just Ronald. It could just be a coincidence but considering what happened with you around the same time, I’m just not sure.”

Sighs, groans, and curses quickly overwhelmed the room, Daniel still trying to shout over everyone to quiet them down.

“Look, I don’t know how they managed to hack our auction last night, but they did. We’re doing everything we can to handle it.”

Holy shit. Someone hacked Darren's auctions? I didn't know if he was referring to the one I'd been a part of or if this was something different, but either way, this was huge.

Darren sighed with frustration. "Fucking hell. We're going to have to rebuild a whole new security system."

"It's already being prepared, and Anton and his team are working around the clock to figure out what happened," Scott added.

"Good. I want to be informed the second they know something," Darren said.

Carefully backtracking into the hallway, my mind raced over what it all meant. Whoever managed to circumvent that firewall had to be one hell of a hacker to pull that off.

Matt hadn't mentioned anything about the auction or any other plans, but it wouldn't surprise me if he had found a way to disrupt it. I wondered what kind of implications this would have.

An approaching guard had me moving my feet again, back into the room as if I hadn't heard a damn thing. Grabbing a Frisbee out of Camaro's toy trunk in the sunroom across the hall, I quickly headed for the door leading into the backyard.

"Where do you think you're going?" Darren's hard voice came from the parlor.

Ah, fuck.

Stopping in place, I turned my head to find him sitting at a large round table with Scott and four other men, weapons and maps laid out all across the surface. Clearly, Daniel had hung up.

"I was just going to play with Camaro outside for a bit," I answered innocently. "Maybe go see the horses if Camaro can keep her shit together." Last time had been a total fucking disaster, and I did not need a repeat of that.

Darren studied me for a moment, his eyes darkening with disapproval.

“No,” he said dismissively, and turned his attention back to the maps and papers on the table.

I stood there stunned.

No?

“What? Why the hell not?”

He didn’t even acknowledge me with a response. Just continued his discussions like I was no longer there.

I continued to stand in the doorway, slightly dumbfounded at Darren’s quick dismissal. My thoughts shifted to the last time I had argued with him after being denied outside access.

It hadn’t gone well for me then, and my fear of the basement was still affecting my confidence, especially when my arsenal was low on ammunition for reasoning or emotion for the occasion. Darren was clearly already in a bad mood, and my wants were childish at best.

I almost considered turning away to sulk in the library when Sid’s voice suddenly snuck into my head.

Drive the fucking car, Jaden.

I could feel my shoulders squaring up as liquid steel started to straighten my spine. I drove that fucking car the other night when I fucked him in that club. I drove that fucking car when I manipulated him this morning into taking me here. And now, I would damn well drive it again.

Placing the Frisbee down on the nearby couch, I carefully made my way over to him, noticing how his eyes stayed planted on the maps while two of the men continued their conversation with Scott. When I was close enough, I slowly wrapped my arms around Darren’s shoulders and leaned my mouth to his ear.

“Please,” I whispered, my plea coming off as sweet and sultry as I could manage. I felt his shoulders tense while his back leaned into my chest. “A change of scenery doesn’t really help when you’re still stuck inside.” My hands traveled over his muscled shoulders and across the expanse of his

chest, my touch slow and deliberate. “And I’ve been cooped up for so long,” I drawled, letting my breath tickle the back of his ear and along his neck. I watched as his right hand clenched into a tight fist, his chest expanding into my touch.

“A storm is coming,” he finally said. “I don’t want you getting caught in the middle of it.”

He had no fucking idea.

“I know, and it’s supposed to last the entire rest of the day. This is my only shot,” I pleaded. He grunted his disapproval of my reasoning, but I wasn’t giving up yet. “Please?” I sang, emphasizing the gloom in my voice. “I promise I won’t go too far. After last night, I really need the air. Just for a little while?”

A heavy exaggerated sigh finally escaped his lips, and I knew I had won.

“Fine, fuck it,” he growled and looked toward Scott. “Put Emmett and Luther on her while she’s outside. She’s got one hour, then I want her back inside.”

One hour was too short, but I would take what I could earn.

“Thank you,” I said quietly so only he could hear and turned for the door.

Darren abruptly stood from his chair, catching my wrist and hauled me back over to him, making my stomach clench as his massive frame towered over mine. Each muscle of his body was so sharply defined through his black dress shirt, the sleeves rolled to his elbows to expose that beautiful eagle tattoo on his forearm.

The man was designed for ruin, reminding me of all the terrifying things he was capable of, and how it would all come to fruition in less than seventy-two hours. Taking my face in both his hands, he leaned down and pressed a firm kiss to my lips, the heat of his body making mine melt right into him.

“One hour,” he reminded me as he pulled away. “No fuss.”

I blinked up at him. “Okay, no fuss. Byeee!” I said quickly and scampered around him before he could keep me there any longer.

I grabbed the Frisbee from the couch and called Camaro to follow me out the door. Heading out to the wide-open backyard, I released a massive breath of relief, and then held up the Frisbee for Camaro to see.

“You want it?” I asked playfully.

When she barked and jumped up on her hind legs, I flicked my wrist and sent the Frisbee through the air and across the yard. Like the speeding bullet she was, Camaro raced after the Frisbee, jumped into the air and caught it right between her teeth.

“Good girl!” I shouted, clapping to encourage her to bring the Frisbee back for another toss. Glancing up at the sky, I took note of the gray clouds rolling in and the dark blue ones far off in the distance. And damn if I didn’t love a good storm.

Watching Camaro run, I felt the two new shadows creep up behind me. They remained a respectable fifty feet away, but they were not the comfort I usually got when Clive and Owen were around.

We played like that back and forth for a little while, Emmett and Luther watching from the shade of the patio, looking bored and brooding all over the place.

I’d ask them if they wanted to play too, but I doubted I’d even get a response. It was hard to blame them, though. Not many people ever dared to interact with me for good reason.

Deciding to send Camaro on a good run, I tossed the Frisbee hard into the air, sending it high into the sky and catching the wind. The gust sent the Frisbee far right, and Camaro chased it even after it changed directions until it smacked right into the face of one of the guards.

Oops.

The second guard he'd been patrolling with laughed hysterically as Camaro tackled him to the ground to retrieve the Frisbee stuck in his jacket.

Giggling to myself, the rest of the patrolling guards laughed at the scene as the poor guard finally shot up from the ground, yanking the Frisbee out of Camaro's reach. The dark expression on his face made it clear he was not as amused as everyone else.

"Sorry about that!" I shouted, hoping he wouldn't stay too mad about it. I mean, he did literally walk right into it. For a guard, that was some piss-poor situational awareness.

Catching my apology, he looked back at me with the meanest scowl on his face and then yelled something at Camaro. He then whipped his arm back and tossed the Frisbee all the way into the damn lake, turning to finally wave and smile at me as Camaro ran straight for the water.

The sound of her jumping from the dock to the splash of the water made me glare back at him. She literally just had a bath the other night.

Marching past his post to retrieve my dog, I scowled back at him. "Thanks a lot, asshole," I growled at him.

"Oops!" he replied sarcastically, making me want to throat punch him with the butt of his rifle.

Ignoring him, I didn't even make it to the dock before Camaro started barking and whining like I'd never heard before. My eyes scanning the lake, I found her in a patch of floating weeds, the Frisbee long abandoned and floating away.

She yelped as she struggled to paddle forward, getting absolutely nowhere as the seaweed growing up from the water tangled under her legs.

Panic seized my heart as I watched my dog struggle to free herself, bobbing up and down in the water and barking, seemingly only making the tangles worse.

"Camaro!" I shouted in panic, racing down the dock and diving straight into the water.

I could hear Luther and Emmett angrily shouting my name, but I ignored them as I powered through the water. Fuck them. I would not sit back and watch my dog drown.

Camaro continued to bark and struggle against the weeds that held her back and I could see her panic turning frantic. I heard two loud splashes behind me, sure that Emmett and Luther had jumped in after me. If that was what it took to mobilize them then fine, maybe they could be of some actual use.

I reached Camaro within a few seconds of my initial dive, grabbing her collar to get her to stop twisting herself and calm down. With the water being too deep for me to touch, I struggled to keep Camaro contained while she scratched the shit out of my arms.

Quickly tugging away the floating weeds that she'd somehow tangled herself in, I struggled to hold her head above the water while simultaneously kicking to keep myself afloat. She was already starting to tire, her hind legs faltering to keep her up as her lower body started to sink.

“Mrs. Davis!” Emmett yelled at me as they both swam toward me.
“What the fuck!”

“She’s stuck in the seaweeds! Get your knife out!”

Apparently, the water wasn’t as deep as I thought because as soon as those fuckers got here they were able to stand with the water stopping just at their chins while my ass was still kicking to stay afloat.

“Move,” Emmett ordered as he pulled out his knife and cut the seaweed while Luther took over my hold of Camaro to keep her from going anywhere and making it worse. As soon as the seaweed was cut, I pulled them away from her while Luther gripped the scruff of Camaro’s neck and held her lower body up as he guided her back to the dock.

“Let’s go,” Emmett said with a disgruntled sigh and pulled me to start swimming back for the dock.

Now that I was coming down from the adrenaline rush, I suddenly became aware of how cold the water really was ... or maybe the chill came when I noticed Darren heading toward us from the house. Dread immediately seeped into my stomach.

Goddamnit.

When I reached the dock, I gripped the edge and pulled myself up. Water instantly sloshed everywhere and soaked the wood under my soggy, drenched shoes. Keeping my shoulders squared, I watched Camaro shake the water from her fur, spraying Luther and making me smirk. At least she was okay.

Patting my dog in relief, I started to make my way back up the dock, water dripping from my hair and clothes. I was sure I looked my absolute finest right now.

When Darren's eyes landed on me, his gaze went cold, fury igniting his features as he stopped at the dock.

"What the hell just happened?" he asked, his voice tight with anger as he looked me up and down.

"Camaro got caught in some seaweed fetching a Frisbee. I jumped in to help her."

His eyes narrowed, that stern jaw of his clenching with rage as he stared me down.

"Why was she in the water in the first place?"

"Because dumb-fuck McGee over there decided to throw it straight into the lake," Luther spoke up, pointing at the guard who now stood several feet away from us with three other guards.

Darren turned to look at the guard Luther had pointed at, and the man went so stiff I thought he was going to faint. The rest of the surrounding guards said nothing as they watched, grateful they weren't the ones catching their boss's deadly attention.

“Is that true?” Darren asked the guard, his voice barely holding back his agitation.

The guard’s face went visibly white as he stood there completely motionless. “Well, I didn’t think—”

One swift movement was all Darren made before a gunshot rang out through the air and the guard fell dead to the ground with a bullet wound in his forehead. I barely even flinched. I swore at least one person died around me every day.

“And the two of you let her jump in?” Darren continued, gun still in hand as he turned to address Emmett and Luther, the other guard now completely forgotten.

“Jesus Christ, Darren, it’s not like I was drowning or something. I know how to swim for fuck—” His giant hand struck out like a fucking whip, grasping the entire lower half of my face to cut me off mid-sentence, and yanking me to his chest.

“Not another word,” he warned before turning his heated gaze back to Emmett and Luther.

“We went after her as soon as she bolted,” Emmett said in their defense.

“How far away were you?” Darren asked, unbothered by my incessant struggle as I tried to pry his hand off my damn face. The thing was a fucking vise.

“About fifty feet,” Luther replied.

“From now on it’s twenty feet until I say otherwise.”

I groaned my objection to his sudden declaration, shoving at his chest to release my face so I could at least breathe properly.

The glare I received from him had me quickly rethinking my strategy. “You’re soaking wet, that water is over your head, and there are scratches all over your arms and shoulder,” Darren scolded as he looked me up and down.

“So?!“ I muffled through my still trapped mouth as I glared right back at him. I’d survived so much fucking worse just last night. It was comical to think otherwise.

Finally releasing my face, I took a huge step back and rubbed my now achy jaw but kept my eyes level with his.

“I have enough shit going on, Jaden. I don’t need to add worrying about you creating trouble in my own backyard to that list,” he rumbled, holstering his gun behind his back.

I almost punched him. “Then train your guards to be more respectful of my activities and maybe a little more attentive of their surroundings. None of this would have happened if he hadn’t walked right into an airborne Frisbee,” I argued, pointing at the freshly dead guard still laid out on the grass.

“None of this would have happened if you had stayed inside like I told you to,” Darren countered, stepping farther into my space to crowd me.

My neck strained just to continue matching his gaze, his giant stature swallowing up not only my space but my entire fucking body, and with each inch he claimed, I felt myself growing more and more agitated.

I scowled in response. “I was not about to sit back and watch my dog drown.”

Darren’s jaw tensed again, that dark blue gaze reminding me of who I was arguing with. “I have half a mind to have that damn dog removed. She’s starting to be more trouble than she’s worth, and I won’t have that, Jaden.”

My eyes widened in shock, panic and fury igniting my entire body until a surge of adrenaline suddenly shot through my veins. This motherfucker just threatened my fucking dog!

I didn’t know what came over me. Maybe it was all the pent-up anxiety. Maybe my brain short-circuited. But in an instant, all my fear and wifely decorum instantly vanished, and I just...lunged.

Bolting forward, I wrapped my arms around Darren's waist and shoved my shoulder into his hip, knocking him back and forcing us both off the dock and straight into the lake. Water splashed everywhere as we sank together, landing in the shallow area that was thankfully only about two feet deep.

A series of "oh shits" circulated the air, the remaining guards still watching from a safe distance, wisely refraining from intervening.

Maneuvering myself as we fell, I twisted my body so that I landed on top of Darren's chest and gripped the collar of his shirt in my hands, yanking him to me.

"Don't you dare touch my fucking dog! Do you hear me!?" I roared down at him. "You lay one fucking hand on her, and I swear to God, you will never know another restful night again because I will kill you in your fucking sleep!" I shouted at him, my rage matching his own as I stared him down.

I didn't know what I expected in return from him, but it certainly wasn't the look he was currently wearing. A flash of shock had reflected in his eyes when we landed in the water, but after my threats had been unleashed, it was quickly replaced with a softened expression and curled lips.

I recognized the look almost immediately, and it made me want to instantly punch him in the mouth. Because that was the look he usually displayed when he thought I was being the most adorable thing he'd ever seen. And it made me growl, knowing he never took my threats seriously.

A soft chuckle reverberated behind his closed lips, my first sign of incoming retribution. "You are just. So. Damn. Cute," he sneered, barely shaking his head. And then his expression suddenly changed, turning completely blank, and I felt a small spike of fear in the pit of my stomach.

Before I could register what was happening, Darren had flipped us, his body trapping mine under the water while both his hands held my head just above the surface. The position made me feel way too vulnerable, fearful

that fighting him like this would be a terrible idea, and he knew that. Bastard.

His piercing gaze held mine in place, my body still as stone while my heart raced like a damn thoroughbred. His voice was low, quiet enough for only the two of us to hear, but the warning in his tone was enough to cool down the rage burning in my chest.

“I’ll admit, that was a nice tackle,” he said, pride lingering in his eyes. “But if you ever pull something like that again in front of my men, I *will* punish you so harshly you’ll never be this confident in their presence again. Do you understand?”

It took me several breaths before I could answer, the frigid chill of the water stealing my voice. “Y-yes,” I whispered on an exhale.

“Good girl. Now kiss me.”

Tilting my head, I begrudgingly pressed my lips to his, giving him the surrender he clearly wanted me to display. Taking advantage, I could taste the smile on his lips as his tongue plundered my mouth, his fingers gripping my jaw to claim more of his territory.

Releasing my mouth, he tilted my face to force me to look at him. “I won’t touch your dog, but understand that she is only yours for as long as I allow it. Camaro needs to be an asset, not a liability. Consider this your one and only warning.”

I had nothing to say to that...because I knew he wasn’t wrong. He could do whatever he wanted, take whatever he wanted, and the most I could do about it was act out my tantrum and proceed to pout for the rest of my life. But even with this acceptance, I didn’t regret a single word.

“I. Said. What. I. Said.”

Darren rolled his eyes and released a heavy breath, his mouth forming the tiniest hint of a smirk as he released my face. “So you did. And now we both need a shower,” he commented.

He then placed his hands under my arms to lift me out of the water and then threw me over his shoulder. Groaning aloud in protest, Darren walked our soaking-wet bodies out of the lake, past the awkwardly silent guards, and down the lawn back toward the house.

“Stau,” Darren commanded in Romanian just as Camaro was getting ready to follow.

I sighed in disappointment as I turned my gaze up to the sky, catching the quick strikes of lightning that burst through the clouds in the far distance. And suddenly, I felt inspired again.

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SOME HELL



Storming through our bedroom door, I tossed Jaden's soaking-wet ass onto the bed, smirking as she rolled with the momentum onto the other side and planted her feet on the floor.

"I'm suddenly in the mood for a little brat taming," I announced as I stretched my neck, moving farther into the room.

Jaden's eyes locked with mine, a look of unease draped across her pretty face as she watched me remove my guns from their holsters and place them on the nightstand, along with my conveniently waterproof phone.

But when her gaze followed my hands to unbutton my wet shirt, I knew her body was already preparing for all the things I planned to do to it.

After that little display by the lake, actually knocking me off the fucking dock the way she did, it was clear my little hellcat had returned much faster than I had anticipated. Either she was getting better at compartmentalizing her trauma or I was losing my touch.

Either way, I was suddenly eager to play.

The shirt stuck to my skin as I pulled it away and chucked it to the floor, droplets of water still clinging to my bare chest. Jaden's hands were buried

in the sheets of the bed for stability, her small frame locked in place as she waited for my next move.

But I wasn't the type to rush these kinds of events, at least not with her. I wanted to drag them out for as long as possible, savoring every second of what I could draw from her, no matter what it was.

Moans, threats, punches, pleasure—I'd take it all and then some until she had nothing left to give.

“Come here,” I ordered.

And like a shift in the air, the wind changed course and Jaden's entire mentality switched from the guarded queen to the prey I craved to hunt and conquer. It was like watching someone split between personalities right in front of you, utterly fascinating.

“No,” she clipped.

A savage grin morphed on my face. Noticing her limbs beginning to slacken, her muscles loosened in anticipation of my familiar brand of brutality headed her way. It had barely been over a week since the basement and her bravery had come back with a vengeance. She was such a damn good girl.

“You have until the count of three,” I informed her, slipping off my wet shoes and socks. “Before I fucking break you in half.”

She sucked in a deep breath, her shoulders rising with the motion, then rolling them back down before straightening and steeling her spine. Jaden had that adorable look of fierce determination shadowing her face, her gaze sharpening to a lethal edge I couldn't wait to taste.

“One,” I said, rolling my own shoulders, letting my heated blood rush through me.

She didn't move.

“Two.”

The single word punctured the air, a final warning that caused Jaden to flinch. It brought a smile to my face as I stared her down, cracking my neck

and expelling some of the built-up pressure. Jaden opened her palms at her sides, stretching her fingers out wide, as if any of it would make one bit of a damn difference. She was fucked either way. Like always.

“Three.”

I moved faster than she could blink, barely granting her enough time to gasp as I clutched her wet hair and yanked her back to my chest. She twisted her body into me and lifted her knee to drive it up into my gut. I took the repeated hit two more times before I laughed and reached for the hem of her dress that had risen up her thighs.

Shoving it up her torso, she swatted at my hand as she tried to back away, but with her hair wrapped in my fist, she wasn’t going anywhere. Growling, she grabbed at my arm holding her, using it for leverage to lift her entire body and shove her heel right under my jaw.

The kick was just enough for my grip to loosen, allowing her hair to slip through my fingers, the release causing her to drop to the floor. She recovered just as quickly as I did, back on her feet, adjusting her dress and grabbing at the first item she could reach.

“I still owe you some hell for that fucking sham of a charity gala!” she growled, throwing a small ceramic display bowl at my head. I dodged it easily, the bowl flying right over my shoulder and shattering against the wall as I charged for her.

Her eyes widened, and she bolted back, damn near leaping over the couch before I caught her around the waist mid-jump and hauled her back to me.

“Yes, you do,” I agreed, turning from the couch with her back tucked against my side. Jaden bucked and twisted until I positioned her to bend over the arm of the couch.

“What the hell was that? Why would you expose yourself like that and help fund your own opposition?” she hissed as she tried to push away from where I had her pinned under me.

Gripping the hem of her dress again, I pulled the wet material up until the perfect curves of her ass fell right into my hands, a lacy black thong peeking between her cheeks. Despite the small round scar that lingered on one cheek, Jaden's ass was still something to marvel at. So much so, I'd almost forgotten she'd spoken.

"I can hardly call them my opposition when they're so good at unwittingly eliminating all of my competitors," I answered, squeezing those perfectly round globes. "My donations fund their operations to unknowingly track down my competition. Multiple groups reveal all the new secrets and methods being used to find them." I pressed myself into her, letting her feel my hardened cock between her cheeks. "The latest tech and software, the most recent targets and raids, the preventive measures, all the connections to the deepest insights, police, judges, private investigators —it keeps me well informed and ahead of the game."

Jaden pushed back against me, her frustration grating her voice. "That's disgusting," she barked, then jammed her sharp little elbow into my rib cage repeatedly until I grabbed her hair and shoved her face down into the cushions.

"Why? Because it puts me at an advantage?"

She turned her head to the side and snarled. "No. Because it makes you the one thing you told me you never were. A liar!"

With her feet dangling above the floor, Jaden was somehow able to pull her knees up and kicked her heels into my thighs, digging in hard enough for her to gain the leverage she needed.

With one foot still planted firmly against my leg, she used it to lift her body up and kicked me in the sternum with everything she had. The impact was hard enough to push me away, giving her the chance to flip herself over and somersault to the other side of the couch.

"A liar, huh?" I pressed, cocking a brow.

“Pretending to be something you’re not? Deliberately misleading those people for your own gain? Yeah, I’d call that a lie,” she snarled.

My muffled laughter filled the air. “Funny, I don’t recall ever being asked by any of them if I specifically engage in such a trade. Seems like an odd question to ask someone at a charity event.”

She growled, her beautiful face twisting into a cute little scowl. “A wolf in sheep’s clothing is still a lie!” she shouted.

I almost snorted at the ridiculous idiom.

“Keeping my business to myself is not a violation of my own code of ethics,” I said, moving around the couch to herd her away from it. “I am not beholden to your standards, my little wife. *You* are beholden to mine.”

Grabbing the frame, I shoved the couch to the side and out of my way, the action causing Jaden to kick at the coffee table between us, flipping it up to crash against my shins.

I barreled through it, kicking it out of my way with my harsh steps, my eyes tracking Jaden’s every move as she reached for a nearby glass figurine and launched it at me. I could have dodged it, but I decided to catch it instead. I didn’t want more glass covering the floor while she was still barefoot.

“No more glass,” I warned, dropping it on the chaise lounge. “I don’t want you cutting up your feet.” Jaden paused for a moment, arching a brow at me before releasing a short, sharp laugh. I shook my head as I lunged for her.

She instantly dropped to the floor, rolling into a tight somersault right under my arms, then rising back on her feet far behind me. Her hand instantly snaked out to snatch another goddamn figurine and lifted it over her head.

What the fuck...

I was going to kill whoever the fuck decorated this house with so much breakable shit.

“Don’t you fucking dare!” I roared. “What did I just say!” My patience for her disobedience was running thin. If she cut her feet, so help me God...

Jaden paused to lower the object and quickly knocked on it with her knuckles, glancing down as she did and then back up at me. “It’s plastic,” she assured, then chucked it across the room at me.

My chest rumbled with agitation as I barely twisted my torso to allow the “plastic” figurine to fly past me as I charged for her. She made it only a few steps before I tackled her to the nearby rug, tumbling so that she fell on top of me to cushion her blow to the floor.

Flipping us over, I pressed myself between her legs, taking the hem of her dress between my hands and ripping it up the side seam. “You’re such a little brat,” I snarled as I smacked the side of her bare ass hard enough to echo through the room.

Jaden yelped as she wrestled with my hands, trying to pry herself away from me. When that didn’t work, she pulled her knees in and shoved them inward against my chest, pushing me back so that she could try to kick off into a backward somersault. But her move failed when I grabbed her ankle and pulled her lower body back down.

She took the opportunity to wrap her leg around the back of my neck and then hooked the knee of her other leg around her shin, trapping my neck and arm between her legs. Securing my stretched-out arm with her own, she squeezed her thighs tightly to lock in an impressive triangle choke, compromising my air supply and blood flow.

I groaned with a grin under the strain, glad to see she had regained the strength in her legs. But when she caught the smile on my face, she growled and squeezed even harder.

Goddamn, she’s fucking strong.

I considered just lifting her and slamming her back down to the floor, but I didn’t want to hurt her that much right now.

So instead, I went for one of her own usual annoying but sometimes effective moves. I reached out with my fingertips and pinched the sensitive skin right between the curves of her ass cheeks.

She gasped in shock, the sharp pain causing her grip around my neck to loosen just enough for me to break out of her hold and lunge forward to trap her legs under me. Pressing down, I pinned her pelvis in place with my own, returning to my earlier task of ripping her wet clothes off.

“Nice try,” I commemorated, the stitching coming apart like paper.

“That’s *my* move,” she grunted as she managed to land two more punches to the side of my face as I yanked the ruined fabric off her.

Her third punch found itself trapped in my palm before it could land. Wrapping my hand around her wrist, I forced it to the floor, squeezing hard enough to make her wince.

It would be so easy for me to break her wrist again with just a few more pounds of pressure, but I didn’t want her incapacitated from another bone fracture. I’d prefer her incapacitation be from something far more rewarding for us both. Or at least, one of us.

“Not a fan when it’s reversed, huh?”

“It’s beneath you,” she retorted as she dug her heels into the floor, pointlessly attempting to pull at my fingers that remained locked around her other wrist.

Some days I wasn’t sure if it was compassionate or cruel to allow her the use of one of her arms while I restrained the other. Compassion in the freedom from restraint or cruelty in crushing the hope of a worthless advantage.

Laughter hummed in the back of my throat at the thought. “The only thing that’s beneath me right now is *you*.”

Ripping away the final remnants of her clothes, I tore at her strapless bra, flinging it across the room. Grabbing her other flailing wrist, I pinned both on either side of her head and buried my face between her damp

breasts. Her cold, wet skin met the new stubble on my jaw, the friction causing her to shiver as she fought against my grip.

The familiar tug of her desperate attempts to break my hold brought a savage smile to my face. I missed this. I missed this fight in her. And I missed fucking it right out of her system.

I moaned with satisfaction as I held her down. “I missed this struggle with you,” I murmured, running my nose along the side of her cheek. “Do you remember how it was in the beginning? When I held you down like this, and you fought against every modicum of pleasure I gave you?”

Jaden scoffed, twisting her head to the side. “You mean when you first started raping me?” she snapped. “Yeah, I remember it vividly.”

I chuckled softly as I drew one of her peaked nipples into my mouth, sucking hard until she squirmed under me even more. She drew in a sharp gasp as her back arched, pushing more of herself into my mouth for the taking. Fuck, my cock was turning into a steel rod in my pants, ready to bury itself home.

“Do you also remember how fucking wet you were?” I teased, dragging the flat of my tongue across the swollen nub. I loved reminding her often of how her body easily surrendered to its impulses while her mind and heart continued to rebel at their own peril. “You were soaking then, just like I know you’re soaking now.”

Jaden groaned as she tried twisting her body under me but quickly discovered how useless that was. “You’re such a fucking asshole!”

Pulling back, I placed both of her wrists in one hand, then slapped her across the face. Not as hard as she deserved, but hard enough to grab her attention.

“I’ve just about had it with that disrespectful mouth of yours,” I growled. “And I’ve let you get away with it for long enough.”

Grabbing the flimsy wet fabric of her thong, I ripped it from her hips, the lining snapping sharply against her skin and causing her to cry out. I

then balled it up in my hand and shoved it into her mouth, sealing my palm over her lips. Jaden shrieked in protest, twisting her head back and forth, attempting to dislodge my grip.

“Cuss again, and I swear to God, this won’t be the only thing you choke on tonight,” I warned, my patience for her inability to follow simple rules running out. Granted, I did enable her far too often. Jaden inhaled deeply through her nose when I pressed the rough wet fabric of my pants against her clit. “Do you understand?”

She grunted in the affirmative, her eyes wincing shut as she tried to nod her head.

“Good girl.”

Removing my hand, Jaden immediately twisted her head to the side and spit her ruined thong out onto the floor.

“And here I thought you’d finally given up,” she snapped bitterly.

I tsk’d at her comment. “You should know better than that by now,” I replied, and then sunk my teeth into her shoulder, biting down hard enough to elicit a cry from her lips. My tongue grazed along her neck as I sucked her skin into my mouth, intent on adding some fresh art to the fading masterpiece around her throat.

It wasn’t ten seconds later that Jaden’s fight began to slow, her energy draining far too quickly for my taste. That was why I liked the chase beforehand. The adrenaline rushing through her veins intensified her fight, prolonging the game and making the victory that much sweeter.

“Oh, come on,” I taunted, pressing my rock-hard length against her pelvis, unreasonably torturing myself. “I know you’re better than this.”

It didn’t take much to piss her off, the insult rupturing the dam containing her civility. Snapping to her left, she managed to reach out and clamp her teeth onto my forearm, biting deep into the skin.

“Fuuucckkkk,” I practically moaned with joy, the pain of Jaden’s bite surging straight to my dick.

Pulling back, I yanked her up by her wrists, dislodging her teeth from my arm to reveal a bloodstained grin on her beautifully flushed face. Leaning down, I took her mouth hard, my lips claiming hers while my tongue delved into her mouth, tasting my own blood.

Jaden tried to pull away, but I locked both of her wrists behind her lower back, my arms keeping her firmly in place. I kissed her violently, taking and conquering all that I could and still demanding more.

When I finally released her mouth, I gripped her throat and shoved her back down to the floor, keeping her pinned while I examined the bite mark she'd given me.

Her teeth had sunk right into my eagle tattoo, the little indentations circling the head of it like she had been trying to bite its head off. With my blood ringing its neck, it looked like she had succeeded. Fuck, I hope it scarred.

"Your little love bites are so endearing," I mused, studying the pattern of her teeth.

"I'm happy to give you another one," she replied, wrapping her arm around mine in an attempt to dislodge it from her neck.

Releasing her, I traded it for both of her wrists in one hand and forced them above her head. Leaning down, I ran my nose along the bridge of hers, enjoying the flex of her muscles every time she tried to twist out of my grip. It just made me smile like the savage that I was.

"Fuck," I groaned as I pushed into her hips, my cock painfully hard. "I may need you to start fighting me again like you did in the beginning, back when you still had hope."

That made her pause, her gaze locking with mine. A hazy liquid amber swirled in her pretty eyes, mixing with flecks of green and traces of brown. Like the final days of autumn still clutching to life before winter buried it beneath its icy chill. But all those beautiful colors couldn't conceal the raging violence brewing behind them.

“You are such a sick fuck.” She emphasized the curse on purpose, then slammed her forehead into my nose, just like the fire-breathing goddess she was.

I reared back, my nose taking all of her brunt force and causing pain to shoot up through my forehead, though not enough to break it. I chuckled as I released her arms and then flipped her onto her stomach.

“Yeah, but I’m your sick fuck,” I rasped, and replaced myself between her legs.

Jaden tried to get up with the advantage of the new position, but my hand snaking out to wrap around her now damp hair had her rethinking her plans. Slamming her head down, I dug her cheek into the rug, eliciting a hiss from her throat as she tried to push back.

Yanking at my belt, I undid my stiff wet pants and pulled out my throbbing cock, desperate for something warm, wet, and mine. Shifting Jaden’s hips up, I entered her pussy without any warning, the impact forcing a sharp cry from her lips.

I didn’t give her the chance to adjust, locking her wrists behind her back and fucking her into a delirious frenzy. Her pussy clenched around me, squeezing my cock like a vise, and it just made me fuck her harder.

“Tell me you’re mine,” I ordered, yanking her by her hair as I pounded her into the floor. She whined beautifully, fighting back hard on those high-pitched cries I loved forcing her to make. “Now,” I snarled, sharply smacking the side of her ass.

“Oh God, I’m yours, you fucking asshole!” she screeched as her pussy spasmed around me.

Reaching out for her discarded thong, Jaden beat me to it, swiping it away and out of reach.

“Oh, you little brat,” I sneered, slamming my palm down onto her ass harder this time and making her jolt. “That’s fine. You can choke on this instead.”

Keeping her wrists in one hand, I reached the other around her face and shoved my fingers into her mouth. The rest of my hand clung around her jaw, keeping it open as I fucked her even harder.

She cried out, fighting my hold on her face as my fingers tortured her gag reflex, but I didn't give her an inch, forcing her head up as I kept up my pace. The grunts and groans from her mouth sported a new tune as her vocal cords competed against the intrusion.

Feeling her warm, wet tongue around my fingers with her warm, wet pussy around my cock was an interesting combination. Apparently, her body thought so too as her walls suddenly clamped down on my cock, her entire body rupturing around me as she came undone.

I sneered as I released her mouth and allowed her to ride out the rest of her orgasm before I withdrew entirely. Using the head of my cock, I rubbed that intoxicating liquid heat of hers all the way up to that second incredibly fuckable hole she had.

"Wait, wait," Jaden panted as she fought to catch her breath, but I just shook my head.

"No."

Jaden tensed as I began to push inside her ass, the tight ring of muscle fighting against my entry. I'd fucked Jaden's ass plenty of other times since our wedding, yet she still hadn't managed to learn how to relax properly. One of these days, she'd figure it out, but until then, I didn't mind coaching her through it.

"Breathe, princess," I reminded her, gently spreading her cheeks. "You know how this works." A low whimper left her throat as she worked to relax her muscles, allowing me to slide in farther. "Good girl."

Rewarding her, I rubbed the pads of my still wet fingers along the seam of her pussy, causing her body to shudder as she moaned into the carpet. Flipping my hand over, I inserted two fingers inside her, extending my thumb to flick across her swollen clit.

More soft moans rang out as I began to fuck her pussy with my fingers, allowing my cock to slide all the way into her ass.

“Goddamn,” I groaned, her tightness choking my cock to the point of pain.

Pulling out, I pushed back in, stretching her wide to accommodate my size. Finding a rhythm, I fucked her ass while my fingers were buried deep inside her, my thumb catching her clit with every stroke.

“Oooooh God!” she whined, her voice strained from so much stimulation it was a wonder she could even form words.

Yanking her back by her hair, I leaned down into her ear. “I’m right here, princess.”

A sharp cry echoed throughout the room. “I can’t—I can’t—” she begged, breathless, and barely able to finish her plea. “Please stop. It’s too much. I can’t! Ah!”

A soft chuckle rumbled in my throat. “I love hearing you beg.”

I instantly increased my pace, driving in and out of her without the mercy she knew didn’t exist. Mercy was not a term I entertained or honored.

“But I’m not giving you a damn choice,” I growled and shoved her head back down into the rug. Like an absolute animal, I finished her off like I was at war, savagely taking every centimeter of her until her screams could no longer be contained.

The music she made as I brought her to the most intense climax she’d ever had was the final catalyst I needed to push me over the edge and detonate inside her. I could feel my cum coating her walls, the pleasure washing through me in waves as I emptied myself completely.

When I was finally sated, I pulled out, my cum instantly leaking out all over her pussy and ass.

Fucking beautiful.

But the second I released her hips from my bruising grip, Jaden collapsed to the floor in a heap, her eyes closed as she focused on regulating her erratic breathing.

I stood and pulled off the rest of my wet pants, my gaze focused on the steady rising and falling of Jaden's chest. Standing over her, I admired all that she was—capable of taking on so much damage in a single instance, just to shed it all off after a couple of days of rest.

Her resilience was incredible, but it had to be exhausting, especially when I kept throwing bricks at her. But rather than avoiding them like most might, she chose to collect them instead and then built herself a fucking fortress around her mind strong enough to withstand anything, including me.

When we got home, I'd make sure she wouldn't be building walls to keep me out anymore. The only thing she'd be building for the next nine months was my fucking child.

“Come on, my little queen,” I said with a grunt, bending down to throw her dead weight over my shoulder. “Time for that shower.”

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CATACLYSM



The following morning, I woke to a strange sense of dread. I felt heavy, weighted down by more than just the strain in my muscles from all the “brat taming” Darren did yesterday.

Either my tolerance for his ruthlessness was increasing or my body had finally figured out how to run on nothing but spite. But none of it compared to the mountain of anticipation that pulsed in my chest at the realization of just one more day.

What the hell would my tomorrow look like after it was over? What bed would I wake up in then? Or was this all just another pipe dream?

Fuck, what if the whole operation failed? What if Darren survives and it only makes things worse? Matt didn’t give me shit to work with, and now, I was living on pins and needles of what-ifs and hows.

What if Jason really did join the fight tomorrow, and Darren killed him? My heart broke at the very thought. It was an incredibly high possibility, and I knew the opportunity would be all too pleasurable for Darren.

He’d probably strive to take him alive just to slowly torture him to death while I watched. I could not let that happen. When the time came, I would have to make sure the fight was successful.

After washing up and readying for what could be my last day of this life, I took Camaro down to the dining room for a late breakfast. I noticed an unusual amount of guards posted throughout the house, heightening my nerves even more for tomorrow's impending battle.

Darren was nowhere to be seen, making me wonder what his agenda would be for the day. So I just asked my question aloud hoping one of the dozen guards nearby would hear and answer.

"Anyone know where the boss is?" I asked sardonically.

The room was silent for several awkward seconds until someone finally spoke up.

"He's out riding this morning, Mrs. Davis," one of the guards replied.

I nodded my acknowledgment, fixing myself a plate of waffles and fruit while Camaro went for her dog bowl nearby. At least I'd have some time alone to calm my nerves before Darren came back.

I picked at my breakfast quietly, finding my appetite to be a continued struggle. I couldn't eat when my nerves were this shot. But I had to keep up appearances and force myself to eat. I would need my strength for whatever tomorrow brought.

Barely finishing my plate, I stood from my seat, ready to go see Luna, the horse Darren had gifted me as a wedding present. But just as I was about to head for the door, I was immediately halted, the guard standing at the door raising his hand.

"Sorry, Mrs. Davis, but you're to remain inside today unless accompanied by Mr. Davis. No exceptions."

My eyes went wide with rage. "Are you fucking kidding me?"

"No, ma'am," he answered, shaking his head with what almost seemed like sympathy.

"Why?"

"It's not my place to question him."

I rolled my eyes at the useless response. “Well, when is he coming back?”

“I’m not sure,” he answered.

“How long ago did he leave?”

“About thirty minutes ago.”

I groaned and spun away in frustration.

Fuck.

He would probably be gone for another hour or two. That motherfucker.

Fresh with rage, I stormed down the hallway with Camaro attempting to keep up behind me. Rounding the corner, I headed for the gym to relieve my anger with a punching bag when the sound of a helicopter flying nearby caught my attention.

If Darren was out riding, why was there a helicopter? Was he expecting someone?

The answer to my question came when the hallway ahead of me suddenly exploded. A storm of fire and heat and debris erupted in front of me, the mass of which was enough to send me flying backward, landing hard on my back and side.

Pain burst throughout my shoulder and hips, radiating straight to my pelvis. The heat of the fire licked at my skin, competing for attention as my ears rang from the roar of the blast. I could barely hear the rest of the security alarms going off, the muffled sound blaring in and out all around the house.

My vision wasn’t much better as I tried to fight through the disorientation, the room tilting on its side as water from the sprinkler system began raining down, soaking everything as it tackled the fire.

Somewhere beyond the noise, I could hear Camaro barking, but I couldn’t get my body to fucking cooperate. I struggled to pull myself up, the water soaking my clothes and making me feel even heavier than my rocked limbs already did.

“Camaro!” I screamed through the noise, trying to see past the water, smoke, and debris to find her. Despite multiple voices shouting and alarms blaring, I could hear her barking, her sharp whine leading me as I stumbled through the mess.

When the sprinkler system stopped, my eyes could focus, clarity finally returning to my rocked system. As I climbed over the debris, the sound of more men yelling had me rushing through until I finally found my poor dog stuck under some of the rubble of the house.

Lifting the heavy, wet boards up, Camaro scrambled to her feet, her body moving naturally without any painful cries. Relief filled me when I realized she wasn’t injured but quickly sank to dread when the sound of gunfire caught my ears.

Shit, was this the attack? They were a fucking day early!

“Mrs. Davis!” More shouts came from behind me. “Get down!” A group of guards had made their way into the hallway just when another group of gunmen entered from the destroyed blast site.

“Shit!” I yelled, ducking down behind more debris with Camaro just as the gunfire went off.

What the fuck had happened? Had Matt lied to me? I knew I was a goddamn fool for trusting him.

Cursing Matt for denying the very important details, I waited for the gunfire to cease before grabbing Camaro by the collar and rushing into the next room. After I practically threw ourselves into the space, I realized we had made it into the parlor. As the guards fought off the approaching gunmen, I raced to one of the cabinets and threw it open, grabbing one of Camaro’s protective body covers.

“Come here, girl,” I called, placing the body armor over her wet and dirt-covered torso, quickly strapping it on and tightening it as fast as I could. She growled as her paws clicked madly over the wood floors, her body turning toward the door to guard me.

With Camaro secure, I grabbed the armor fitted for me and strapped it over my wet clothes. Darren had once shown me where at least ten of these armor kits were hidden around the house.

He had little fail-safes scattered throughout every piece of property he owned for this very reason, but the ones I knew about where meant only for me, which meant they didn't include any fucking guns, only knives, tasers, and first-aid kits.

As I tightened the straps, I remembered that Matt had warned me to be away from the house before the fight started. Clearly, whoever was here wasn't too keen on ensuring I didn't get caught in the crossfire. They'd blown up the side of the house I'd been walking through and shot in every direction without hesitation.

Did Matt tell them I wouldn't be here?? That wouldn't make sense if they were attacking early! Something was off about this attack. An objective to refrain from shooting at a very obvious redhead woman with a dog should be an easy order to follow, but these guys weren't even looking. What the fuck kind of rescue operation was this?

What if this isn't your rescue mission at all?

My throat went dry at the very real possibility of that. Darren had many enemies. But what were the chances of back-to-back attacks from different adversaries?

The more I thought about it, the less sense any of this made. Dread seeped into my stomach as I considered the probability that Jason might not actually be in this fight. That I was about to engage in the wrong attack and completely blow my redemption period with Darren. If he caught me doing this and we both lived, I was going to be so fucked.

But there was only one way to know any of this for sure, and that meant shoving his latest rule right out the fucking window.

Like you were going to follow it anyway.

"Camaro," I called, patting the side of my thigh for her to follow.

With knives in both hands, I slowly made my way around the doorway into the quiet hallway. I could see a few bodies crumpled over the debris of the house. Otherwise, no one else was around.

Hopefully, their guns were still attached. But then the sound of more heavy boots came barreling around the corner, fifty feet in front of me.

Only one way to find out if they're here for me.

Hating this strategy, I stood just outside the doorway and waited for them to notice me. When they did, they all paused in unison, and I held my breath.

“Uh...hi?” I waved awkwardly.

Hi? That's what you say?

I would have punched my inner monologue self, but I didn't have the time. Devastation was just as swift as the bullets that were suddenly shot my way by the gunmen, forcing me to duck down and back into the room.

FUCK!

Rolling to the floor, I ducked down behind one of the couches as Camaro followed, moving just as quickly as the approaching footsteps. Hiding against the side of the tall liquor cabinet, I waited silently as the gunmen spread out into the room.

Thank fuck for all the noise and gunfire still going on around us, otherwise they probably would have heard Camaro's panting next to me.

When the gunmen gathered into the right formation, I clutched my blades against my palms and made my move.

Sprinting into a run, I launched myself at the closest one before they noticed me, eliminating the distance he would need to shoot me. Both knives sank deep on either side of his neck as my legs wrapped around his waist, my front to his back.

The distraction gave Camaro the advantage of a sneak attack as she launched herself onto the closest gunman and trapped his jugular between her jaws.

Both men screamed. The momentum of my impact swung him around, effectively shielding me from the other gunmen lucky enough not to have something sharp buried in his neck. Yet.

Releasing my grip on one knife, I reached down and grabbed the pistol from his thigh holster and aimed it at the other gunmen, putting two bullets into his face. He dropped to the floor as I released the second knife still buried in the other one's neck, then jumped down to kick him in the back of his knee. When he went down, I grabbed both of my knives and yanked them out, leaving him to choke on his own blood as he crumbled to the floor.

Walking around him, I moved for the last gunman, who was currently pressed up against the wall with a very large dog on top of him, wearing her jaw as a neck warmer. Watching him yank a knife from his belt, I lunged forward and stomped on his wrist, pinning it to the floor beneath my tennis shoe.

“Vabasta,” I ordered. Camaro immediately released her hold and stepped back, but her attention was still very much on the bleeding meat sack beneath her.

Crouching down, I placed my knife just under his eye, letting the tip softly drag along his skin.

“Is Jason with you?” I asked, keeping my voice low so that only he could hear.

While he was clearly in pain, he still managed to look confused.

“Who...the fuck...is that?” he croaked out as he clutched at his mess of a throat.

I tried not to be too disappointed with his answer. Not every foot soldier had all the information.

“Do you know who I am?”

More confusion. Not a good sign.

“Why are you here?”

The gunman was not impressed with my twenty-one questions and just shook his head, a gurgled chuckle rolling up his throat. Pressing the knife deeper into his skin, I made sure the blade was a single millimeter away from puncturing through his lower eyelid.

“Why. Are. You. Here?” I tried again, maintaining the fake patience in my voice. If Darren caught me doing this, I’d be so goddamn fucked. Hopefully all the cameras in the area had been blown to shit too.

The gunman’s face twisted into an ugly scowl, so I added more of my weight onto his wrist, making him hiss as he sucked in a gargled breath.

“Payback,” he finally groaned. Didn’t sound like much of a rescue plan to me.

“Who sent you?” I asked, reducing the pressure. I needed to know if Matt had actually coordinated this attack and if Jason was involved.

He laughed again. “Get fucked, bitch,” he mumbled in Spanish.

With no emotion on my face, I pressed the knife into his eye, slowly increasing the pressure second by second until he started screaming.

“I’m going to slice your eyes open and then my dog is going to eat your fucking face if you don’t give me a name,” I seethed as blood leaked down his cheek. “Rainer? Spade? Miguel Spade?”

“Ah! Sí! Spade! Sí!” he shouted as his feet kicked against the floor.

I didn’t know whether to be disappointed or suspicious, but as I withdrew the knife and drove it into his skull, I decided it wasn’t enough to turn back.

Matt had emphasized enemies as friends, so it wouldn’t be entirely out of the question that Matt might have teamed up with Miguel and Jason to use their combined forces against Darren.

But if that were truly the case, their soldiers probably wouldn’t have shot at me just now.

I sighed with frustration as I listened to the sounds of the fighting throughout the house. There was noise everywhere, so pinpointing any one

sound was difficult.

The helicopter was still flying overhead, gunshots competing with the shouting voices of men as they fought while the house crumbled around us. It was a mess of chaotic racket with no discernible path for me to navigate through.

Loud gunfire cut through my thought process, the little sonic booms stealing all my focus. Until an even louder explosion suddenly overtook it, the sound of something metal and heavy crashing to the ground and scaring the absolute shit out of me.

Needing some kind of confirmation, I quickly peered through the bulletproof window in the hall to see what was now left of the helicopter as it burned in a heap of scrap over the grass. And then my gaze moved beyond it to catch Darren casually tossing what looked like a grenade launcher to the ground.

Well, wasn't he just resourceful?

With the threat of the helicopter gone, I decided now was probably the right time to scope the place for more information before Darren caught up to me.

If Jason wasn't in this particular fight, then there was no way in hell I was getting out of here. But I needed to look for him to be absolutely sure. I needed to know if he was here. And the only way to do that was to be seen by the men with guns. And I needed to somehow make that happen without ending up like the damn helicopter.

Collecting the guns and ammunition of the dead gunmen, I quickly armed myself to the max. Pressing the cheap AK-47 to my shoulder, I looked down my sight to the end of the hallway. Aside from all the debris and dead bodies littering every square foot, there was no one left in this area, though I could still hear gunfire in the distance.

Stupid idea. This was a fucking stupid idea.

What the hell else are you gonna do? Hide like Darren told you to?

No, I needed to see this through. I couldn't afford to be a coward and waste the opportunity.

Creeping through the hallway with Camaro following closely at my side, I carefully stepped around the dead bodies scattered in every direction. Each one I came to brought a tsunami of dread as I feared I would stumble upon Jason's dead body. I had to check every single one to rule out the possibility, then collected tokens of guns and ammunition after the relief set in. Now I just had to hope I had enough time before Darren found me. *If he found me.*

I continued maneuvering through the house until stray bullets shot through the walls ahead of me. Dropping low to the ground, I crouched quickly through the house, hoping to find a good vantage point somewhere. It sounded like it was coming from the kitchen. Circling back, I made my way around the lobby and then stopped dead as two gunmen rounded the corner.

I pulled the trigger without thinking, spraying their legs with bullets until they both dropped to the floor. Racing over to them, I kicked their guns out of reach while Camaro jumped on top of one and growled in his face.

"Why are you here?" I asked, my rifles pointed at their face.

They both moaned in agony.

"Fuck you, bitch," the one said and moved to grab his pistol from his leg.

But Camaro was already on him, chomping her teeth down onto his arm and crushing his bones. He screamed as he wrestled with Camaro, dropping the gun to the floor as he tried to push her off him. I kicked the gun away, then whistled for Camaro to back off. The guy instantly clutched his arm, squirming in pain from both his busted legs and arms.

"Did Matthew Rainer send you?" I asked aloud.

And again, they looked confused. But I didn't get much time to dwell on it as the sound of metal clinked near my foot. Looking down, my heart stopped when I realized it was a fucking grenade.

"Shit!" I shouted, kicking the grenade away and grabbing Camaro by the collar as we vaulted in the opposite direction. But the ensuing explosion was still too close and caused one of the nearby walls to collapse overtop of me. The pressure made it difficult to breathe as the weight of the wall instantly forced me to the ground, my legs and waist pinned under the heavy drywall and shelving.

"Fuck!" I cursed to myself as I tried to push the wall off me. I was a sitting fucking duck under this thing.

Camaro raced to my side, her snout going in all directions as she tried to sniff out the solution to my confinement. Her only option was to whine and bark out her distress.

"Quiet," I told her, wincing to myself as I tried to wiggle free as much as I could. Grabbing a broken piece of shelf, I wrapped both hands around each end and held it out above my head. "Camaro, bite, pull," I ordered. Sharp canine teeth bit down onto the wood and pulled the material, yanking left and right until one of my legs finally came loose. "Good girl!" I praised, pulling myself up for more leverage, but my other leg was still trapped. "Fuck," I muttered as the pain began to build in my leg from the pressure.

More stomping boots in the background had me moving even faster until my eyes caught those boots in my gaze.

Shit.

Reaching down, I managed to pull the pistol from my side and fired two shots at the quickly approaching gunmen. The first one went down, but as I pulled the trigger for another shot, there was nothing but a clicking sound.

Fucking empty.

Fear hit me hard as the remaining four gunmen lifted their rifles and aimed right at my fearless dog just as she lunged for them.

“No!”

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SECURED



The wind whipped through my hair as I rode down the path, Elsie galloping beneath me at a quick and even pace. When the first target appeared between the trees, I raised my Winchester lever-action rifle and fired, the bullet tearing through the little red dot in the center. Keeping focus, Elsie blazed down the path while my attention moved to each appearing target, a single bullet penetrating the bull's-eye each time.

Runs like these allowed me to clear my head, my body operating on autopilot and muscle memory as I cleared my moving targets one by one. With everything that had happened in the past forty-eight hours, I needed a few moments of clarity, away from the demands of constant chaos.

For the first time in a long time, I did not have all the answers. And it was making me incredibly irritable and murderous.

Still one step ahead of you.

The words taunted me, something most of my enemies did not do. They couldn't afford that kind of game. They had to be more discreet in their attempts to thwart me, keeping silence to maintain their safety in

anonymity. But their identities didn't remain secret for long, my retribution steadfast and absolute.

But this new adversary was different. They were deliberately trying to provoke me, taking their sweet-ass time with whatever the fuck it was they were trying to accomplish. But the attacks didn't make sense.

First, they killed the man responsible for attacking us in Rome, then they killed my surveillance team tasked with hunting down Matt. The motives weren't connecting.

And to top it all off, Jaden and the auction were both attacked on the same night. Had the whole thing just been some elaborate distraction to steal nearly two million dollars from our accounts while no one was looking?

Shifting my aim for the final time, I pulled the trigger, eliminating my last target of the run. I sighed as I pulled on Elsie's reins, signaling her to slow down.

I just needed to remain patient. One way or another, my enemies always revealed themselves, whether they wanted to or not. And when this one did, they'll wish they had never even heard of my fucking name.

Elsie trotted into a stop, snorting soundly just as Scott pulled up beside me on Zac, finishing his run of the targets. His energy was wrought with agitation as he pocketed his rifle in the saddle holster, his brow knitted together.

"The point of this exercise is to recalibrate, not antagonize ourselves," I commented as I slid my rifle into my holster.

Scott shook his head, his eyes still brimming with frustration. "I can't shake this feeling that we're missing something bigger. Something right under our nose. It's driving me nuts," he muttered, his voice strained with contempt. I nodded in agreement.

Turning our horses around, we slowly made our way down the wide, open path back to the estate.

“Once we’ve exterminated Miguel, we can refocus our efforts,” I said, cracking a kink in my neck. “If we stretch our resources too thin, then they’ll become useless, and you know how I feel about useless things.”

Scott dipped his chin. “Miguel has to be nearly bled dry by now. All those safe-houses were demolished within hours of each other. He has no resources left on this side of the border.”

“That we know of,” I added grimly.

We were silent as we continued down the path, lost in our thoughts and theories of what was to come. Scott was right, though. We were missing something, and in my line of work, missing something was a deadly mistake to make.

I fully planned to personally double my efforts into hunting this shadow clown before he, or she, became emboldened to attempt more damage.

“The wind is picking up,” Scott suddenly commented as a heavy breeze blew through the trees.

I nodded as I reached back for my phone when the light sound of an approaching helicopter caught my attention.

“Are we expecting anyone I don’t know about?” I asked Scott.

“No,” he answered sharply.

Kicking Elsie into gear, Scott and I raced back down the path just as a loud explosion rocked the air, throwing both our horses into a fit.

Fuck!

Elsie and Zac both suddenly skidded to a stop, bucking and kicking, a shrill squeal echoing through the trees. Tightening my legs, I pulled the reins to keep myself from falling off as I tried to rope Elsie back under control.

When her front hooves finally touched the ground, I kicked hard, driving her to race off toward the noise. Scott was only a few paces behind me after regaining control of Zac, pushing just as hard as me to get back to the estate.

Two days. Two fucking days and now my private home was being attacked, with the most precious item I owned not permitted to leave it.

God-fucking-dammit.

When the sound of gunfire erupted, I kicked even harder. We were nearly ten minutes out on a steady cantor, but I aimed to cut that time in half, fueled by the wrath simmering in my blood.

Keeping steady, I managed to pull out my phone to check Jaden's vitals, ensuring she was still alive. Her heart rate was through the roof, but she was alive. For now.

Whoever the fuck thought to enter my property today, I would end their entire fucking bloodline before the sun went down.

Finally breaching the trees, I could see a black gunship helicopter hovering next to the house, smoke filtering from the destruction as it began to rain gunfire across the lawns.

Launching myself from Elsie, I quickly descended into the dog kennel, ignoring the chaotic barking and howling as I pressed the hidden trigger release on the wall to reveal an extensive arsenal of weapons.

Grabbing the RPG, I heaved it over my shoulder, engaged the settings, then marched out onto my lawn. Taking aim, I fired it at the damn chopper, the explosion a satisfying storm of thunder as it erupted into a fiery ball of crushed metal, crashing to the ground with a loud metallic thud.

Tossing the RPG aside, Scott and I turned back to the kennel to quickly arm ourselves and made our way to the house. Checking my phone for Jaden's location, imagine my fucking surprise when I saw she was not yet bunkered down in one of the panic rooms where she was supposed to be by now.

Both of her legs had better be fucking broken or I was going to break them myself and permanently chain her to our bed when this was over.

"You take the east. I'll take the west," I said to Scott as we approached the back of the house. "Jaden is the top priority."

“On it,” he replied before separating from me to head in the opposite direction.

Creeping through my own house, I quickly maneuvered around the disheveled furniture and chunks of blown-apart drywall, following the sound of gunfire and combat.

Sliding to my knees, I knelt beside an upturned table just as a swarm of bullets burst overhead. Shoulder to the floor, I returned fire, my aim far better than that of my adversaries. Moving past their dead bodies, I pressed my rifle hard against my shoulder and squeezed off two more rounds, dropping two more unsuspecting bodies to the floor.

The sound of barking among the gunfire caught my ears.

“Camaro!” I called as I moved toward the sound of her bark. Jaden’s mark had placed her somewhere near the parlor, so she had to be close.

But before I could advance, the muzzles of several rifles rounded the corner. Lifting my knee, I kicked the rifles hard, throwing off the trajectory, and slammed the butt of my M16 into the face of the nearest body.

Bringing the rifle back up, I fired it at the second gunman in the throat, then grabbed the top of the third gunman’s rifle, bullets firing from the barrel as I steered it around to fire at the first of them. Dropping my gun, I ripped my knife from my belt and shoved it into his trachea, yanking it out to cut more of his arteries than was necessary.

A body then slammed into me from behind, my momentum following the flow of energy to twist around and out of his hold. He lifted his leg to kick me, my body turning to the side to trap his leg between my arm and ribs before my elbow slammed down on top of his kneecap, breaking it in place.

Satisfied with his howling, a quick glimpse of his utility vest showed two grenades attached, prompting me to reach out and snatch the pin from one of them. I then kicked him into the next room, right into two more of his buddies, all three bodies crashing to the floor.

Picking my rifle back up, I bolted from the area just as the grenade went off, the sharp explosion activating the designated area sprinkler system and the familiar ringing in my ear. Increasing my pace, I leaped over debris as I followed the sound of Camaro's bark until I heard it morph into a vicious series of snarls.

Fuck!

I abruptly halted in my tracks when I came upon several more gunmen, the barrels of their rifles moving low toward the ground. Two gunshots were fired, dropping one of the gunmen to the ground while the rest advanced.

"No!" Jaden's panicked voice screamed just as Camaro came into my vision.

Firing off multiple shots, I sprayed my bullets into the backs of two men before they crumpled to the ground. I groaned as I realized my clip was now fucking empty, and I lacked the time to reload.

Advancing quickly on the others who had now scattered, I slammed the butt of my gun into the temple of the nearest one while kicking the rifle out of the hands of the one at my right.

Retrieving my hunting knife from my side, I ducked below a swinging fist and drove the serrated blade into their side, twisting it deep before yanking it back out. Blood sprayed across my face, the smell antagonizing that demon inside me, the one that lusted for carnage.

Quickly lifting my arm, I blocked the aim of the pistol directed at me just as it fired into the ground. Kicking in his knee, the gunman screamed as his body dropped low, giving me the opportunity to shove my knife deep into his throat.

Dodging another strike coming from my left, I grabbed the raised arm, twisted my body and hurled the fucker over my shoulder and into the torso of the last approaching gunman. Both men went down, their backs hitting

the floor hard just as I drew my Berretta and fired a shot into each of their throats.

Moving between their mangled bodies, Camaro barked one hell of a snarl as she stood over Jaden, her teeth bared in warning. Rage ripped through me like lightning when I noticed she was wearing one of her protective vests that were also stored alongside Jaden's. If she had time to armor her dog, then she had time to get her ass to one of the many panic rooms hidden throughout the house.

“Discedant,” I ordered, Camaro relaxing her stance and immediately backing out of the way.

Pocketing my pistol at my lower back, I crouched down to find Jaden staring blankly up at me, her amber eyes wet with fear as her hands clutched the wall she was clearly trapped under. Pressing my hands under the debris, I heaved it up, shoving it away with a crashing thud, dust swarming into the air.

Jaden tried to pull herself up, but I beat her to it by grabbing the shoulder strap of her protective vest and yanking her to me. She practically dangled on her toes as I took stock of her appearance, noticing all the magazines of different calibers strapped to her vest, accompanied by three knives, two Glocks, and a single grenade. She was also soaking wet, donning bits of dust and drywall in her damp hair while her skin was marred with even more scratches and bruises than before.

An ungodly amount of fury rushed through me at Jaden's blatant disregard for my orders, clearly choosing to engage rather than run like I had literally just told her to merely two days ago.

When my eyes locked with hers, her chest shuddered as her glossy gaze filled with dread. I wanted to instantly strangle her all over again. And she knew it.

“You've disobeyed me for the last time,” I growled.

Hauling her in the direction of the nearest panic room, I whistled for Camaro to follow as more gunfire echoed in the background. My urgency to get Jaden under ground intensified as it drew closer.

“Darren, wait!” she pleaded as she tried to regain her footing while I practically dragged her across the floor. “I was trying to find one! But the house was blown to shit! There were gunmen everywhere! I wasn’t going to look for a panic room unarmed!”

My blood boiled hotter and hotter with every lie she spoke in her defense, unwilling to entertain a single word from her until I had her safely bunkered down.

The fact that I couldn’t kill Clive and Owen a second time with my own hands pissed me off even more. If they had handled the attack in Chicago better, they would still be alive to be here to protect Jaden from her own stupidity.

Fuckers were lucky they were already dead.

Movement at the far end of the hall caught my attention. Gripping Jaden’s vest, I shoved her through the nearest open doorway as I trained my pistol in the direction of the gunfire aimed at us. I gritted my teeth as a bullet grazed my arm before two of my own entered the skulls of the gunmen ahead of us, dropping them both to the ground.

Turning back into the room, I found Jaden trying to pick herself up from the floor, grumbling under her breath. Yanking her back up to stand, I didn’t wait for her to regain her balance as I continued to drag her down the hallway.

“Darren, wait!” she continued to protest as she uselessly pulled against my grip.

Ignoring her pleas, I practically threw her against the wall of what was left of the library. I reached down to remove the rug, concealing the hidden lever of the trapdoor underneath. Lifting the lid, I clocked my wife with a murderous glare and pointed at the descending stairway. “In. Now.”

“No, Darren, wait, wait! I don’t want to go down there! Please!”

I cocked a brow at her sudden refusal.

Did she seriously just tell me no?

“I can’t be down there! I need to be outside! Please! I don’t want to be left in this house by myself! It’s on fire!” she screeched, panic rising in her voice as she started to back away.

My eyes narrowed at the oddly misplaced apprehension she was still wearing on her scraped-up face, and it made the well-controlled rage still simmering inside become absolutely volcanic.

I don’t have time for this shit.

In two steps, I marched forward and backhanded her so hard across the face she fell into the barely intact bookcase. Camaro whined as Jaden’s knees buckled, her motor skills dazed from the impact as she failed to regain her bearings.

With her diminished capacity, I easily threw her over my shoulder without a fight and moved back for the hidden stairs, whistling again for Camaro to go in ahead of us.

Her claws clicked along the metal stairs as I followed her in, closing the door over top of us and locking it in place. The bottom of the stairs yielded an open space wide enough to fit a twin bed, a fridge, a sink, and a tiny connected bathroom.

Jaden groaned and squirmed as I laid her down on the bed to disarm her body of every weapon she had collected from her kills. Each item I found brought me closer and closer to throttling her knowing she had engaged this many people. But I didn’t have time to punish her now. It would have to wait until this was over.

Despite her groaned protests, I gathered Jaden’s little stash and locked it all away in a large drawer. I then moved to retrieve my most reliable fail-safe, the only thing I could count on to keep Jaden obedient. When I turned

back around, she was clutching the side of her face as she pushed herself up against the wall.

“Darren, please don’t leave me down here,” she begged as I moved toward her. When her eyes landed on what was in my hand, more panic jolted her body. “Please! No! Take me outside! I don’t want to be trapped in here!”

Ignoring her nonsensical protest, I reached out and clutched her arm, hauling her to me as I removed the cap of the syringe with my teeth.

“No, Darren wait, wait!” she begged as she tried to maneuver away from me, pressing her hand against my wrist to stop me.

Camaro continued to whine loudly as I angrily whipped Jaden around onto her stomach, pressing my knee into her back to hold her down.

“Darren, no! Wait! Stop!” she cried as I pushed the needle into the back of her arm, injecting her with the sleeper agent calibrated just for her.

“Stop...” she mumbled before her eyes fell shut and her body finally went limp. Rolling her onto her back, I removed her vest and did a quick scan of her body, searching for obvious injuries. Relief was swift when all I found were scrapes, bruises, a few burns, and a shit ton of drywall dust.

Moving my gaze back to her face, I could see her reddened cheek was already starting to swell. She’d have one hell of a bruise and a massive headache when she woke up, but at least she’d be alive.

Rising to my feet, I grabbed a small ice pack from the freezer, wrapped it in medical gauze from a first-aid kit and placed it under her cheek. The swelling should be significantly reduced by the time I returned.

But the fact that I had to resort to such extreme measures was an infuriating mystery I’d have to dwell on at a later time. Right now, I needed to get back up there and handle whatever the fuck had decided to knock on my door.

And I needed to be able to do that without worrying about my disobedient brat of a wife. Knocking her ass out and hiding her in a safe

place was the only option I had since I couldn't trust her to follow my orders. I'd enjoy rectifying that later.

"Stay, Camaro," I told the dog, approving as she hopped up onto the bed and laid her head over Jaden's torso with a sad whine. "Good girl."

Turning to the monitors of the security cameras installed into the wall, I searched for my would-be enemy.

Two black vans idled before the front entrance, the chrome gate lying in pieces on the ground. Two of my men were lying dead or severely injured at their posts in front of the house. Six cameras from the east wing of the house were destroyed, but I spotted Scott moving through the halls, giving orders to my remaining guards.

With the two vans and the chopper, and what I could find on-screen, I estimated about twenty gunmen had descended into my home. And that was a deadly fucking mistake.

Pulling out several hidden drawers, I switched out my Kevlar plates with fresh ones and then slung an AK-12 over my shoulder. After strapping on two additional Glocks, two grenades, three knives, and several more magazines, I was sufficiently armed. I checked the cameras one last time to ensure no one was outside the trapdoor and quietly made my way back up the stairs.

Almost immediately, there was more gunfire in the background, and the sound drew my attention to the southern entrance. Maneuvering quickly through my destroyed house, the sounds of fighting increased as I got closer. Rounding the corner, I found Scott and two of my guards fighting off three more gunmen.

From my hidden vantage point, I was able to shoot a round into each of their legs. Shifting quickly, I slammed the butt of my rifle into the head of one while Scott and my guards did the same with the others. We would need some to survive for questioning later on. And I planned on having their night last for a very long time.

“You find her?” Scott asked as he knelt to hogtie their hands and feet.

“She’s secure in bunker three. How many have you taken out?”

“Including these three? Six.”

“There shouldn’t be very many left then. There are two vans parked outside.”

“I saw,” he confirmed with a nod.

“Try to keep as many alive as you can. I want at least five to gut later on.”

“I’ll do what I can, but I don’t think there are many left,” he replied with a bloody smirk on his face.

“I’ll head east and meet you at the front exit.”

“Have fun,” he jested before I turned away and headed farther into the house.

Rage filled the void in my chest at the state of my fucking house. It was completely destroyed, which meant Jaden couldn’t stay here any longer than completely necessary. Once I wrapped things up here, I’d have to move her to a nearby safehouse.

I managed to tag three more remaining gunmen, killing only one and clipping the limbs of the others with enough bullets to keep them from lifting a single toe. My guards had killed the rest that had scattered out along the rest of the property.

With the grounds finally secured, I ordered my men to clean up the bodies and to start working on damage control. With my medic team on their way, the only thing left to do was to drag some answers out of some soon-to-be very sorry assholes.

The corners of my mouth lifted as I made my way back through the house. Scott was going to need some assistance in stringing a bunch of dead motherfuckers up.

AFTERMATH

Ice-cold water was thrown into the face of the man hanging by his wrists from the chains built into the wall. His dark beard was caked in blood, the red droplets dripping onto his cheap leather boots.

The striking cold rush of the water abruptly woke him from his fist-induced coma, causing him to cough and sputter.

Four of his buddies were also strung up throughout the concrete room, their bodies wrought with destruction and wear from the small battle that had ended barely an hour ago.

Instead of just setting the metal bucket down, Scott threw the damn thing right into his chest, the bucket bouncing off him and clattering to the floor.

“That was excessive,” I commented, side-eyeing Scott as he moved on to one of the other captives. With so many of them, a team effort was needed.

Grabbing one of the wrenches off the nearby tray, I made my way toward the shivering fuck and placed his thumb between the clamps of the wrench and gently squeezed.

“How did you know we were at this location?” I asked calmly.

This particular location was pretty well-known among my inner crowd, since most of them attended my wedding here. But how they knew we

would be here when I literally decided on it only two days ago had me questioning that inner circle. I needed to know if I had any rats among my ranks and confidants.

He took several deep breaths then, his chest rising up and down as he contemplated how many fingers he wanted to lose before I killed him. I gave him five seconds to decide before squeezing the clamps until they cut through the flesh of his thumb. A squeal of a scream escaped his lips, a pathetic sound I intended to amplify.

“Answer my question or I’ll finish what I started,” I said, squeezing the wrench just a little tighter.

He groaned as he sucked in another breath, his eyes moving back and forth from me to Scott as he began cutting off his screaming captive’s ear. It was nice having some extra motivation in the room.

“Okay, okay,” he began, his heavy breathing becoming increasingly annoying. “The information w-was given from an outside s-source. But I’m too low in the r-ranks to know who or c-care.”

His Mexican accent was thick as he spoke in stuttering English. I squeezed the wrench until the bone between it finally snapped, crunching under the pressure like a walnut.

“Fuck!” he screamed, the sound bouncing off the concrete walls and causing the other captives to jerk in their chains. I couldn’t help but snort.

“You’re going to have to do better than that if you want to keep the rest,” I informed him, flipping the bloodied wrench in my palm.

More breathing. More crying. More wishing he were already dead.

“Really!” he cried. “I don’t know where we got the info. I’m just a foot soldier!”

I rolled my eyes. “I’ve already encountered enough of Miguel’s *foot soldiers* to know where he’s hiding and how many of his men are across the border.”

More screaming stole his attention away as Scott continued questioning the other captives, hopefully creating more motivation for this stupid motherfucker to speak.

“I don’t know what else to tell you!”

Placing his index finger between the wrench, I squeezed it just as I had before.

“Preferably something that will spare you this finger. Otherwise I’ll just skip the questioning and move on to the fun part.”

I squeezed the clamps harder, drawing blood from the torn skin as it dripped into a puddle on the floor. It took another thirty minutes and all four digits to be torn from his hand before he finally went in the right direction of what I was looking for.

“There’s an extraction point!” he suddenly shouted just as I was about to start on the other hand.

I rolled my eyes. This was the best he could do? “What good is an extraction point when I can easily trace that helicopter you brought back to its original base?”

“M-Miguel will be there,” he sputtered.

“Max! You dirty piece of shit!” one of the other captives shouted out.

“F-fuck you, Mick!” he shouted back.

I narrowed my eyes at what sounded like complete bullshit. “Why the fuck would Miguel be at an extraction point?” I would have expected his cowardly ass to remain hidden in his little fortress behind the safety of the Mexican border.

“Because we were s-supposed to bring you in alive. He wanted to be there f-for that himself.”

I released the clamp around his finger and stepped away, the laughter bouncing up from my chest impossible to contain. The audacity of these assholes. They thought they were going to take me alive? Hilarious.

“When and where?” I asked, holding the wrench up for emphasis.

“Twenty klicks south of here. Three hours from now.”

I grinned at the sudden turn of events. It looked like Miguel would have his final wish come true after all.

“Seems you get to live another three hours.”

Grinning, I stepped away to answer an incoming call. I placed the phone to my ear just as another scream ripped out from one of the captives.

“What.”

“Sir,” Eric said on the other line, practically panting. “There was another attack. You weren’t the only one.”

For fuck’s sake.

I sighed in aggravation, pinching the bridge of my nose to relieve the pressure growing behind my eyes. This day was never going to end.

“Where?” I asked, anger rising in my blood for the thirtieth time today. But I didn’t expect to be hit with an odd sense of dread at his answer.

“Daniel’s home, sir.”



I WOKE WITH A STIR, bolting upright from my position and clutching my heart to keep it from leaping out of my chest. The room immediately spun, my vision blurring while my head pounded something fierce. I quickly lay back down, flopping onto my side only to experience some serious soreness in my cheek. Wincing, I rubbed it gently, feeling some slight swelling as I slowly rolled onto my back.

What the fuck happened?

I closed my eyes, focusing on my deep breathing until the dizziness faded away, working to ignore the flaring pain in my hip that shot down my leg.

And then reality struck me.

Darren had drugged me. During the fight. During my one possible chance of getting out.

I felt the panic quickly sink in, fear and anguish running down my cheeks in heavy streams at the thought of what Darren might have discovered while I was unconscious. I could barely catch my breath as my blood pulsed with dread.

Breathe, Jaden. Just breathe. You don't know anything yet.

But deep down, I already knew. My very state was proof enough. I could sense that my hair had already been washed and styled, the softness of it brushing underneath my jawline. My skin didn't feel tight or caked in grime anymore, and I was wearing a new clean dress.

The signs of failure were all there, just as heavy and debilitating as the anguish radiating in my muscles and bones from the battle that had clearly been lost.

Attempting to regain some ground, I tried to train my focus on anything other than the tremors flowing through my body. Taking slow deep breaths, I wiped away my tears and slowly sat up to study the room I was in.

It was dark, and the bed beneath me was unfamiliar since it was so small. But the large presence in the corner was unmistakable, that black energy of his always palpable to my touch. And that was when I realized Matt's plan had well and truly failed. Darren had survived. And I was not free.

Oh God. It was true.

I was not free.

“You look scared, my defiant little queen.”

A cold chill shot its way up my spine, the tremors worsening with every silent second that past. Darren stepped forward from the shadows, his imposing stature dominating the small space, reminding me why I was such an idiot for thinking he wouldn't survive. Reminding me of how goddamn foolish I was.

Had this been years earlier, I might have allowed my terror to sink in at the mere sight of him, my flight instinct activated to flee immediately. But like Darren had already said, it was my fight that always kept me in place to take him on.

Quickly analyzing his features, I searched for the triumphant sneer in his lips that would confirm my worst fears, any semblance of a devious victory that he would taunt me with. But I found none of that. Instead, all I saw was cold, dark fury.

What did this mean? Had Jason not been found? Had he even been there at all? Had my deception been discovered?

No. No, it couldn't be. I had to believe Jason hadn't been involved. There was no other explanation for that disaster of an assault. None of the gunmen even knew his name. Something had to have gone wrong.

Slowing my breathing down, I took several large breaths in through my nose to center myself, and then launched my emotions from panic to absolute volcanic anger.

"What the hell did you do?" I shouted from the bed. "Why did you drug me? We were in the middle of an attack, and you left me completely helpless! Why?!"

It only took a single stern look from him to force myself to quiet down, the stormy look in his eyes warning me to lower my voice and remember my place. But I wanted answers. Needed them desperately. And then a solid, heavy step forward had me wincing.

"I drugged you because I had no other choice!" he roared, the deep pitch in his tone causing my body to flinch. Darren rarely raised his voice, noticeably because he just didn't need to, the coldness in his calm tone terrifying enough. But this time was different. "You deliberately disobeyed me *again* after I had just told you to run for safety. Instead, you chose to stay and fight, and then had the audacity to argue with me while I was correcting your near-fatal mistake!"

I could feel my teeth grinding to dust as I bit back my retort. Now that I knew I was still stuck here, I had some serious damage control to manage.

“You wanted to leave me buried under a house that had parts of it on fire! What the hell kind of strategy is that?” I argued. “And then you left me completely defenseless! What if you had lost the fight? I’d be completely fucked right now!”

“*Watch your fucking mouth, little girl,*” Darren growled, causing my back to stiffen. “I already explained to you what I expected and why, and that it was not up for debate. Yet you chose to defy me anyway.”

“I *tried* to find the panic room!” I continued desperately. “There was so much going on. Bullets were flying everywhere, parts of house had been blown apart, noise in every direction. Sorry if my navigation was a little off while I tried to find it!”

In three long strides, Darren grabbed me by my neck and hauled me up to slam my back against the wall above the iron headboard, my bare feet still digging into the mattress. We were practically eye level now, his face inches from mine as fury ripped his features into something vicious and predatory.

His grip tightened harshly when I started to struggle, the blood flow to my brain heavily compromised. My hands instinctively clawed at his wrist, using him as an anchor to hold myself up, but his arm never moved.

“Keep lying to me, Jaden. It’s doing you a world of favors,” he threatened, his voice deep with malice.

“I did try,” I croaked out on a broken whisper.

“You fucking *failed* is what you did,” he rasped. “Imagine my disappointment when I found you trapped under a fucking wall with five rifles pointed at your head. If I hadn’t gotten there in time, you would be fucking dead right now.”

I scoffed as I tried to reposition my neck in his grip, barely gaining a centimeter. “First, I have a 100 percent success rate,” I grated, “and now

I'm a failure. Just like that."

I shuddered angrily at the truth, hating that he did have a point. Pinned under that wall frame, I was about to lose that fight had he not intervened when he did. I would have lost Camaro in the mix as well.

But what had followed next was an alarming display of swift and lethal brutality. The violence Darren was so skilled at left me frozen with near disbelief, accompanied by the horror of realizing he was still alive. He was so fast, so efficient, so goddamn deadly it terrified to me think Jason would ever last more than a few moments against him.

"That's how failure works, you disobedient little brat," he growled, squeezing tighter and making me wince. "Something you consistently do when it comes to following my orders. And now it's costing you your safety *and my fucking sanity!*" His dark gaze bore down on me with an intensity I could feel, his energy searing my skin with the kind of wrath that made me want to shrink away instantly. "Apparently, I've gone too soft on you," he murmured, his eyes scanning me with disapproval. "Clearly too lenient, too indulgent...and far too merciful. Evidently, you're not nearly as afraid of me as you should be if you're willing to defy me so easily. That ends today."

With that, he released me and stepped away, letting me crumple to the bed like a rag doll while I struggled to regain my bearings. But now that he'd gotten his wrath out of his system—for now—I needed to know what he knew.

"What happened after you drugged me?" I asked, my voice grated by his bruising grip. "Who was it that attacked us?"

Darren was quiet as he turned back to study me, his eyes searching for any little clue my body might reveal to him. Sometimes he was too damn good at reading me and it scared the fucking shit out of me.

"Miguel's attack on our home failed," he stated plainly. "There were very little casualties on our side." His flat tone was bored like he was

delivering the weather report instead of the result of the massive assault that nearly claimed my own life.

But there was one word that captivated my attention. One very special noun. *Miguel's* attack. Not Matt's. Not Jason's. *Miguel's*.

Thinking back on my conversation with Matt, he had refused me the very important details I needed to be prepared for this attack, like who the fuck was going to execute it. I assumed Jason would be involved since Matt said I could be free after the attack.

Why else would that even be a possibility if not for Jason to secure my rescue? But Darren would have to be killed in order for me to be free, yet here he was, standing like the dark omen of my fate.

What the hell had happened? What went wrong? Why had the operation failed? Why had they attacked ahead of schedule?

“How do you know it was Miguel and not Matt, or some other enemy you have?” I asked carefully.

Darren’s brow furrowed as he glared down at me, the shadow of suspicion darkening his eyes before he finally answered.

“Because I’m very good at motivating people to talk,” he replied.

I nodded in acknowledgment. He did have a knack for that.

So if it was Miguel, I could see Matt teaming up with him, especially since he’d had a business relationship with his brother, Javier, before Darren had him killed.

“What happens now?” I asked dryly, my mind already exhausted from everything.

“I’m going to kill Miguel within the next hour. And you’re going back to the estate where you will stay until I say otherwise,” he said definitively. “I suggest you make peace with your position there because you won’t be leaving the grounds for a *very* long time. If ever.”

I felt a metaphorical door suddenly slam shut in my face, the lock deafening as it clicked into place. Back to square one, just like that. Back to

my original prison. And this time I knew—I knew I'd never get to leave it again.

Fuck.

I felt my entire body deflate into a dark void of nothing, the weight of hopelessness crushing my soul. Exhausted and broken, I laid my head against the pillow, utterly devastated by it all.

Absolutely nothing had gone according to plan. Not one damn thing. In fact, everything was worse now. If Darren successfully took Miguel out of the game, it was one less ally Matt and Jason could count on.

Was I really this stupid? This naive? Too eager and arrogant to see the potential flaws in Matt's plan? Why did I even bother at this point? I couldn't trust one goddamn thing that might actually save myself from this fucking nightmare I was trapped in.

I could feel Darren moving closer to me, his presence drawing me to him like the gravity of a black hole. But the closer he got, the harder it was to contain my impending tears.

I thought I had been so close. So fucking close. Or, fuck, maybe I had never even come close at all. Either way, I would never know. And the pain of it was like having a crater punched through my chest.

All I knew was that being drugged had prevented me from knowing the truth. Whether or not Jason had been there. Whether or not Matt could be trusted, which was a stupid question to begin with. Of course, I couldn't trust him.

But if his illusive words held any kind of sway over the margins of my life then this failure was all the proof I needed to judge the truth.

While my brain tried to rationalize it all, my heart wanted nothing more than to deny it. I wanted to believe Jason would be there, and the only way to know was to fucking be there myself!

But considering everything that had happened, it was clear to me Jason couldn't have been there at all. If he had been, I'd be waking up to a very

different situation than my current one.

And now I had to sit on my ass in isolation and figure out what the hell had happened that made everything go so wrong. I supposed in hindsight, I was glad Jason wasn't there or had evaded Darren's capture. I was sure Darren would have rubbed it in my face if he had finally caught him.

"Fine. But I'm going to bitch about it the whole time," I stated, my voice flat and lifeless.

Darren moved away from the bed, grabbing his jacket off the side of a nearby chair and slipped it on.

"Bitch all you want, princess. The only thing it will change is the color of your ass. And you know how much I love to paint it."

I cringed at the implication.

"At least now you'll finally have all the chances you'll need to fulfill your end of our first little bet you lost," Darren said as he brushed his hands through his unruly hair.

I furrowed my brows. "What are you talking about?"

A tight grin formed in the corner of his mouth. "Babysitting Ella. You'll be seeing a lot more of her when you get back."

My brows knitted in confusion. "What? Why?"

His eyes turned grave as he lifted his gaze to mine. "Because Daniel's home was attacked at the same time we were," he replied, causing my body to stiffen with suspense. Had this been part of the plan?

"Are they okay?" At least let Katherine and Ella be okay. Fuck Daniel.

"Ella is fine, but Katherine and Daniel were badly injured. They barely made it out before their home was completely destroyed, and the majority of their staff were killed."

My breath caught in my lungs, my heart frozen with horror for Katherine.

"So they'll be coming to stay with us for a while until their house is rebuilt."

I didn't know why I was going to ask because I already knew the damn answer, but I needed to hear it from him.

“Do we know who attacked them?”

Darren's features tightened into a scowl. “Take a wild fucking guess.”

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AT LEAST YOU TRIED



The night was colder than usual. With the wind picking up as the moon appeared beyond the clouds, the night promised to be every bit as pleasing as ever.

Scott and me, along with Antonio, Carlos, and Luis, my three soldiers best matching the description of the other soldiers we captured, all accompanied our last man standing, Marx.

We stayed hidden in the shadows of the extraction point, awaiting the helicopter that Miguel would apparently be riding in.

I didn't understand why he wouldn't just wait for the helicopter to transport me to his compound. But apparently, his ego required that he personally escort my dead ass back and serve me up in front of his men so he could claim the kill. Fucking pussy.

Tonight, I would end this pitiful war with the Spade family and get back to killing Matthew Rainer's.

And maybe even finally start my own.

We didn't have to wait long for the helicopter to arrive, the sound of its propellers giving us the signal we needed to ready ourselves. Unzipping the body bag, I lay down inside it and allowed Scott to zip it up. Once the

helicopter had landed, he heaved my dead weight over his shoulder and walked us out into the open.

“Christ, you weigh a fucking ton,” Scott muttered under his breath.

It was a bold move, but sometimes it took bold moves to win wars. And winning wars was my specialty.

Four taps against the back of my knee from Scott told me how many men were inside the helicopter. I suspected Miguel, two of his soldiers, and the pilot. Listening as the door slid open, I could hear my men climb inside before Scott gently dropped my body onto the floor of the chopper.

“Ha ha!” Miguel’s laughter was excited. “Look at this shit!”

I kept still as I felt the pilot fly the chopper up into the air, back to their base. Back on land, four armor-plated Hummers were following our tracking signal back to Miguel’s base to finish off whoever was still left.

“Ha! We got you, you stupid gringo fuck! I told you we could do it without those fucking Americanos!”

Americanos? What the fuck is he talking about?

Knowing full well he wouldn’t be able to resist for very long, Miguel got up from his seat to climb over the partition separating the pilot from the passengers. Judging by how quiet and spacious it felt in here, he had to be flying a pretty nice luxury helicopter.

Reaching for the zipper, he began to slowly pull it down, revealing parts of my would-be unconscious body. More laughter came from Miguel, his excitement almost as irritating as his laugh. But the moment he pulled the bag apart, I struck.

With a tight grip on my knife, I surged forward, the wild grin on my face impossible to hide. Miguel squealed in shock and horror as I grabbed the back of his head and forced my blade between his lips, instantly slicing into the corners of his mouth.

My move was the signal for Scott, Antonio, Luis, and Carlos to finish off the other two useless passengers in the back. Their throats were quickly

slashed while Scott climbed to the front of the cabin and pressed a gun to the back of the pilot's head.

"Stay on course," he ordered, his voice encouraging.

"You look surprised to see me, Miguel." I snickered with a wide grin. The combination of rage, shock, and terror on his face was my prize at the end of this little competition. "Did you really think that pitiful display of an attack was enough to take me out?"

"Fuck you, Davi—"

Pulling the knife away, I sliced even deeper into the corners of his lips, blood flowing down his cheeks and chin just so I could slam my elbow into the side of his face, knocking his head against the half partition. I then grabbed him by the hair and smashed his face against the hard wood over and over until his blood splattered against my shirt.

"Who told you we'd be at that location?" I seethed, tightening my grip on his balding head.

Miguel's response was a gurgling chuckle.

"Who!" I roared, pressing the knife just under his eye.

A bloody-toothed smile curved his mouth. "You really don't know?"

"Answer the fucking question!" Scott shouted from the cabin, his gun still pointed at the clearly terrified pilot.

More laughter, more nonsense before Miguel finally spit out a name. "Matthew fucking Rainer, you gringo cunt!"

Son of a bitch.

I should have known that. But how did he?

"You were always a shit—aaaaahhhh!!"

Miguel's voice went from cocky to shocked as I dropped the knife to allow both my thumbs to drive into his eye sockets.

He screamed and squirmed violently as I wrapped my long fingers around his head and shoved my thumbs even deeper, his eyes turning to mush around my digits as blood squirted in every direction.

Scott chuckled from the cabin at the scene while the pilot looked like he was about to be sick. Removing my thumbs, Miguel continued to scream and writhe on the floor as he pressed his palms against his face and wildly kicking his feet around like he might actually strike something.

Grabbing my knife from the floor, I gripped his hair in my hand again and pulled him up to a sitting position, holding him steady. I then leaned in toward his ear as he continued to cry and groan.

“Al menos lo intentaste,” I told him, though I wasn’t sure if he could even hear me over his incessant screaming.

At least you tried.

The blade of my knife then slowly slid into the side of his throat, pressing in gently so as to draw it out for a few additional seconds. Miguel gurgled and choked as I removed the blade, allowing his blood to flow from his neck in heavy rivulets down his chest.

Dropping his dying body, I moved to the front of the cabin to slide into Miguel’s seat with a satisfied sigh.

“Just one more present to drop off,” I told Scott as he maintained his aim at the pilot.

The pilot’s shoulders shook the entire time as he maneuvered the chopper through the air and off to its home base. It wasn’t a long trip, only about fifteen minutes before the confines of a small compound could be seen in the distance.

“It’s there,” the pilot pointed.

“Hover over the main house,” I ordered. Turning back, I could see Luis and Antonio were already preparing the bomb that we were about to drop overhead. I wanted this shit finished once and for all. No mistakes this time.

Once they had finished, Luis freed the latch of the side door, allowing a gust of wind to blow through the cockpit. When we were perfectly over the compound, I gave them the signal and nodded.

Releasing the package, the bomb flowed through the air under a parachute as it descended into the middle of the base. After Scott had directed the pilot to clear from the blast radius, he pressed the ignition to trigger the bomb.

The blast rocked through the compound, destroying everything with a heavy storm of fire. Watching Miguel's guards run around while their bodies were covered in flames was truly satisfying, which only increased when our land convoy entered the premises to take out what was left and clean house.

"You know, I think we could lose a little more weight while we're at it," I suggested to Scott.

He nodded, then turned to direct Antonio, Luis, and Carlos, instructing them to toss the slain passengers and Miguel's body out of the helicopter to land within the confines of the explosion and burning buildings.

"Put it on autopilot," I told the pilot.

Once he had it securely engaged, Scott yanked the front of his head back against the seat and quickly dragged a blade across his throat from behind. Leaving the man to bleed out, Scott reached over to open the pilot's door and pushed him out of his seat, his body plummeting to the fiery ground beneath us.

Maneuvering quickly, I placed myself into the pilot's seat, changing some settings on the controls before disengaging the autopilot and flying us the hell out of there.

A sense of pride floated through the cabin now that the war had been won. But things were never that easy. I may have closed the door on one war, but there was still one left that I needed to take care of.

Matthew Rainer was a very, *very* dead man.

BEHIND THE CURTAIN



My fist slammed against the side of his jaw, the blow knocking him clear off his ass and sending him straight to the concrete floor. I got in two more hits, busting his lip and eye before strong hands finally gripped me and yanked me back.

“Jason, stop!” Romero demanded as Anthony and Derick held me back from completely demolishing Matthew Rainer into the fucking ground.

“You lying piece of shit!” I roared, raging against their hold as Rainer spit blood onto the floor. “You fucked up that entire operation and betrayed our agreement. I should fucking end you right now!”

Rainer said nothing as his hand clutched his bruising jaw and slowly stumbled to a stand. The old warehouse we were in didn’t hold much light, but I could still clearly see the glare on his face from the accusation.

“I had no idea they were going to attack ahead of schedule,” he argued. “I had to scramble to get my own team together in less than an hour to coordinate our attack at the same time, and it was almost damn near impossible. Either someone had miscommunicated something or Miguel was an even bigger fool than I thought.”

“Bullshit!” I retorted. “We never should have fucking trusted your word. I should have just infiltrated the suite myself and gotten Jaden the fuck out of there. We have the goddamn cloaking device. She doesn’t need to be there anymore.”

“But then who would have convinced Darren to go to the country estate, genius?” Rainer countered. “I’m surprisingly impressed she actually managed to do it in the first place. And besides, we already agreed you can’t be her contact anymore. You can barely control yourself as it is. The last time you saw her you nearly fucked everything up and almost went back for her. We all agreed it’s best you stay away for now, remember?”

I groaned aloud, because yeah, I fucking remembered. I remembered the inferno that burned deep in my chest as I watched Jaden walk into that beachside restaurant with him. As beautiful as she looked, I caught the slight limp in her step and the way he took her hand to help her inside.

It was just a single glance from the driver’s seat of a passing car, but five minutes later that was all it took for me to whip the car around and go back, even if it was just for a glimpse of her shadow.

Thankfully, Derick had been with me at the time and successfully brought me back to reality, but I’d gotten us about fifty yards away from that restaurant before I realized I’d be driving myself straight to my own damn death, and maybe even Derick’s.

That was when I knew I couldn’t be trusted with being that close to her anymore. That first time in Rome had nearly broken me. I never wanted to have to leave her behind again. So I just needed to stay away. For now.

“As much as I hate to admit it, Jason, he’s right,” Romero conceded. “We need Jaden to be there if we’re going to have any shot at taking this guy down. She made the attack possible in the first place. We may need her to do it again. Remember, she isn’t the only one we’re trying to save.”

I shook my head at Romero, knowing damn well we were making a mistake with this fucking guy.

“He doesn’t give a shit about any of that,” I reminded him. “As long as he gets Daniel, he won’t care if our plans fail or not. And he couldn’t even get the stupid fucker!”

Matt’s eyes flashed with fury as he took a step toward me. “Why the fuck would I want that mission to fail? I need Darren just as dead as you do to avoid his retaliation. *That* fucker will never stop until someone puts a bullet in his head.”

I scowled at him, my fists tightening as I imagined blackening one of his eyes next.

“Who the fuck knows with you,” I retorted. “We’ve been at this with you for months, and we’ve gotten no closer to ending this. Your intel and plans are proving to be inadequate and unreliable.”

Rainer shook his head as he glared back at me. “Believe what you want, it makes no difference to me, but the agreement remains the same. Either we can work together as a team and coordinate our efforts or we can go at it separately and most likely fail.”

My gut wrenched, knowing I had been this close to ending all of this, and this motherfucker still had the balls to deny it. I had one goal and one goal only.

Get. Jaden. Out.

That time had finally come. And then it was gone before I even knew it.

I could only imagine Jaden’s devastation right now. And it was gutting me from the inside out.

Derick grunted. “What’s the point of coordinating our efforts if your resources are unreliable? We just lost a huge advantage because you put your faith in the wrong enemy,” he scolded as he and Anthony released my arms from their hold.

“Like I said, if I had known Spade was going to attack the country estate a day earlier, I would have informed you sooner.”

“And why would they reject our assistance?” Anthony asked, his arms crossing over his chest as he stared Rainer down. “We could have ended that son of a bitch right then and there, and instead, Davis ended 80 percent of Miguel’s cartel the very same night. Some great collaboration that was.”

Rainer shrugged with a heated glare. “Apparently, I miscalculated Miguel’s ego. He was a prideful moron with no sense in his little coked-out brain. He wasn’t exactly a fan of accepting aid from what he considered a bunch of self-righteous gringos.”

I groaned and threw my hands into the air, enraged and in disbelief at the new bit of information. It might have been useful to know before agreeing to work with a drug lord who preferred to personally test his own product every week.

“Now he fucking tells us,” I said, ready to rip my damn hair out. “Why didn’t you warn us of that before?”

“And jeopardize the collab? You all were already suspicious of each other. I didn’t want to make it worse!” Rainer explained.

“A lot of fucking good that did!” I shouted in retort. “Any other surprise reveals you’d like to share tonight?”

Rainer’s mouth twisted into a scowl. “Other than the fact that I agree on the self-righteous part? No. Though I don’t think that should come as a surprise to any of you.”

“Self-righteous? Seriously?” Romero challenged, taking a threatening step toward Rainer.

He sneered, blood tainting his otherwise perfectly white teeth. “That’s right. You’re all high on your own heroic nobility, but deep down, you’re nothing but a bunch of bloodthirsty murderers trying to even a score. Just like me.”

“Don’t try to compare us,” I barked. “We’re nothing like you.”

He cocked a brow as the corner of his mouth lifted. “Oh, you don’t think so? I know your body count, Jason. What you did to Darren’s

surveillance team in Chicago? Even I didn't anticipate that. Your bloodlust is getting out of control."

I advanced on him, ready to knock his head off his fucking shoulders. I didn't care how many bodies I had to stack to end this, I would not be deterred.

"Careful, Rainer, or I'll add you to it," I snarled, loving nothing more than to follow through on it.

I didn't give a single fuck what this manipulative piece of shit thought of me. His judgment was meaningless. I wasn't doing this to prove something to anyone, including myself.

I was doing it to get my fucking woman back. And if that meant I had to get my hands dirty, then I'd stain them until they were good and black before I let myself give up on her.

"Please," Rainer taunted, dropping his chin. "You've accepted my weapons, my intel, and my funding. I doubt it'll be much longer before you start accepting my employ once this is over."

"Once this is over, you better pray we never cross paths again," I shot back.

"This is just a means to an end," Anthony interrupted, side-eyeing me. "You need our skills and ambition, and we need your resources and connections. Anything else outside of that is insignificant."

"Fair enough," Rainer stated, his gaze unwavering. "But we'll need to come up with a new strategy now that Spade is out of the picture."

Romero tilted his head as he narrowed his gaze. "What did you have in mind?"

"We need to attack more of Darren's bigger resources," Rainer answered. "Bleed him dry. Disrupting the auction and rerouting the funds was good but not enough. There's a small cartel in the Colombian jungle called the *Lobos*. Darren supplies them with money, guns, and women, and

they supply him with the best cocaine crop there is. If we take them out, that's a serious chunk of income gone, and it will rattle his other suppliers."

"And you want us to be the ones to take them out," Derick stated with an eye roll.

"No, I'll handle that operation," Rainer answered. "Consider the information a sign of good faith."

My mouth formed a straight line while my gaze narrowed, my suspicions solidifying in my brain.

"And how exactly do you plan on executing that?" I asked, folding my arms across my chest.

"I'll be calling in a family favor," he replied, his eyes meeting mine.

"You've got another resource we don't know about?" Romero asked, his brow arching.

"Just trust me on this."

I rolled my eyes and dropped my arms. This guy could not be fucking serious.

"We also need to do a better job of disrupting his weapons supply. Our isolated attacks to avoid detection were too small to really be effective. Now that our failed attack is over, we don't have to contain the noise anymore. It's time to ditch the subtlety."

"Finally," Derick griped. "I'd say it's time to kick it up a notch."

"The underground brothels he has in Vegas, the ones disguised as exclusive massage parlors that host much darker and more sinister natures. They're the most lucrative. You can even get your kicks off knowing you'll be 'rescuing' some of the whores when you dismantle it all."

"Watch it," Romero warned.

Rainer rolled his eyes. "Regardless. If you take out those brothels and disrupt the recruiting process, it will break down another source of revenue, not to mention diminish some of his ability to launder money."

“Fine, we’ll take care of them,” Romero answered for all of us. “What else?”

“Darren also has an agreement with the manager of an underground fighting ring consisting of mostly women in Vegas. Raiding it will show that even his business partners aren’t safe and may dissuade others from starting new contracts with him.”

Derick didn’t look impressed but nodded anyway. “I’ll look into that one.”

“Good,” Rainer acknowledged. “Some of Darren’s shipments are transported off the coast to a warehouse in Tijuana. Tipping off the Mexican cartels about that potential payday might be worth the trouble, especially now that they probably know Darren took out Miguel. His allies might want a little payback.”

Anthony nodded. “This is good.”

“What about a server farm?” I asked, catching Rainer’s eye. “Jaden mentioned a server farm somewhere that would be detrimental to his corporation if someone were to *tamper* with it.”

Rainer blinked, then straightened to fold his arms across his chest. “He has dozens of those all across the country.”

Of course, he does.

“She mentioned a company called Digital Frontiers. That they might be managing the farms,” I added.

Rainer dipped his chin as he stepped around the room. “It’s run by a man named Patrick Edgar. He’s been managing that company for the past ten years.”

“Do you have access to this man?” Derick asked.

He puffed a breath of air with humor on his lips as he cocked his head.
“Not anymore.”

I shook my head in agitation. Shocker.

“Fine. We’ll have Miller get to work on it,” I said, nodding to Derick in agreement.

“Yeah, except here’s the problem,” Rainer interjected. “They manage some of my shit too. Shit Darren doesn’t know about.”

I could feel my knuckles nearly bursting through my skin from how hard I was clenching my fist. This man seriously only cared about himself.

“Relax, Rainer. This is just investigative work,” Anthony added. “No one will know we were even there.”

“They knew you were there when you attacked the auction’s mainframe,” Rainer shot back.

“By then it was too late,” Romero countered. “And we got exactly what we needed.”

“You got lucky is what you got,” Rainer snapped.

I pinched the bridge of my nose as the tension grew between my eyes.

“Regardless, we’ll get in, get what we need, and let you know what we find,” I retorted.

Rainer sighed dramatically. “Fine. But even if you’re able to disrupt his legal businesses, he still has plenty of fail-safes to fall back on. We’ll need to target those as well.”

My eyes shot over to Romero, who met my gaze with the same concern I was already feeling. How much more information was this guy really withholding?

“What other fail-safes?” I asked.

“Darren has multiple unguarded safehouses hidden all over the country. Each safehouse contains an underground vault with at least ten million dollars in cash. It might be humorous to have him continue funding his own demise.”

I cocked a brow at the new information. “That sounds like a huge operation. We’d have to attack several at once to avoid detection before he ups the security for the others.”

Rainer nodded. “Agreed. Which is why the cash will be an incentive to hire more mercenaries to assist you. Your ability to recruit has been impressive, but your little boy band isn’t enough. You need to build an army. Obtaining this cash will do it.”

I exhaled a short breath as I mulled over his suggestions. The thought alone was exhausting, but if it brought me closer to Jaden, then I’d fucking do it a hundred times over.

I just hoped my team’s need to take Davis down was as strong as my need to get Jaden the fuck away from him. But after everything we’d done already, I couldn’t doubt them.

“Fine. Let’s plan this out,” I said.

For the next several hours, we formulated our strategies based on Rainer’s intel. I didn’t want to trust the fucker, but what choice did I have? We still had the one thing incentivizing him, so it would be foolish for him to waste his efforts.

With plans now in motion once again, we left the warehouse under the cover of dark, our black SUV parked securely next to a shipping container. But Rainer’s annoying voice was calling my name before I made it even three steps outside.

“Jason, aren’t you forgetting something?” he called, his tone taunting.

I glanced up at the night sky, gathering strength and the will not to beat him to death, and grabbed my wallet from my back pocket.

“You know, I’m not so sure you deserve it, considering your end of the last deal had been a complete fucking disaster.”

A low growl emanated from his chest. “I don’t care. This part of the agreement still stands. Now hand it over.”

Shaking my head, I opened my wallet and handed him the single folded picture of the pretty little blonde, the grimace on my face impossible to conceal.

Rainer's eyes softened as he reveled over the photo, his lips forming into a half smile when he saw Kayla had held up her middle finger for the camera this time.

After our first meeting, we refused to allow him another second in her presence, no matter how much he tried to bargain for it. But giving him little glimpses of her at each meeting was usually an effective way of keeping him in line. Usually.

This little transaction also allowed Kayla to safely express herself to him without having to worry about retaliation. She could be impressively creative when she wanted to be.

The fucking fool craved her pictures like a goddamn junkie, and as long as we kept giving them to him, he'd leave her alone. But I wasn't a moron. I knew as soon as all of this was over, he'd be gunning straight for her again. And I'll be damned if I let that happen.

His grin still in place, Rainer pocketed the picture and met my glare.

"Always a pleasure, Jason," he sneered, then turned to leave, heading for his own ride out of here.

Watching his figure disappear into the darkness, I knew without a shadow of a doubt that man would not survive this war.

I'd fucking make sure of it.

SNUFFED



I was a fool. A goddamn fucking fool. A stupid little girl with zero perception of the world around her. Who held on to stupid dreams that were pathetically lost to her wildest imagination. Who trusted monsters that fed on lies and misery.

Katherine's hand was cold in my own, the steady beeping of the heart monitor next to her bed bringing me some relief that she was stable and recovering. But you wouldn't know that just by looking at her.

Angry second-degree burns marred the side of her face, extending to patches on her chest, arms, and legs. She had bruising and deep lacerations just about everywhere while her broken wrist was wrapped in a cast, resting at her side.

Katherine's bodyguards stared at me uncomfortably from their chairs against the wall, their stiff statures and hard expressions making me feel incredibly unwanted. And Camaro could feel it as she sat by my feet, her watchful eyes tracking every movement they made.

If they moved too quickly, she would rise to a stand and groan with disdain at them. The guards would roll their eyes and go back to their

business. But they could go fuck themselves. My heart was too busy breaking just looking at the state of Katherine.

And between those jagged cracks, fury seeped through to glue them back together.

Matt had done this. This was his fault. I'd stupidly assumed he was going to be a part of that fight, but he had only used it as another play to separate Darren from Daniel, giving him the chance to attack without Darren's interference. And still, he fucking failed.

Jackass.

But it wasn't without casualties. While Daniel had survived, a bullet had grazed his skull deep enough to cause brain damage. What kind, we didn't yet know, but it would eventually manifest once he woke up from surgery. For all we knew, he could be a completely different person. Maybe he'd finally grow a fucking conscience.

Thankfully, by some miracle, Ella had made it out unscathed. Her nannies had all been killed in the attack, so she was currently being cared for by Darren's staff until a new nanny could be secured. But she didn't know where her mommy and daddy were and had been asking for them.

I felt like such an idiot. Matt had even warned me that trust didn't exist in this world, yet I chose to work with him anyway. And what did it accomplish? What did I get out of it? Absolutely nothing.

In fact, Darren was actually stronger for it now that Miguel was officially out of the picture. And I had put myself in an even worse position when I'd gotten caught ignoring Darren's orders to run so I could ensure my own escape like a goddamn moron.

What a colossal fucking disaster that had been.

And now I was going to pay for it. I could feel that sinister dark cloud hovering just beyond the horizon, slowly creeping toward me so it could rain down a storm of hellfire.

Just another Tuesday.

I didn't know why I continued to allow myself to hope, but some part of me still stupidly clung to the idea of freedom. Of living my life without every bit of it being controlled by a sadistic bloodthirsty psychopath who fed off my tears and screams.

His oppression was a weight that was getting harder and harder to carry, my entire body so close to caving in just to relieve some of the pressure. But if I did that, I feared I'd be stuck under his thumb so tightly I'd never be able to move again.

I'd never been more grateful to have the entire bed to myself last night after I'd been dropped off at the estate. By the time the sun rose this morning, my pillows were soaked with hours-worth of tears.

I'd long ago accepted that crying was therapeutic now. A necessity. A form of survival and self-soothing. Keeping my feelings pent up was just a disaster waiting to happen. I needed to expel them as soon as I possibly could.

Between my crushed hopes of escape and wondering what had gone wrong, I had been fearing the worst—that the reason I hadn't found Jason was because he'd already been killed in the fight. I just hadn't come across his body yet. And neither had Darren.

For all I knew, Jason could have been buried under all that debris, and I would never have known. He could have perished in an explosion that would have decimated his body beyond recognition.

Would Darren's men even know his body if they found it? Would his body even be recognizable? Would they even care to check the dead left behind? And if they didn't look, then there was no way in hell Darren would ever find out that Jason had been involved, and neither one of us would ever know if he was still alive or not.

And not knowing was absolutely killing me inside.

I had no idea what to do now. I felt lost. Everything just seemed so goddamn hopeless, and I felt fucking useless being trapped in this house

again. I'd have to figure something out—find some way to cause chaos on the inside. Maybe keep Darren distracted somehow.

But given what I knew was coming my way, I had no idea what kind of stamina I'd have afterward.

Fuck, my body shook just thinking about it.

“Jaden? What are you still doing here?”

Turning my head, I looked back to see Sid standing near the doorway with a concerned expression on his face. When I confirmed he was alone, I turned back around.

“Someone should be here with her when she wakes up,” I answered.

“That’s sweet of you,” he replied, stepping farther into the room, stopping in front of Katherine’s bed. “She’ll be alright though. It’s Daniel I’m worried about.”

I almost scoffed. Fuck Daniel.

“How is he?” I asked, feigning concern to mask my morbid curiosity.

Sid exhaled deeply like he was exhausted. “Incredibly lucky,” Sid replied. “The bullet grazed the frontal lobe, so he won’t lose any major bodily functions.” Sid paused like he wanted to say more but chose to ponder it instead.

“I sense there’s a but somewhere in there.” My eyes rolled up to meet his gaze, his chin tucked in his hand as he stared down at Katherine.

“I have no idea what kind of person he’ll be when he wakes up,” he mused with a sigh. “The frontal lobe is responsible for cognitive function. Our emotions, decision-making, self-control, and behavior are all controlled by the frontal lobe. And a small piece of it is now missing. The consequences of that could be devastating for a man like him.”

I contemplated that for a moment, the hope of opportunity snaking its way back into my mind. You had to be smart to survive in this world, and if Daniel lacked the brain tissue responsible for ensuring his survival, then that could be an interesting fire to stoke.

“But we won’t know until he wakes up,” I added in confirmation.

Sid nodded before clearing his throat. “Should be in the next couple of hours.”

I stretched my stiff neck, rubbing my shoulder as I did. “Good thing he’s got a great neurosurgeon,” I commented with a smirk.

Sid grunted as he dipped his chin.

“How long have you been down here?” he asked me.

“Too long,” one of the guards angrily answered for me.

I rolled my eyes. “I don’t know, a few hours?”

Sid looked at his watch and frowned. “It’s past lunchtime. When did you last eat?”

I paused for a moment, not realizing the time. I used to have people who did that for me, who directed me throughout the day. But with Clive and Owen gone and Carla busy with assisting in the rehiring of all of Daniel’s staff, I was officially on my own for the first time in a long time.

I wonder how long that will last.

“Breakfast, I guess,” I finally responded.

Sid sighed. “You better go eat before Darren finds out.”

I grimaced at the thought of upsetting him again. Though he should be in a pretty chipper fucking mood given his recent victory. I didn’t need to give him a reason to upset that balance.

“Have you spoken to him today?” I asked.

“About thirty minutes ago. Why?”

“I was just wondering if he said when he would be back.”

Sid shook his head. “Whatever amount of time you measure ‘soon’ to be,” he answered. “So I would suggest you get moving.”

I exhaled a deep breath in disappointment. “Yeah, okay,” I relented, grasping Katherine’s hand tightly before letting it go and standing.

“I’ll watch over her for a bit. Go on,” Sid said, folding his arms as he stared down at Katherine.

“Thank you,” I said sincerely, momentarily locking my gaze with his before heading out of the infirmary toward the elevator. I’d seen this place way too often for my liking as it was.

The elevator doors dinged and slid open, allowing Camaro and me to step in and ride back up the short distance to the main floor. Staring down at my wedding rings, I twisted them absentmindedly around my fingers, eyeing the sharp edges of the cut while appreciating the fire of the diamond as it sparkled under the elevator light.

It took billions of years under intense heat and pressure for the earth to create something so tough and resilient. Yet it only took a few hours for humans to completely reshape it into something else, something brilliant and pleasing to the eye. It made me think of how often Darren had reshaped me, and then I wondered if he would ever be finished.

Before the elevator doors had barely opened, I glanced up, and my eyes immediately widened. A hand snatched out to clench around my throat and shoved me back against the elevator wall. The doors closed shut with a ding as the elevator descended, Camaro’s uncertain barked whine bouncing up from the floor.

Finding my courage, I willed myself to look up into the dark and vicious blue eyes that pierced back at me. Darren’s gaze was shadowed, a dark storm brewing behind the fierce coldness he was emitting.

But then I realized I was still breathing without strain, his hand having yet to tighten around my neck. Instead, he just held me in place as the elevator stopped at another floor lower than the infirmary, a floor I didn’t know existed.

“Where are we going?” I dared to ask, my voice low with caution.

Darren’s jaw tightened, the muscle flexing as his fingers curled around my throat.

“You’ll see,” he answered just before the elevator dinged and the doors opened.

Circling to the back of my neck, Darren wrenched me out of the elevator, whistling for Camaro to follow. The doors opened into a dimly lit hallway. There were no other doors, and the hallway seemed to stretch on pretty far. It must have been some sort of tunnel that connected the main house to somewhere else on the property.

But as Camaro's claws clicked against the white tiles, my stomach clenched with dread. I knew something bad was going to happen, either to me or to someone else, probably me. But if I was the target, Camaro was usually removed to avoid her trained interference. When I wasn't the target, she wasn't exactly dismissed either, her presence more inconsequential than anything else. But it seemed this time that Darren actually wanted her involved. And that made me even more nervous.

"Darren, what's going on?"

"Quiet," he clipped, his eyes focused on the path ahead.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

The tunnel seemed to go on for ages, but well before it ended, we finally stopped at a door on our right. Darren pressed his thumb into a small screen beside a security panel. The door then clicked open, and Darren pushed me inside, waiting for Camaro to cross the threshold before shutting it behind us.

I blinked as I observed the room around me, its familiarity hitting me like a punch to the gut. I hated this room. It was the underground chamber of the "shack" that Darren utilized for some of his more gruesome "activities" that I was lucky enough to witness at times. The place made my stomach sour, the scent of blood and bleach always tainting the air.

But the room wasn't barren like it usually was. There was a plain white mattress laid out on the floor in one of the corners, with a bright spotlight pointed at it and a camera placed on a tripod. About ten feet away sat two sturdy-looking metal dog cages placed about one foot apart from each other.

Oh God, what the fuck is this?

In the opposite corner, another camera and spotlight were also set up and pointing at an old wooden chair that was clearly bolted to the floor. A small metal table stood against the corner wall with silver-looking instruments laid out.

In front of both settings, a large metal table was bolted down in the middle and allowed for a perfect vantage point of both scenes.

“What the hell is this?” I asked as I struggled to pull away from Darren’s grip.

Without answering, he just shoved me forward and pressed my upper body onto the large metal table. Three seconds later, my wrists were forced down onto the frigid tabletop, my cuffs magnetized to the metal. Fighting against the magnetic pull, I only managed to move my wrists a single centimeter, the strength of the cuffs impeccable for their size.

Darren stepped away and walked over to one of the cages, opening the door and whistling for Camaro. She followed the command and settled into the cage without complaint, lying on her belly while her tongue peeked between her teeth. Darren crouched down and placed something around her neck before shutting the cage door.

“What did you just do?” I asked, failing to hide the panic in my voice.

He ignored me as he came back around to the table and stood directly behind me. A few seconds later, I could hear people coming down the stone steps of the shack, the sounds of a struggle echoing throughout the room. Scott came into view first, leading the way as two guards dragged a woman down the steps, followed by another two carrying another woman in the same manner.

Both of the women seemed to be somewhat drugged as their struggles were pathetically minimal as they were carried away to the opposite corners of the room. One was dropped onto the mattress in the corner, the two men not even needing to hold her down as a chain bolted to the floor was wrapped around her neck and padlocked closed.

It was difficult to tell her age with her matted brown hair covering much of her face, but she looked deathly skinny under the baggy T-shirt and shorts that hung from her small body.

The second woman, a blonde, looked a bit younger but had a much heavier build than the brunette. They actually had to squish her into the small chair before tying her limbs down with scratchy-looking rope.

When both women seemed to be properly arranged, all but one guard left, the other moving to stand by the camera near the crying blonde, seemingly waiting for his next set of orders. Scott then turned around to nod at Darren and my stomach immediately dropped to my feet.

Ah, fuck.

I could hear Darren release a heavy breath from behind me before his steps carried him to the front of the table so I could see him clearly. With his hands in his pockets, he stared down at me with a blank expression I couldn't read worth a damn.

“Do you know what snuff films are, Jaden?”

I closed my eyes and sighed, turning my head away as my stomach soured, hoping to regain some composure before answering him.

“Yeah,” I replied with a nod. “I know what snuff films are.”

You mean murder porn.

“Good,” Darren said. “Daniel used to run quite the little production set at his home, but since it’s been burned to the ground, we’ve had to improvise a temporary location to keep up with the demand of his clients.”

Clients?

“Daniel has clients that actually pay to watch people get murdered? Seems like a waste of money when they can just watch slasher movies,” I commented.

Darren smirked. “They don’t pay just to *watch*, Jaden. They pay for their *production*,” he replied darkly. “Specifically, just for them. They hand us the script, and we make it happen. There’s no mass distribution or

reproduction, no marketing scheme or promotion. Just a single tape, no editing or copies. It's an incredibly simple process."

I internally groaned with disgust. "Sounds too simple."

Darren shrugged. "Not everything has to be complicated." He turned around and nodded to the man still patiently waiting by the camera. On command, he stepped into action, securing a black ski mask over his head that depicted a white skull on the face.

The second the terror washed over the blonde's face, I found myself yanking against my restraints.

"Argh! Why do I need to be here! Haven't I witnessed enough torture for you?!"

Darren turned around to stare down at me, a knowing look in his eyes.

"Because I'm hoping these will have a much more effective impact on you," he answered. "I know how much physical pain you can take and how the threat of it doesn't seem to inspire your obedience anymore. And while I thoroughly enjoy beating and fucking that stubborn willfulness out of you, the circumstances have changed. I can no longer afford to have you thinking you'll just take your whipping and move on. Not when you're putting your life in jeopardy because of it."

I gaped up at him, disbelief and horror blurring my vision at what he was implying.

"It's time I reinstalled a healthy dose of fear in you, to remind you of who you belong to and what I'm capable of." I felt my stomach roil with anxiety as he glared at me intently, the pure malice radiating from his cold gaze making me shiver. "I told you that you had disobeyed me for the last time, and I meant it. There will be no more leniency. From now on, your transgressions will be paid for by another, and you will watch every second of it until it finally sinks into your head that disobedience is no longer an option, starting today."

Darren nodded at one of the other men, who immediately moved to stand behind the camera and pressed record.

What happened next was a scene that rivaled the movie *Hostel*. This poor woman was systematically cut apart, piece by piece. Her nails, her toes, her tongue, even some of her teeth had been slowly removed to create the greatest amount of suffering.

Only when he started to remove the rolls of skin from her stomach did she finally bleed out, and even then, her torturer didn't stop. He took her apart like a puzzle and unceremoniously dumped what was left of her into a giant trash bin.

Throughout the entire scene, I couldn't seem to catch my breath, my heart pounding into the metal table below it as my body shook with horror.

Every time I closed my eyes, every time I looked away, Darren would activate my collar and shock me until I returned my gaze. He had to do it three separate times before I finally found a brick in the corner behind the scene to focus on instead. But averting my sight barely helped compared to what I could still blatantly hear and smell.

Her screams were deafening, the shrill sound sharp with so much pain, it made my stomach churn with nausea. I'd never been so grateful to forget to eat. I was honestly surprised Camaro hadn't reacted more than she did, but she was trained to ignore screaming unless it was mine.

But while I was forced to watch the atrocity carried out in front of me, it sickened me even more knowing that someone had paid for these specific requests. Someone had not only paid for her to die this way, but they also paid to have it filmed so they could enjoy it as often as they pleased.

What had this girl done to deserve such a horrific death? Who was she to the person who demanded such agony? Did Darren even know? Did he even care to ask?

"Who was she?" I finally managed to croak out, my voice barely a broken whisper.

I could feel Darren's gaze turn to me as I watched her executioner wash away the blood from the chair, walls, and floor with a hose down the drain. When his task was done, he packed up his tools and left without a second glance.

"The client's niece. Evidently, she didn't like her very much."

My brows rose. She?

Oh my God. A woman had conjured up that nightmare?

I had no right to be surprised. People were evil. And evil had no gender.

"As for the other one, apparently her husband has finally had enough of her embarrassing drug habit and constant unfaithfulness."

My eyes shot over to the brunette who was currently huddled on the mattress, her eyes closed and her hands over her ears. Her entire body was shaking as she quietly cried into the mattress.

Dread weighed me down at the idea of having to watch her tortured execution as well, my body shaking at the thought of enduring more.

"Darren," I said, my gaze lingering on the metal table. "You've made your point."

Scott turned in the corner of my view to glance back at Darren. He then nodded, and placed his phone at his ear as he headed back up the stairs, leaving us alone with just the crying women still chained to the dirty mattress.

I could feel Darren's eyes on me, hovering over my body with the kind of judgment you could feel scratching against your skin.

"Have I?" he asked, his voice a low taunt as his steps echoed across the floor.

I nodded. "I get it. Please, I don't want to see any more. I've seen enough death this past week to last me a lifetime."

His leisurely steps continued until I could feel him standing right behind me. And then he lowered himself to my ear. "See, I'm not sure you have," he murmured, that soft tone full of malicious deceit.

“I have,” I rasped firmly.

“Would you prefer the basement instead?”

I paused, my blood stalling in my veins at his alternative offering. Fear crept into my lungs, making it difficult to breathe as dark memories assaulted my psyche. I’d seen plenty of torture and murder, but what I just witnessed was far worse than anything I’d ever encountered. But every time I went into that godforsaken basement, I came out a completely different person, a half person.

Was that better? This woman would die by the script Darren had been given regardless of my transgressions. It was a gruesome sentence to witness, but it would be a much shorter one than what I would endure in the basement.

I sighed in exhausting defeat, resting my forehead against the cold metal table.

A soft laugh left Darren’s throat, his hand tracing down my spine, making me tremble.

“The fact that you even have to think about it is all the answer I need.” And then he lifted the back of my skirt and ripped my thong away. The sound of his belt buckle had my well-conditioned pussy clenching as he suddenly kicked my legs apart and entered me.

I gasped at the intrusion, my body not quite ready but yielding to his cock relatively quickly.

“You say I’ve made my point, but I’d like to drive it a little *deeper* before we move on to the next one,” he groaned, his hands on my hips and thrusting in hard for good measure. “From now on, you will do exactly as I say when I say it, or you will witness these same acts over and over again until you finally understand what obedience means.” His cock stretched me completely, plunging in and out to hit the exact spot that usually drove me insane with need.

“Ah!” I cried out, my body frozen in place as Darren fucked me into the table, that twisted pleasure building at a sickening rate.

After what I just witnessed, pleasure should be the last thing I could achieve, but that was trauma for you. Nothing ever made sense.

Darren suddenly snaked his hand through my hair and yanked my head back. “Do you understand?” he growled, keeping an even pace as my pussy clenched around him.

“Yes,” I gasped as I struggled to catch my breath.

“Who do you belong to?” he rumbled as he slammed into me, the remnants of an orgasm beginning to blossom.

“You! Ah!”

He fucked me harder, faster, driving me insane until I was moaning and gasping, desperate for release so this would end.

“Tell me you love me,” he commanded, his voice thick with lust and dominance, making me wince from the pain of his demand.

I groaned and cried, wishing I could be anywhere else but here. Wishing I had just died in the attack instead.

When I didn’t answer fast enough, he slapped me against the side of my ass so hard I almost screamed.

“Now!” he roared down at me. I flinched internally, despising the very existence of those fucking words.

“I love you,” I sobbed, my fingernails digging scratches into the metal.

Darren yanked my hair even harder. “Louder!” he snarled, his thrusts becoming punishing in their pursuit as hot tears ran down my cheeks.

“I love you!” I wailed, my body broken with the despair of my life, desperation splintering my soul.

Darren suddenly shifted his angle and fucked me straight into a tidal wave of painful pleasure, my entire body seizing and locking in place as my breath caught in my throat. I could feel him coming inside me as liquid heat

filled my core, my pussy spasming around his cock until all my energy had been drained.

I flopped back onto the table the second he released my hair, my chest heaving in rapid succession. And then suddenly, I was able to move my wrists again.

But then my attention was immediately diverted to Darren's arm wrapping under my hips and hauling me off the table. I couldn't help but go limp as he carried me over to the cage next to Camaro's.

Lifting the top lid, he forced me inside, my body barely fitting within its small confines.

"Darren, wait, please," I gasped, still struggling to regulate my heart rate.

But my pleas were answered with the instantaneous tug of all my cuffs at once. My neck was yanked to the back of the cage

while my wrists and ankles were forced to the sides. I could barely move an inch in the uncomfortable position, the flaring pain in my hip from him fucking me into the table spiking down my leg.

"Darren, please," I implored again, but the only answer I got was the top of the cage slamming shut over of me.

He then crouched down beside me, his eyes hard with that vengeful intensity I knew so well, devoid of any mercy or sympathy, just like the tone in his voice.

"I wanted you to watch this next part while my cum leaks out of your pussy. Remember how this feels the next time you think about defying me." Darren then stood back up, straightened his blood-red tie and took out his phone to text something. Ten seconds later, the door to the top of the stairs opened and three of the same guards from earlier descended. "Just so you're aware," Darren said as I watched two of the guards pull the same skull face ski masks over their heads while the third went to stand behind the camera. "Every time you look away, Camaro will be the one to take the shock this

time. So be mindful if you don't want your dog to suffer *your* consequences."

A stunned sob wracked up my throat as more tears slipped down my cheeks, Darren's cruelty boundless in its ability to torment and destroy.

"You asshole," I whispered bitterly under my breath as my hands curled into fists. I was rewarded with a quick burst of electricity that jolted through my entire body, the pain sharp and intense.

"Consider that your one and final warning," he rumbled. "From now on, every curse that leaves your mouth, Camaro will take the shock. One way or another, Jaden, you will learn to control that disrespectful mouth of yours."

I refused to look at him, my jaw straining as my fingernails bit into the palm of my hands until I was sure I broke the skin. I had warned this man not to threaten my dog, and I vowed right then to make him regret it. If Darren thought he wanted my obedience that bad, then I would fucking bore him to death with it.

"No! Wait! Please!" the woman shouted as the men descended on her.

She fought back as best she could as they ripped her clothes from her body. I watched with blurred vision thanks to the tears in my eyes as they viciously raped her from both ends, one from behind while the other was in her mouth. About three brutal minutes later, they both pulled out long hunting knives that glinted in the dim light.

My stomach ate itself alive as each man took a single turn stabbing her outstretched skinny body at every angle they could reach. I made the mistake of lowering my lids for too long, my body suddenly struck with dread at the sound of Camaro's sharp yelp and subsequent whine.

The poor woman continued to scream and fight, but it didn't make one bit of a difference as they drove their blades into her body, covering her with blood as it poured down and soaked into the mattress beneath them.

They continued to fuck and stab her long after she'd gone limp, her lifeless eyes glossed over as she stared off into the empty distance.

Her own husband had orchestrated this, wanted her to die just like this, and wanted to remember her *just like this*. My body shivered as a desolate coldness seeped into my bones, all the while Darren's warm cum leaked out of me to drip onto the cold metal floor of the cage.

Was my husband just as cruel as hers? Or was he worse? Would he condemn me to the same fate if he were so inclined? Would he tire of my antics and recycle my body into an immortalized reel of suffering too? Did he actually have a breaking point?

He very nearly killed me just a few weeks ago but stopped at the last second. Maybe it was time I really did change my behavioral strategy.

Whatever power Sid thought I had before was now officially gone. Things had clearly changed thanks to all these wars, and I would have to do what I always did when the occasion called for it—adapt.

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DOOMED

The following morning, I found myself sitting silently in the dining room, attempting to eat my breakfast as quietly as possible while Darren sipped his coffee and read something on his tablet.

The air was thick with an awkward silence, but if Darren noticed, he certainly didn't care as he remained focused on his work.

My stomach was still uneasy from the horrors I had witnessed the day before, but I knew Darren wouldn't accept that as an excuse not to eat. So I settled for fruit and toast, hoping it would be enough.

But the sound of him clearing his throat had me stiffening in my seat, and all my attention immediately focused on his movements as he folded the case over the screen of his tablet and stood.

"When you're finished, I want you to go see Sid about your hip. You've been limping since yesterday, and I want it resolved."

I wonder why...

I kept my features neutral as my mind went back to the ache still lingering in my hip. I didn't think I had been limping that bad and had just planned to stretch it out, but if that was what Darren wanted, then I guess I wouldn't argue.

"Okay," I responded plainly.

"After that, you'll spend the day with Ella like we discussed."

I immediately panicked inside. “Alone? Darren, I have no idea how to care for a toddler.” I mentally cursed myself for arguing, but the panic couldn’t be stopped.

“Carla will assist you.”

That was better than nothing. “Has Katherine woken up yet?” I asked.

Darren paused as he leveled me with a glare of caution. “She woke up last night. She’s fine.”

Relief surged through me at the good news. “I should go see her,” I said, scooting my chair back so I could stand.

“No,” Darren said sharply, causing me to pause in place. “You can see her later, after you’ve done what I’ve asked. Clear?”

I bit my tongue to hide my frustration. “Yes.”

“Good. I’ll see you later.” He took off down the hallway, most likely heading for his office.

“Fuck,” I whispered under my breath. Sighing, I leaned forward and placed my head in my hands, waiting for the anxiety in my stomach to settle.

Today was going to fucking suck.

With my appetite now shot, I got up from my seat, Camaro rising from her bed in the corner to follow me down to Sid’s office in the infirmary. I slowed my pace as I neared Katherine’s room, peaking through the window to see if she really was awake. But from what I could tell, it looked like she was sleeping.

Camaro’s claws clicked against the tile floor as we continued on past the cleaning staff, passing a few nurses who were working on a screaming soldier’s bloody leg. And then I instantly wondered where they were keeping Daniel. Shouldn’t he be in the same room as his wife?

I eventually found Sid in his office, his nose buried in a binder of records at his desk. Knocking against the doorframe, I startled him from his seat.

“Dammit, Jaden!” he accosted me, but all I could do was smirk.

“You’re extra jumpy today.”

He huffed his irritation. “Come on, let’s look at that hip,” he said, waving me in.

Stepping inside, I rounded his desk as he went to the sink to wash his hands.

“Lie down, Camaro,” I said, watching my dog find herself a spot on the floor, yawning as she did.

“Okay, let’s take a look,” Sid said as he sat back down in his chair. Lifting the side of my dress for him to see, he furrowed his brows when he noticed the speckled bruises spread over my skin. “Goddamn that man,” he whispered under his breath. “How bad is the pain?”

I shrugged. “A five or six. It just feels a little tight.”

He gently pressed his hand along my skin, feeling the bone and testing the muscle. I winced when the pressure became too much.

“You’re a little inflamed. I’m going to give you a cortisone shot for the pain. It should help bring down the inflammation.”

Opening a drawer, he pulled out a syringe and an alcohol swab. After disinfecting the area, he removed the cap and pressed the needle to my skin. “Slight pinch and a little pressure.”

I gritted my teeth at the “slight pinch” as a weird pressure began to fill in my hip joint. Withdrawing the needle, Sid disposed of it in a medical waste bin, then turned to look at me, his eyes full of scrutiny.

“You look tired. Are you tired?” he asked, raising a brow.

I shrugged. My life was exhausting. Of course, I was tired.

“Yeah, always.” *Duh.*

Sid swiveled in his desk chair back to the open drawer and pulled out another syringe.

“I’m gonna give you a B12 shot. Give you some energy and put some pep back into your step.”

I eyed him suspiciously but ultimately resigned over its harmlessness. “Sure, why not,” I said. I didn’t think I was deficient, but I wasn’t going to protest if it gave me back a little more energy.

After injecting the shot into my arm, he disposed of the needle and removed his gloves.

“Okay, you’re all set, Jaden.”

“Thanks. Darren told me Katherine woke up. How is she doing?” I asked.

Sid sighed before he coughed into the elbow of his jacket. “She’s in a lot of pain from the burns, but she’ll be okay. She just needs to rest.”

I nodded. “That’s good. What about Daniel?”

“So far, he’s alive and resting. I expect him to make a full recovery.”

“But you don’t know about the potential personality changes?”

Sid shrugged. “Time will tell with that one. It’ll manifest itself one way or another.”

“And Darren is aware that his brother could now be a potential liability to his criminal empire?” I asked.

Sid furrowed his brow, eyeing me with suspicion, but then nodded. “He’s well aware of the risks and challenges that may or may not lie ahead.”

I nodded in acknowledgment. “Well, that’s all good to know. I’d like to be able to visit Katherine when she’s well enough. Will you let me know when I can?”

Sid folded his lips together, tilting his chin before finally answering me. “I’ll try to.”

I gave him a small smile. “Thanks. I’ll see you later. Come on, girl,” I said and headed out of his office, my hip noticeably less tight with each step.

But dread crept into my stomach as I approached Katherine’s room, remembering that I had to entertain her daughter today. Peeking through the

window again, I hoped for some sign of movement, but she seemed to still be in the same position as before. Sighing, I left her to rest and made my way up to the nursery, where I knew Ella was being kept.

Opening the door, I found the room bathed in sunlight, a toddler's soft coos and giggles floating from somewhere off in the corner. My eyes landed on the tiny blonde sitting on the floor, watching Sesame Street and playing with a texturized book.

Behind me, Carla was busy in the small kitchen area, preparing what must be Ella's lunch. When she turned around, she damn near jumped out of her skin.

"Oh, Mrs. Davis!" she gasped, her hand clutching at her chest. "I didn't hear you come in."

I folded my arms and tried not to smirk. That was the second time in one day I'd scared the shit out of someone by being so quiet. Darren must love getting these reactions all the time.

"Sorry," I said as I moved farther into the room.

Smoothing down her shirt, she regained her composure. "I was just preparing Ella's lunch. Why don't you go sit with her while I finish up?" she suggested.

"Sure," I replied, reluctantly turning around to make my way toward Ella.

Ella stayed focused on her book even though an array of toys surrounded her, her chubby fingers gripping the fuzzy lengths on the cardboard pages. I sat down on the floor next to her and folded my legs, catching Ella's attention.

"Hi, Ella," I said sweetly. "Do you remember me?"

Her pretty blue eyes searched my face, like she was trying to recognize me. And then a cute little smile lit up her cheeks followed by a quiet giggle.

"Hi," she said back shyly.

After a few seconds, she pulled herself up to stand and wobbled over to hand me her book.

“Do you want me to read it?” I asked as I gently took the book from her. She smiled and giggled, plopping down in front of me to open the pages for her to play with.

As I sat there and read, my stubborn ass didn’t want to like this just to spite Darren, but I couldn’t help but enjoy myself. Ella was cute, expressive, and so damn happy for the daughter of a criminal like Daniel. But given who her mother was, I hoped she had more of her genes than his.

I didn’t know what Darren was trying to accomplish by having me do this. He’d just had my birth control replaced, so I knew he wasn’t ready to force a child on me yet.

What was he waiting for? Did he hope this would stir up some baby fever in me and I’d end up begging him for a child? If that was the case, he was more delusional than I thought.

But I decided I would play his game. I could spend as much time with Ella as he wanted me to and it wouldn’t change a damn thing about what I wanted. And I would relish in his failure to inspire for as long as I could.

Because while I knew he wanted me to want a family with him because it would make the whole process easier, my acceptance was ultimately not required.

Given the current status of things, I wondered if I should just accept what was. I had no idea if Jason was alive, I had zero faith in Matt, and Darren had buried another enemy into the dust overnight. It could be years before another attack like that could be orchestrated.

I was sure Matt wasted a lot of resources on Daniel’s home when he failed to actually kill him. He should have been using them to get rid of Darren.

With him out of the way, Daniel would be easier to get to, and Matt wouldn’t have to worry about retaliation. Or maybe he and Jason were

splitting the work to get them both at the same time. Either way, whatever the fuck they were doing, it wasn't working.

I sighed with frustration. I was going to drive myself insane if I kept going back and forth over it. It was exhausting, and I needed to just take everything one day at a time.

"Okay, everyone," Carla called as she hustled forward holding a small bowl and spoon in her hands. She stopped in front of the pen and nodded her head at the highchair near the table. "Would you like to feed her?" she asked me.

I blinked up at her. "Uh, sure."

"Great, just pick her up and put her in the highchair."

When I looked back down at Ella, she was still playing with the fuzzy cotton on the pages of the book. Reaching out, I picked her up from the floor and placed her on the side of my hip. She squirmed at first, but then giggled as her wide blue eyes focused up at me.

I found myself quickly entranced by the striking coloring of them. Dark blue rimmed her ice-blue irises, the brightness mesmerizing in its contrast.

One thing was certain as I held her. Something took root in the pit of my stomach, and the longer I held her, the faster it grew. And I knew without a shadow of a doubt, if I gave Darren a child, I was fucking doomed. Because I would die before I ever gave that child up to him.

Just like his mother did.

AMBITIONS



I stared down at the old security feed, watching Jaden interact with Ella in the nursery for like the seventh time today. I loved seeing the shift in her eyes the second she picked her up. Those pretty hazels warmed almost immediately, her features hardening with the determination I had hoped for.

She knew what was expected of her, she knew what was coming, and what would not be stopped.

She'd had plenty of time to come to terms with her future, but I hoped the more comfortable I got her with Ella, the better off she would be.

Hopefully, her anger over the expectation would dissipate faster if she secretly wanted a child. It would be better for her if she did. But I doubted her spiteful stubbornness would allow that to manifest so quickly.

Once she was pregnant and could feel our child growing and moving inside her, whatever anger she was feeling would be replaced with the longing for motherhood. She might hate me for a long time over it, but that hate would disappear into the eyes of our firstborn.

Jaden would cope and adapt just like she always did.

The doors to my office opened without a knock, telling me Scott had something to report on. Dropping a manila folder onto my desk, he plopped

down into the black leather chair behind him.

“Those are the potentials,” he said with a nod toward the folder. “They’re all overly qualified, so personality is probably going to be the next best factor to consider. My advice would be to pick someone she’ll actually *want* to listen to, someone she’ll respect.”

I scoffed at his joke.

Now, wouldn’t that be a nice change of pace?

Opening the folder, I took the profiles of Jaden’s new potential bodyguards Scott had gathered and spread them out across my desk. Each one had a photo attached to it so I knew what kind of build they would be using to protect my most precious possession. Studying the profiles, an interesting one caught my attention.

“A woman, huh?” I commented as I glanced up at Scott. He nodded as I opened the profile.

“She’s six foot three and built like a tank. A stone-cold Russian like her might be a good change of pace for Jaden. She certainly wouldn’t be barred from the lady’s restroom like Clive and Owen had been.”

“True,” I replied as I flipped through the pages, reading all her credentials.

“I’ve also worked with her in the past. I’d trust her with even *my* life.”

I glanced back up at Scott to see that he was serious. But as it turned out, she did have an impressive background. Former SVR, expert marksman, ballistic specialist, speaks five languages, and has guarded over a dozen foreign nationals. She even spent some time with the yakuza a few years back. But given her appearance, she would definitely draw some attention.

“Why did she leave the SVR?”

“Sexism,” Scott answered. “Apparently, her looks just didn’t suit for the roles they wanted women like her to play.”

I chuckled a laugh, entirely unsurprised. “It’s Russian intelligence, color me shocked. She looks like the damn female boogeyman,” I commented.

Her pale yet blotchy complexion was marred by multiple scars, none of which could be hidden behind a curtain of hair since hers stopped just above her brow. Intriguingly, the faded buzzed-cut sides gave visibility to the outline of a red-and-black Japanese dragon tattoo etched along the side of her skull.

Likely in her late thirties, her ice-blue eyes were sharp as steel, a familiar dark gaze hardened by years of field experience. And Scott was right, she was built like a tank, with an impressive physique I knew Jaden would immediately envy. Maybe she would be a good match for her after all.

“She seems a little eccentric, but I’ll consider it,” I said as I set the profile aside. Catching Scott’s eyes, he looked like he had more to say. I raised a brow in expectation.

“Daniel is still asking for you,” he said, reminding me for the second time.

“He shouldn’t be. He needs to be resting,” I replied as I glanced through another profile.

“He says he can’t rest until he talks to you.”

I rolled my eyes before bringing them up to meet Scott’s gaze. “He just wants to pester me for shit he shouldn’t be thinking about. He needs to relax.”

“You know he won’t until you put his mind at ease. And it’s already been a week.”

“For fuck’s sake,” I cursed under my breath, pinching the bridge of my nose. “Fine. I’ll go see him this afternoon. Where are we with the investigation?”

Scott stared at me before sighing in apparent frustration and shook his head. “I have no idea how Matt knew we would be there. The only thing I

can think of is he found some way to track us.”

I frowned at the logic. “But he already knew we were in Chicago. Why wait to have us attacked later when he could have done it then?”

Scott shrugged. “Maybe he didn’t have the time or the manpower then to mobilize an attack. Maybe the location was wrong? Who knows? Could be a million things.”

I cocked a brow. “He was the one who lured me to Chicago in the first place. It’s unlike him to fumble an opportunity.”

“Maybe something fell through, and he couldn’t act when he wanted to. Or maybe he had no plans to attack you in Chicago at all. Maybe he just wanted you out of California so he could take advantage of your absence and use it to attack Daniel.”

I thought about that

“Probably. But that doesn’t explain how he knew where we were going,” I added, sitting back against my chair. “He should have assumed I would just return home.”

Scott shook his head. “Someone had to have been tracking us.”

I paused to consider that. It was likely, and it wouldn’t be the first time someone followed me. But it was quite the stretch to follow me that closely undetected.

“There’s a missing link somewhere, and we need to find it.”

Scott nodded in silence, his eyes drifting off in thought while mine shifted back to the computer screen.

Jaden was now spoon-feeding something orange to Ella. I exhaled a deep, satisfying breath, relaxing my body as I watched her.

The longer I stared, the more I noticed a warm sense of optimism and hope blooming in my chest, overpowering my incessant drive for war and carnage. And soon, a decision quickly solidified itself in my mind over a desire that just couldn’t be beat anymore.

I wanted to finally start my family with Jaden. But in order to do that, I needed to destroy someone else's.

"We need to arrange a hit on Matt and all of his immediate family members. I don't care who kills them or how, I just want them all dead."

Scott was quiet for a moment before he took out his phone. "How much?"

"Five hundred thousand each, and one million for Matt with a two-year exclusive contract."

He nodded as he stood to make the call. Keeping my focus on Jaden, I realized I was already bored with this war with Matt. I just wanted him fucking dead so I could be done with his petty bullshit and move on. He'd destroyed one of my homes, one of my brother's homes, marred his family, and nearly took his life.

Matt had caused enough hell to officially become a goddamn plague, so I would utilize every resource I had to finally bring it all to an end. And if that meant recruiting some blood-thirsty mercs, then so be it.

Their assistance would even give me the time I needed to flush out this new shadow enemy of mine before they became any more of a problem than they already were. I was not about to supplement one war for another when I finally found them out. I wanted that issue done quick, clean, and contained.

When I was finished looking through the remaining profiles for Jaden's new bodyguard, I decided I was putting Daniel off long enough. Glancing back up at the computer screen, my chest warmed as I watched Jaden play with Ella on the floor, her gorgeous face lighting up with the same brilliant smile she would eventually show our own child.

Starting tomorrow, my main focus would center on nothing else other than making that a reality within the next nine months. But first, I needed to get her obedience back on track.

Rising from my seat, I sighed as I made my way down to the infirmary, already irritated by the conversation I would have to endure with my brother.

With his brain injury, we had no idea what to expect, and I really didn't feel like testing the waters right now, given his "fragile" state.

Bypassing Katherine's room, I rounded the hallway into our little intensive care unit, finding Daniel sitting up in his bed. He was typing something out on his phone when he looked up and noticed my entrance.

"About fucking time, Darren," he muttered.

"Shut up. You should be resting," I clipped as I sat down in the chair beside his bed. He had a white bandage wrapped around his head where the bullet had entered his skull, grazing about a centimeter across his frontal lobe, and then exiting his temple.

"Fuck that. I'll rest after I finally kill that motherfucker," Daniel retorted, an irritated edge to his voice. The asshole was lucky to be alive. Again. It was now the second time Matt had *almost* succeeded in killing him.

"Yeah well, someone else might beat you to it before you get the chance," I told him.

His brows snapped together. "What the hell are you talking about?"

I cracked my neck, ready for the explosion. "I just put out a four-million-dollar hit on him twenty minutes ago. One million for his immediates."

His scratched and bruised-up face suddenly turned even redder. "You what?!" he nearly roared.

I tried not to roll my eyes. "Calm down before you give yourself a brain aneurysm," I warned.

He immediately scoffed. "Since when the fuck do you commission open contracts on people? We always handle our problems ourselves."

“Since this morning when I decided I had better things to do than waste another second on that spineless little fuck. I want this shit done, Dan.”

He looked like I had slapped him. “Better things to do? You have better things to do than avenge your only remaining brother for the attack on his life, home, and family? Are you fucking serious?”

“Don’t be so fucking dramatic, Daniel. It’s not like I’m calling anything off, I’m actually ramping it up. You’re the one who started this war, if you want to finish it your way, no one is stopping you.”

The scowl on Daniel’s face reflected that of a man unhinged. “It still wasn’t your decision to make, Darren,” he seethed.

I tilted my chin in his direction, leveling him with a glare I typically reserved for lesser men.

“*Every decision* is mine to make,” I reminded him. “Do you understand me? This is not a fucking democracy, Daniel.”

“And isn’t that the whole fucking problem,” he snapped, the scowl on his face tightening. “Who made the decision to leave for Chicago when I specifically told you not to go? And look what fucking happened! If you’d have been here, we might have actually been able to end Matt when he attacked me, but no! You walked right into the trap I warned you about.”

I tried to suppress the growl scratching up my throat, my hands itching to strangle him. “What trap? The trap that led to Miguel’s demise? That one? Or are you just pissed because you nearly had Matt in your grasp, and not only did you fail to end him but you also lost your home in the process, *and* a pretty piece of your brain. Am I getting warm, Daniel?”

“Fuck you, Darren! We were outnumbered and yeah, I took a bullet to the head!”

“And you lived! Stop whining because big brother wasn’t there to hold your fucking hand,” I snarled. “You and Matt both failed. Again. And he cost himself a shit ton of resources in that attack. And what did you lose? A house. Big deal. I lost one too, and I’m not crying about it.”

“I almost died, Darren!” he shouted back.

“We *almost die* nearly every damn day, Daniel. It comes with the job, yet here we still stand. You should be reveling in your obvious invincibility since no one can seem to kill your ass despite the number of times they’ve tried.”

He scoffed and threw his hands up in the air.

“That’s not the point,” he retorted bitterly. “I told you not to leave, and you left anyway. Then we were both attacked. And now you’re making us look even weaker by letting someone else do our dirty work! It makes us look like we can’t handle our own shit, and we can’t afford to look like that right now!”

I pinched the bridge of my nose and sighed, fighting off the growing tension in my temples and the raging desire to break my brother’s jaw just so I could have it wired shut.

“See, this is why I didn’t want to come down here,” I barked. “You’re way too hot-headed to be thinking clearly right now. No one is backing down. You just need to sit back and heal.”

“I don’t need to do shit!” he bellowed, his face growing redder. “What you need to do is find your fucking balls and—” I had him by the throat before he could even finish that sentence, pinning him hard into the pillows behind his head. His eyes widened in shock while his hand gripped my wrist, but he was far too weak to push me off.

“Be *very* careful, *little brother*,” I warned, my words slow enough for him to understand. “We may be family, but that doesn’t mean my tolerance for disrespect is any different. If you weren’t recovering from a traumatic brain injury right now, you’d already be picking your teeth up from the fucking floor.” Releasing his throat with a shove, I stepped off and stood a few feet away from his bed, running my hands through my hair. “You haven’t even asked me about your wife or daughter. Is revenge really the only thing you care about?”

Daniel rubbed at his throat, scowling at me with eyes that wanted to set me on fire. “That man has caused us enough trouble,” he replied through clenched teeth. “He should have been dead a long time ago.”

“I agree, he should have,” I replied bitterly. “But that’s not how reality works, Daniel. These things do not end overnight. You know this. Matt’s not some small-time drug lord in a turf war whose resources are limited to one city,” I continued, my eyes snapping to his. “You need to be patient. He won’t survive much longer, not with a price on his head.”

He rolled his eyes and groaned. “You don’t get it, Darren. *I* want to be the one to kill him! His death belongs to me! Not some fucking scummy hitman from Romania.”

I shook my head, folding my arms across my chest, decidedly done with this conversation. “I’m not stopping you from killing him, Dan. If you’re so hell-bent, then by all means, have at it, but I am done wasting my personal time chasing that fuck around when I have other pursuits that also need my attention. I want this done and over with so we can all move the fuck on. If that means I utilize an additional resource I’ve always had access to, then so be it.”

He scoffed again and shook his head, his eyes maintaining a look of arrogance I wanted to smack right off his face. “If it’s really that important to you, Dan, I’ll let you skull-fuck his corpse until your heart’s content. Now get some fucking rest before I knock you the fuck out myself.”

With that, I turned around and walked out of the room, irritated that he was capable of running his mouth for so long.

Turning the corner, I stormed into Sid’s office, nearly knocking the old man out of his chair from my abrupt entrance.

“For a man who just took a bullet to the head, he has way too much energy to be that emotional. Up his meds,” I ordered.

Sid released an exasperated breath as he finally relaxed in his chair a bit, resting his hands on his desk. “We talked about this, Darren. We knew

your brother's cognitive state was going to be delicate. His behavior may become erratic at the most random of times. This will require some patience.”

My patience with my brother was running very thin lately.

“That’s fine when he’s fully healed and I can beat the shit out of him again. But until then, he needs to stay in a less wrathful state of mind before he does something stupid.”

Sid nodded before quickly turning away to cough into his sleeve. “I’ll.” *Cough.* “Take care.” *Cough, cough.* “Of it.” *Cough, cough, cough.*

“You do that,” I said over his coughing fit, turning around to head back up to my office. I had several positions that needed immediate replacements, and now I would have to add a private physician to the list too.

As I stepped out of the elevator, my phone rang, showing Scott on the other line.

“What?” I answered as I moved back to my office.

“We’ve got a big fucking problem. Someone just annihilated the *Lobos*.”

I stopped in my tracks, a blaze of fury mixed with disbelief swarming through my bloodstream.

“What?” I had to have misheard him.

“Someone just sent us a video of their entire village completely up in flames. Dead bodies were riddled with bullet holes, and the fields were decimated. They razed the entire place to the ground,” Scott explained.

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath, trying to calm the growing rage so I could think rationally.

Mother. Fucker.

“Did they leave a calling card?” I asked. “Any indication as to who or why?” Even though I already had a damn good idea.

“Not yet. I’m sending a team down there to investigate while I get to work on who sent the video to us.”

I shook my head as I tried to contain my rage. “This had to be Matt. No one else would have a reason to attack the *Lobos* and destroy the crop. This was strictly retaliatory. Otherwise, they would have kept the fields for themselves.”

“I’m willing to bet the same,” Scott agreed. “From the looks of it, they were very thorough. Nothing was spared. It had to have been a sophisticated operation.”

My thoughts returned to my conversation with the general and his threats about my global operations. If anyone had the reason, the means, and the fucking ego, it would be him. No doubt Matt finally called in a fucking favor.

“When you confirm it was General Rainer, let me know.” I hung up the phone and practically stormed down the hallway back to my office, ready to pull out every single speck of damning evidence I had to finally bury that old motherfucker once and for all.

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SLOANE



Two weeks had gone by, two whole-ass weeks, and Darren still wouldn't let me see Katherine. Though I could always see Ella any time I wanted.

He was testing me, and I knew that. My ability to act like the good and obedient little housewife he suddenly desired was on trial every second of every day. And I'd been nothing but a perfect fucking angel just to spite him.

I understood the shift, and it was my own damn fault. But goddamn, even I was bored with our interactions, annoyed with myself, and hating the sweet and innocent personality I had adopted as I pretended everything was fine.

Every day was a “yes, Darren” day, and it made things so dull when I couldn't antagonize him just to take a swing at his face anymore. But that certainly didn't stop Darren from taking a swing at me.

Catching on to my malicious compliance, he slapped me across the face, telling me to stop being annoying even though I was just doing what he said he wanted. It was the only indication I had received that told me I had met my mark. So I switched my personality from sweet and annoying to silent and boring.

After that, he acted like nothing was amiss, and I guess, technically, it wasn't. He remained surprisingly less antagonizing, actually avoiding intentionally taunting me so I wouldn't be tempted to argue with him.

There was no more playfulness to him, it was all business now. He laid out his orders for the day as if he were announcing the weather and expected full compliance without issue. And that was exactly what I gave him—boring, robotic compliance.

I wanted to bait him so badly, to remind him when he was being stupid and pig-headed. My nature to raise hell was a constant urge I had to beat back like a rabid dog, but he just wasn't worth testing anymore, not with his threat of harming others hanging over my head.

In fact, I made sure to say as little as I possibly could to him, speaking only when prompted.

But if I was being honest, there wasn't much time for conversation when he preferred to spend it fucking me as often as he could in every which way possible.

What was worse, he'd removed all of my thongs and replaced them with these ridiculous special G-strings made of nothing but a thin waistband and a string of pearl beads down the center.

I knew immediately what they were for, but I just didn't understand why the sudden change. But when Darren noticed me frowning in the mirror, he informed me I was expected to wear them all day, every day, with no exceptions.

I could feel the annoyance heating my face, but instead of lashing out, I decided to test my new strict boundaries by asking a seemingly innocent question.

But the cold dark fury I received in response had me retreating a few steps back to avoid being swallowed up by his approaching towering frame. I didn't push it any further by objecting to his answer that I was, in fact, still expected to wear them even when I was training or working out.

I had to suppress the urge to ask why, but it would be a fruitless pursuit that wasn't worth testing the consequences for. So I gave Darren the submissive little nod he wanted and finally released the breath I had been holding when he left the room.

Begrudgingly, I slipped them on, dreading the frustration I knew they were going to cause me as the string of pearls slid between my legs to press gently against my clit. With even the slightest of movements, the pearls would massage all the right places, keeping me in a constant state of soaking-wet need.

I already had enough reasons to kill Darren, but this was now in the top five. The never-ending sexual frustration left me in an irritated mood, the perpetual mess between my legs requiring more discretion than I liked in order to avoid leaving wet stains anywhere I sat. There was barely any relief throughout the day.

Even after Darren fucked me, he still expected me to keep them on after. At least he hadn't forbidden me from orgasming on my own if I needed it. He told me I could make myself come as often as I wanted, but the pearls would remain in place.

From then on, every time Darren saw me, even if it was just a passing glance in the hallway, I'd find myself bent over something nearby. He was suddenly a fucking machine, and I didn't understand why he was so hell-bent on making sure I couldn't walk straight by the end of every day.

If I wasn't so sexually frustrated and horny all the time, I would have avoided him like the plague just to give my poor pussy a damn break.

One day, I had tried to cheat for a few hours by pushing the pearls between the crease of my leg, just for a few moments of relief. When I realized Darren was looking for me, I quickly slipped them back into place, but there wasn't enough time for the desired effects to liquefy before he found me.

When he saw that I wasn't soaking like he expected, he slammed into me dry as punishment. Thankfully, it only took a couple of strokes for my body to get with the program, but those first thirty seconds were brutal. It seemed those pearls served an important purpose I finally understood—to protect me from Darren's new unhinged impatience.

Toward the end of that second week, he called me into his office, making my legs immediately tremble and my stomach clench. He had already fucked me four times today, and it was barely 3:00 p.m.

With Camaro at my side, I reluctantly made my way down the hall to find the doors wide open and Darren sitting at his desk. I approached tentatively, hoping he had another objective on his mind while my clit, still swollen from the pearls, had different hopes.

"Come here, Jaden," he ordered, his fingers waving me closer, a sultry look on his face.

I physically stumbled to a stop. "Darren, please, I swear to God, if you fuck me one more time today, my vagina is going to shrivel up and die."

Fuck, I hope that wasn't an overstep.

My stomach flipped at the curse, but I noticed Darren didn't seem to punish me if I was referring to the act rather than using the word for verbal decoration.

A dark smirk formed its way into the corner of his mouth. "Fine. I have someone I want you to meet anyway."

I breathed a sigh of relief, my shoulders sagging, only to briefly pause and cocked a brow. "Who?" I asked.

"Your new bodyguard."

I stilled for a moment, my nerves catching up with his words. Slow, heavy footsteps thumped against the hardwood of the floor, the sound bringing my attention to the person I hadn't realized was standing behind me in the corner of the room the entire time.

Turning around, I widened my eyes as I watched my new bodyguard approach me, surprised at Darren's choice. Standing before me was a very tall, well-built Amazon of a woman.

She had the typical haircut of a man—longer at the top with a high fade at the sides. But the fresh buzz cut revealed a sweet ass black and red oriental-looking dragon that was tattooed into the side of her skull.

The tattoo was so fucking cool that it nearly distracted me from all the other scars spread across her hardened, but still surprisingly, pretty face. She had to be at least six feet two, maybe six feet three, and built like a fucking tank. I couldn't stop staring at her. I was in complete awe.

"Wow," I whispered, just gawking at her like a dumbstruck idiot. My clit suddenly pulsed as it brushed against the pearls.

Am I in love?

"Jaden."

I blinked. "Huh?"

Darren's gaze hardened with perplexed annoyance. "This is Sloane. She's your newest Camaro," he informed me.

Turning my wide stare back to the incredible Amazon, I gave her a pitiful little wave. "Hi," I breathed, sounding like a dazed child.

Her eyes warmed as the corner of her lips lifted. "Hello, Mrs. Davis. It is nice to finally meet you," she said politely, her accent noticeably Russian. It wasn't heavy, but it was definitely obvious.

Camaro walked closer to Sloane, her head tilting left and right as her nose sniffed the air around her. She must have been satisfied because she turned her nose down and moved back to stand beside me with a yawn.

"Only one?" I asked Darren, surprised he didn't replace both Clive and Owen.

"For now," he answered seriously. "That will change by a lot if or when I decide you can leave the house again." I nodded solemnly, hating the way he phrased that. But he continued, tilting his head with an odd sense of

pride at the giant of a woman behind me. “Sloane surpassed all the trials far better than any of the other candidates. She will make an excellent addition to your security team.”

I raised my brow. “She outperformed the men? Imagine that,” I commented as I turned my gaze back to Sloane, catching the flash of humor in her eyes.

It was a subtle taunt, but I couldn’t help but point it out. Even Darren had to admit that women could serve as more than just a profitable wet pocket for men to use.

“You know I prefer intelligence to brawn any day,” he responded darkly.

I nodded in acknowledgment and pursed my lips for a moment. Muscle wasn’t everything in this world.

“Is she aware of what happened to my last bodyguards?”

Darren’s gaze narrowed. “She’s well aware of their *failures*, yes,” he replied, his voice laced with warning.

I tried not to glare back at the insult, instead turning my gaze back to Sloane to find her standing like a proud soldier, like she was ready to lay down everything on the line.

But given the risks, why would anyone even want the job in the first place? If the ultimate end was to die for me, what benefit was there for them? What was Darren using to secure the role? Were these people just suicidal or something?

“What made you want the job?” I asked Sloane directly.

She didn’t even look at Darren before answering. “It’s a great honor to protect you from harm,” she answered confidently. “For both me and my family.”

I furrowed my brow in confusion. “A great honor? Your life expectancy just dropped to zero for someone you don’t even know. Your termination ends in death.”

“That’s enough, Jaden. This is an introduction, not a fucking interview,” Darren scolded, clearly not liking my line of questioning.

Sloane nodded, unbothered by the exchange. “Yes, an honor. And my family will be rewarded should my sacrifice be required.”

Well, someone had a damn good life insurance policy.

My gaze returned to Darren, catching the warning in his eye that made my stomach clench. He’d found another sucker willing to die for me, and I needed not to fuck it up.

“Is there anything else, then?” I asked him, hoping to be dismissed.

The look he gave me was not one of approval. “No. You both can go. I’ll see you at dinner.”

I nodded. “Okay, then,” I said gently, and walked out of his office with Camaro at my side and Sloane following close.

I had a new problem to figure out now. Trying to discern what kind of trouble Sloane would be for me. Was she the nosy type?

She seemed to be too straitlaced for that. She acted like more of a soldier compared to Clive and Owen. And the fact that she was soloing this job without a partner told me Darren must have really been impressed with her.

I was suddenly interested in what made her that impressive.

Making my way into my private gym, Sloane followed me in, and I stopped at my octagon.

“I don’t have a training partner today. Would you mind filling in for me?” I asked her.

“Of course,” she said with a professional nod. “What would you like to start with?”

“I thought maybe a little light sparring?”

She dipped her chin at me. “I will wait for you to change then,” she commented, noting I still wore my regular clothes.

“Oh, sometimes I like to practice in regular clothes since I’m rarely attacked in my workout clothes,” I answered with a wink, then pointed at the trunk against the far wall. “But I do have pairs of shorts that I usually slip on to avoid showing off my ass.”

I gave her a tight smile before I headed to the trunk and discreetly slipped on the shorts. My bare ass wouldn’t be the only thing exposed since the stupid string of pearls concealed absolutely nothing.

Sloane gave me a sly grin as she followed me. “You’ve been through multiple attacks, yes?” she asked as she removed her suit jacket and tie.

“More than I’d like. What about you? What kind of action have you been through?”

“I have been on many rescue missions for extraction in dangerous cities around the world. I have also been the head of many security details for multiple politicians, celebrities, and infamous drug lords and their families for several years. I’ve had my fair share of action.”

“Uh-huh,” I said, listening intently as I began to wrap my hand, making sure I left my rings on this time. “So what’s the *real* reason you want to give all that up just to babysit me full-time?”

Her lips curled as she began to roll up her sleeves. “I’d heard about you before. The rumors made you sound respectable and intriguing. When Scott reached out about possible recruitment, I decided it was a worthy opportunity.” She began to roll up her other sleeve and continued her explanation. “Most wives or daughters of my previous clients are spoiled until they’ve become rotten inside. Your background did not give me that impression.”

I raised my gaze to her. “No?”

What the hell gave her that impression?

“No,” she affirmed as she began to wrap her hands. “You seemed like a person worth protecting, deserving of such selfless devotion.”

I paused at her answer, surprised she felt the way she did without ever knowing or meeting me.

“You got all that just from pieces of paper?”

She stepped closer to me, her chin dipping low as she looked down at me. “No, I’ve actually been watching you for the past week. And your interactions confirmed my initial perception.”

I felt my lips folding into a tight line, wondering if I should tell her the truth about my recent personality switch.

“Interactions with who?” I asked tentatively.

Her brows knitted together. “Does it matter?”

“More than you could imagine.” If she had been basing her perceptions on my interactions with Darren, which were now entirely different from how they were almost a month ago, then she really had no clue who I was. Would she change her mind if she did? And then I suddenly paused, wondering why the hell I was seeking a stranger’s approval. “You know what? Never mind. Let’s just go to work.”

Sloane nodded in agreement. “Would you like to do drills first or get straight to the sparring?”

“We can spar,” I said, fastening my last glove in place.

“Very good.”

Leaving our shoes on the floor, we stepped into the cage. Sloane closed the gate behind us to make sure Camaro didn’t interfere. She was used to watching me train, but this was a new person, and I didn’t want to take any chances.

Taking our spots on the mat, I stretched out my arms and legs, bouncing a little on my bare feet, trying not to wince as the pearls grazed between my slit.

“Ready?” Sloane asked.

I nodded. “Ready.”

Moving in on each other, we closed the gap between us and immediately started exchanging blows. She dodged most of my strikes, taking only a few to the face and body, and carefully maneuvering around my kicks. I had to admit the woman was fast.

“What kind of a name is Sloane?” I asked as I ducked under one of her roundhouse kicks. “Doesn’t sound very Russian to me.”

She chuckled as we danced around each other. “That is because it is not my birth name,” she answered as she veered to the right of my elbow strike.

“Why don’t you go by your birth name?” I asked.

Her lips curled as she gave me a knowing look. “That’s a story for another day,” she replied as she released a series of strikes I barely managed to dodge. Clearly, someone didn’t want to divulge too much about themselves. “I’ve studied your fighting pattern,” she said, her breathing remaining steady and even. “You have an interesting fighting style.”

I dodged her strike to my nose, but not the one to my kidney, causing me to wince as I sidestepped her. “How so?” I asked between breaths, trying to ignore those goddam pearls between my legs.

“You have a small frame. Yet you’re able to throw your weight around with much success. It’s fascinating to watch.”

I just barely dodged her kick to my head, moving to my knees to strike her in the gut. She took the hit and then lightly punched me on the side of my head. From my vantage point, I quickly turned to jump on her back and wrap one arm around her neck. “I guess I had to create my own adaptive style,” I said before dropping my weight to hang from her neck.

It only took Sloane a few seconds to shake me. She whipped me around, then slammed me on the floor. But I managed to keep my legs tucked and kicked her with both feet as she tried to regain her balance.

“Have you ever fought Darren?” I asked, standing from a kip-up.

She dipped her chin with a slight nod. “Three times during the trials last week,” she answered, bringing her leg up for a hook kick. “He is the best

I've ever fought."

I almost rolled my eyes. Of course, he was.

Dodging her kick, I moved in with a side kick, landing it square into her gut. But she didn't even react. She just took the hit and then attempted to punch me right in the head. But she switched her tactic and grabbed my arm to flip me over her shoulder, causing me to land on my bad hip.

Ah fuck!

I groaned through gritted teeth, pain flaring up in my joint that started to spread throughout my pelvis and down my leg. When Camaro saw I wasn't getting back up, she stood on her hind legs against the cage and started to bark. Sloane immediately froze in place.

"You are hurt," she declared, releasing her hold on me.

"No, no," I replied quickly, sitting up and waving her off. "It's from a previous injury. I'm fine. It just flares up sometimes."

"From your gunshot wound?"

I looked up at her to find concern in her eyes. "He told you about that, huh?"

She frowned at my question. "When I passed the trials and accepted the position, I was given an extensive report on your characteristics, personality, mental state, and various medical records. I studied well."

Now that was a report I'd love to get my hands on.

"I'm sure it was an interesting read," I commented, pushing myself up to a stand and placing more weight on my other hip.

She nodded. "I think we are done for the day. Do you need anything for your hip?"

I released a slow, deep breath, the pain aching all the way down my leg. "Just a large bucket of ice delivered to my bathroom," I said as I pulled my gloves and wraps off.

"Of course." She headed for the door, leaving me alone with Camaro.

I tried to hide my limp as I stepped out of the cage to put my gloves and wraps away, but Camaro immediately ran to my side to sniff and whine at me.

“Think she’s gonna be a problem, big girl?”

Camaro pressed her nose into my leg, her tongue hanging out of her mouth as she continued to whine at me.

“Yeah, I’ll have to figure out what to do about this one.”

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WARNINGS

Sloane was a difficult character to decipher. She was quiet for the most part, not one for jokes or sarcasm, but she would converse when coaxed by me.

She was the straight shooting, robotic ice giant that I couldn't quite crack. Sloane was respectful, polite, and even helpful at times, only too happy to provide me with whatever I needed.

Carla actually seemed annoyed by Sloane's swift and innovative sufficiency, like she was putting her out of business or something. But when the two of them teamed up with their efforts, I found myself at complete odds.

Clive and Owen had never been this coordinated, this diligent in their duties. Clive and Owen acted like annoyingly protective older brothers in comparison to Sloane.

Even so, I still kind of missed those fuckheads.

It was interesting being surrounded by more women, an entire team of females tasked with my well-being. My personal, emotional, and security needs were all handled with a kind of sisterhood I had trouble adjusting to at first, irrationally afraid Darren might find some way to disapprove and take it all back.

But once I got used to it, it was cool for the first two weeks, but after a while, the constant reassurance I had to give them that I was fine and didn't need anything was getting old. It was also hard to find time to be alone.

When I wasn't with Sloane and Carla, I was getting fucked by Darren several times a day. I didn't understand where he got the energy, but he was stealing all of mine until I was too depleted to even move. But on a day I was feeling particularly courageous, I finally asked Darren to let me see Katherine. The worst he could say was no. Again.

"Darren," I said gently, adjusting my skirt as I watched him refasten his tie.

"What."

I folded my lips into a thin line, suddenly unsure of myself due to his clipped tone. Softening my gaze, I released a slow breath. "Can I please see Katherine today?"

His eyes lifted to mine, hitting me with that deep intensity that always seemed to swallow me whole. Instead of answering me, he turned around to grab his suit jacket, slipping it over his shoulders and buttoning it at his waist. And then he finally glanced back up at me.

"I'll talk to Daniel," he said, and then walked out of the room.

My eyes stayed stuck on the door Darren had just shut behind him, his cum still leaking out of me and soaking into the sheets. I found myself stuck to the bed, puzzling over how things had changed since we got back to the estate.

My mind replayed much of our interactions, quickly recognizing his clear intent to reduce me to nothing more than the obedient fuck-doll I'd been in the basement.

Darren barely spoke to me, and any words he did speak were short and clipped. He spent more time fucking me than he ever had before, and ignored me almost entirely when he wasn't. Was he overcompensating our

time because he wouldn't let me fight him anymore? Was my pussy the only thing left that actually entertained him now?

No. I shook my head at the thought. We'd already been through his era once before, and he came to hate it. This was just another phase, and it wouldn't last forever.

Darren wanted me *because* I fought him, because I was the reoccurring challenge he never seemed to tire of, and I was sure he would miss the conflict. I just didn't know how long it would be before he finally broke, but I had a strong feeling it had everything to do with Matt.

Once Darren finally eliminated him, I was sure he would lighten up again. But with Matt gone, my chances of escape diminished even more. And I really didn't want to think about that right now.

With a sigh, I stood from the bed, cleaned myself up, and swapped the pearls with a fresh pair that wasn't sticky with Darren's cum. After changing into some workout clothes, I stepped through the bedroom door, pausing as I came face-to-face with Sloane standing in the hallway with Camaro. I glanced down the hallway, wondering if she had seen Darren pass by.

"Did Darren say anything to you when you passed him?"

Sloane's brows furrowed with a confused suspicion. "He did not," she answered as she stared down at me. "Did you expect him to?"

I shrugged and then shook my head. "I guess not." Would she even tell me if he did?

"Come," she said, gesturing to the stairs. "Let us go outside. It is a beautiful day."

I TOSSSED the Frisbee to Sloane, chuckling softly as I watched Camaro dart off for it. I didn't often get to play keep-away from her since it was damn

near impossible to get Clive or Owen to participate. But Sloane seemed happy to oblige.

A couple of times Camaro had managed to wrangle it before we could snatch it from her, but she was still excited to chase it all the same.

Standing in the shade of the trees, Sloane tossed the Frisbee again across the lawn, but the wind suddenly picked up and swung it a few feet to my right. When it hit the ground, I quickly reached down to grab it before Camaro could.

But she was faster than I had anticipated. We both went for the Frisbee at the same time, but instead of the Frisbee, her jaw clenched right over my left hand instead.

A quick sharp pain struck through my hand, a yelp slipping from my mouth as I drew my hand back. Camaro immediately whined and cried at realizing she had accidentally bitten me, her entire body shaking back and forth as she moved.

“Jaden, are you okay?” Sloane called as she came running from across the lawn.

Pulling my hand from my chest, I saw a few red puncture marks below my knuckles and near my thumb, blood coating my skin as it seeped from the wounds.

“Shit,” I whispered to myself.

“Let me see that,” Sloane demanded as she gently took my hand.

“It was an accident. She didn’t mean to bite me. I reached for the Frisbee at the same time she did,” I tried to explain.

Sloane nodded. “Okay. We should get you over to Sid.”

“Oh, come on. It’s not that serious. I can clean this up myself.”

“Jaden, you were bitten by a dog. On your hand, no less. Sid needs to take care of this.”

I sighed as the anxiety filtered through me. If Darren found out about this, I was afraid of what he would do about Camaro. She was already on

thin ice as it was.

Begrudgingly, I followed Sloane down to the infirmary with Camaro trailing behind me.

“It’s okay, Camaro,” I cooed, trying to calm her down. But inside, I was anything but calm. Darren was going to be furious, and I didn’t know how I was going to get him to forgive her.

Sid cleaned up my hand as carefully as possible, and examined the punctures.

“Well, the good news is that it doesn’t look like you need any stitches. The bites aren’t that deep,” he confirmed. “But I’m going to give you some antibiotics, just in case.”

I breathed a small sigh of relief, but Sloane didn’t look any happier. No doubt Darren would somehow find a way to blame her as well.

When Sid was done treating and bandaging my hand, I looked down at my dog and the dark feeling of dread crept over me. I didn’t want Darren to find out, but I was sure Sloane would have to report what happened to him anyway.

“Is there any way I can convince you to let me tell Darren what happened?” I asked her.

She folded her lips and then gently shook her head.

I groaned aloud. I knew it was a long shot.

“Fuck.”

“Why don’t we go see Katherine now and think about this later,” she offered. “I was just informed that you may join her for lunch.”

Fucking finally!

Suddenly rejuvenated, I hopped down from Sid’s medical table and patted Camaro behind the ears.

“Okay, let’s go.”

I eagerly kept up at Sloane’s side, trying to hide my impatience as I followed her to Katherine, my bite now long forgotten. I had no idea where

they were keeping her. I hadn't seen her once since she and Daniel had been transferred back to one of the guest bedrooms. It seemed she was bound to her bed just like I had been.

It turned out that her room had been on the other side of the mansion, far from where I usually was. A guard stood outside the room, nodding at Sloane as he opened the door for us to enter.

Walking into the suite, my eyes scanned every inch of the elaborate room, searching for the source of the laughter I was hearing. Rounding the corner, I found Katherine sitting on the couch with Ella, reading her a book while the news played in the background.

Hearing our entrance, Katherine turned her head in our direction, her soft features lighting up as her sad eyes met mine.

"Jaden," she breathed, a smile curving her lips. She stood as I approached her, both of our arms reaching out as we embraced, but the second we did, I felt her flinch.

"Oh my God, I'm so sorry," I blurted, immediately pulling away. "I should have known better." Her burns had to still be healing, and I was stupid enough to hug her.

"No, it's okay," she said, waving me off as she tucked her honey blond hair behind her ear. "I'm fine, really." But the scars along the side of her face spoke a different story. While the majority of it seemed to be healing, they still looked angry and red. And painful. But then she looked down at my bandaged hand. "Oh, no, what happened?"

"Oh, it's nothing. How's the healing been?" I asked as we sat down on the couch, Sloane standing just behind us. Camaro whined as she pressed her nose into Katherine's knees, coaxing some ear scratching and gentle petting.

"It's been slow, but I'm coping," she stated softly. "As long as I keep the burns covered, Ella doesn't seem to notice."

"And what about Daniel?" I dared to ask.

Katherine paused for a moment as she continued to fluff Camaro's ears.
"He avoids looking at me."

I sighed quietly in disappointment. "I'm sorry, Katherine. Your cheek really doesn't look that bad. I'm sure once it's finally healed, he'll lighten up."

She slowly shook her head. "Not this time," she whispered.

I scoffed under my breath. "What does he know. He's missing brain matter. His qualifications to judge have been reduced by a gram or two."

A puff of air left Katherine's nose as she smiled, attempting to hold back her laughter. "He has been acting a little...different lately."

I tilted my chin in question. "How so?" I wondered if it was anything I could exploit.

She folded her lips into a thin line before finally elaborating. "Just little things here and there. Shorter temper. Easily frustrated. Withdrawn. Some odd confusion he won't admit to."

Confusion? Now that was something I might be able to work with.

"Confusion about what?"

Katherine's eyes suddenly shifted to Sloane who remained standing behind me right in front of the couch. "I probably shouldn't say."

I pursed my lips, trying to find a way to justify her divulgence.

"Katherine, if he's getting confused by things he shouldn't be, it might be something Sid or Darren will want to know. We don't want him to be a liability."

I pinned her with my stare as I waited for her to find her courage.

She sighed and then sagged her shoulders. "Like I said, just little things. Forgetting things I know I told him. Odd misunderstandings and overreactions. Frequent pauses mid-sentence. Misinterpreting my words. Delayed reactions."

My eyes scanned her face as she spoke, catching the fear reflecting in her eyes, especially when they slid back to Ella.

“Has he been violent?” I asked.

Katherine looked away until her gaze fell to the floor, a small nod following.

Rage ripped through my blood at the idea of Daniel hurting his already fragile, healing wife.

Piece of shit.

“I’m sorry, Katherine,” I murmured. “For everything you went through. The attack must have been horrifying.”

She nodded. “Believe it or not, it’s not the first time I’ve survived an attack like that. But it was the first time I’ve experienced it as a mother,” she said sadly.

“Try not to dwell on it,” I attempted to soothe her. “You both made it out. Ella is fine, and you will be too. You just have to take it one day at a time.” I wished there was something else I could say that would make things better, but there was nothing either one of us could do.

At least for now.

If Daniel was as volatile as I thought he was, I would need to be tactful in my approach.

A few seconds later, a breaking news bulletin caught my attention, drawing my eyes away to the screen of the TV. Suspicion threaded through my brain as the story of a long time United States General had reportedly been arrested along with several members of his commanding unit for various war crimes, conspiracy, and extortion. An older man with a very familiar last name. Rainer.

My eyes narrowed on the picture, looking for similarities. Was there a family connection or was I just reaching for—

“Who’s your new friend?” Katherine suddenly asked, interrupting my thoughts as she glanced up at Sloane.

I didn’t want to, but I took her bait to change the subject.

“New bodyguard,” I answered, as my eyes peeked back toward the TV screen to continue my scrutiny.

From the corner of my eye, I could see Katherine’s brows furrow. “What happened to Clive and Owen?”

I swallowed back my dread. I didn’t know why I was thinking I could avoid this question. I knew eventually she would ask. Maybe I just didn’t want to relive their deaths by having to explain them, but I had to get over it sooner or later.

Giving up on the news story, I returned my full attention to Katherine, knowing there would be a lot of follow up questions.

“I was attacked when we were in Chicago,” I explained, dryly swallowing back my misplaced grief. “They didn’t make it.”

Katherine’s gaze suddenly grew wide with concern as they bounced up and down my hunched over form. “You were attacked? No one told me! Oh my, God, Jaden, are you okay? What happened?”

I tilted my head in surprise that she was kept this much in the dark, even though I really shouldn’t be. I had a feeling the only reason Darren told me about their attack was to explain why they were staying with us.

“You haven’t been told anything since you woke up?”

She shook her head. “No. Has something else happened? What have I missed?”

Damn. And here I thought I had it bad when it came to being kept in the dark.

“We—”

“Mrs. Davis,” Sloane interrupted sharply. “I’m not sure you should divulge. If her husband does not want her to know, it may be prudent to respect that.”

I turned my gaze back to her in irritation. “The man has brain damage, he probably just forgot. And if Darren didn’t want me to discuss a particular

topic with Katherine, he would have said so. As far as I'm concerned, this is fair game."

Sloane was silent as she looked down at me, her stoic face giving off zero emotion. And then she dipped her chin. "Very well then," she replied.

Turning back around, I proceeded to bring Katherine up to speed as to what had happened recently. The attack in Chicago, the attack at the country estate, and the disposal of Miguel Spade. By the time I was done, Katherine's eyes were the size of saucers.

"My, God, Jaden, you're sure you're okay?" she asked, her voice thick with shock.

I smirked at her concern. "I'm fine. Just another Tuesday."

She blanched, clearly uncomfortable with my dismissal.

Our lunch arrived a few minutes later, the spread being placed out on the balcony so we could enjoy the sun. Katherine and I kept the subjects safe, speaking mostly about Ella and the status of their home.

Even though she was bound to this room, she coordinated with Carla to help with the reconstruction of their home and replacing the staff. Katherine was only too happy to have a purpose and to stay busy.

By the time lunch was over, I'd only gotten to spend maybe an hour with Katherine before Sloane was reminding me that my time was up. I wanted to argue, but I knew where that would land me.

So I begrudgingly hugged Katherine goodbye on her uninjured side and waved goodbye to Ella who sweetly waved back. I hated leaving them behind, but I was grateful for the time I did get to spend, even though it meant I'd probably have to grovel to Darren for allowing it.

And God knew he was going to exploit the shit out of that later. So naturally, when I met him for dinner, I made sure to keep a positive and appreciative attitude.

"It was really good to see Katherine today. Her wounds seem to be healing nicely."

Darren said nothing as I sliced through my roasted chicken with the side of my fork, thankful the meat was so tender that it cut through like butter. But the broodiness surrounding him was much tougher to slice through than my chicken. I needed to distract him with something more significant.

“Ella was super cute while I was there, too. I played peek-a-boo with her and—“

“Jaden,” Darren interrupted coldly.

“What?”

“Put your left hand on the table.”

More anxiety cracked in my jaw as I clenched it, dreading the blow up that was about to happen.

“Before you freak out,” I started as I placed my arm on the table, “it was a total accid—” But I didn’t get a chance to finish my sentence before Darren’s hand snatched my wrist to pin it in place and ripped back the bandage covering the top of my hand. His eyes lit up with a bright fury, but I hurried to douse those flames. “See, it’s not even that bad. Just a couple of scratches. No big deal.”

But still Darren said nothing. Instead, he abruptly stood from his chair, nearly knocking it over and stormed his way into the kitchen where Camaro was eating her own dinner.

“Darren, wait! Stop!” I shouted as I rushed after him, dashing around him to place myself between him and my dog. “It was an accident, Darren! My hand got in the way of the Frisbee she was fetching and she accidentally bit down. She immediately pulled back when she realized what had happened!”

Darren’s eyes shot to me. “She still bit you, Jaden. That’s unacceptable.”

“She didn’t mean it! My hand is fine! Please, just listen to me!”

Darren shook his head, his glare baring down at Camaro as she whimpered from the floor behind me. “Please, Darren, don’t take her from

me. You know how much she means to me. I need her in my life.”

“And I need you in mine,” he affirmed, stepping closer to tower over me. “This will be your one and only warning, Jaden,” he said evenly. “If Camaro causes you harm one more time, accidental or not, she’s done. That also includes you risking your life for hers. Do you hear me? Either she will succumb to her injuries or I will put her down myself. I will not have you dying for a fucking dog. Do you understand?”

My heart was breaking with every threat, my breath getting caught in my throat as I attempted to acknowledge him.

“Okay,” I murmured, my heart slowly cracking open.

“She’s a goddamn guard dog, Jaden. Not a pet. Her job is to protect you, and if she isn’t going to do that, she’s useless to me. Do you understand?”

She’s never useless to me. “Yes, I understand.”

“Good. Camaro’s days have always been numbered, Jaden. Try not to hasten them.”

Darren then turned around and left the kitchen, leaving me to finally collapse onto the floor next to my dog, my one and only friend. I clutched her tightly to me, terrified of what the future held for her. I didn’t want to see her end up the same way as Clive and Owen and I didn’t know what I would do if Darren forced her down that path.

I just had to hope I would never find out.

FINALLY



Jaden's hips slammed against my desk, my cock pounding in and out of her soaking-wet pussy that clung to me like a fucking lifeline. Bent over the hard surface, she clutched the edges, holding tight as she hissed and moaned through every stroke.

Primal satisfaction ran deep as I claimed what was mine, knowing my efforts would eventually lead to the ultimate reward.

Jaden's dress and bra lay discarded on the floor in ribbons, the only item of clothing left being the string of pearls that teased along my shaft. If you could even call that clothing.

This particular set had two parallel strings that allowed my cock to spear between each one, the additional stimulation an interesting mix with Jaden's tight heat.

I'd been fucking her like this for nearly two months now, keeping her constantly in need, eager to bend over any surface I forced her up against. It was a brilliant way to ensure she was constantly filled with my cum, and the thought alone was enough to keep me hard practically all damn day.

If I wanted to get her pregnant, I needed to make sure my seed was constantly coating her womb. I already had Sid initiate the fertility

treatments, my eagerness and impatience incompatible with female biology. I was tired of waiting for the things that I wanted. Time could go fuck itself.

A notification pinged on my phone, indicating a new email with an attachment had come in, and then Scott's name appeared on the caller ID.

Fucking finally.

Swiping the answer button, I put the call on speakerphone and addressed Scott. "That had better be the report I've been waiting for," I told him as I continued to press into Jaden. When she noticed the call was on speakerphone and I wasn't stopping, she gasped an adorable sort of screech and tried to move away to avoid being heard. I pushed my hand down on the middle of her spine to keep her in place. "Stop it. You're fine," I ordered, continuing my pace without pause.

"You busy?" Scott asked from the other line.

"When am I not busy?" I replied as Jaden quickly buried her face into the cover of her arms, attempting to muffle any sound I had been previously enjoying behind her now sealed lips.

I chuckled softly at her sudden desperation for modesty, finding it cute that she was trying to hide herself from Scott's ears.

Scott ignored what was likely obvious to him and continued. "The numbers are better than we thought."

Grabbing my phone, I thumbed through the email app until I came across the report I had been waiting on. Swiping through the pages, I continued to slowly fuck Jaden while reviewing the data I needed, the corners of my lips curling in victory.

Matt's company, Rainer Industries, had finally released its second-quarter numbers, reporting a devastating loss in shares and plummeting stock value by a good 11.2 percent. After rumors had spread of Matt's family ties to the disgraced United States general and his possible involvement in his uncle's war crimes, remaining in business with Rainer Industries was no longer ideal or profitable.

A muffled cry snuck past Jaden's lips as my cock bumped against her G-spot, causing her body to stiffen with tension as her pussy clenched around me. A smirk formed on my lips as she did her best to pretend she wasn't even here. But with my other hand returning to grasp tightly against her hip, I refused to let her.

"How many suppliers have already withdrawn their contracts?" I asked, Jaden's muscles locking up as she attempted to hold back the orgasm I was intentionally building inside her.

She gave voice to her disapproval of my continued conversation with Scott with a little exacerbated grunt, her hands clenching into fists at the back of her head until her knuckles turned white.

"Seven so far, and I'm not sure if Matt will even have the funds to sue for the breaches of contract by then," he answered smugly.

Jaden finally lost the fight, and her pussy abruptly locked down on my cock, clenching hard as her body tensed up. My grin widened, knowing she was starting to come as another stifled whimper escaped her lips. She fell apart right there on my desk.

"Keep an eye on it. If the shares get any lower, I may just initiate a hostile takeover," I said, another burst of dopamine entering my bloodstream at the thought of owning Matt's company just so I could burn it to the fucking ground.

Hanging up, I turned my attention back to my wife, who was still convulsing from the aftershocks of her not-so-subtle orgasm.

"Did you really think you were going to escape my cock just because Scott was on the phone?" I taunted as I leaned over her stretched-out spine. I thrust in deep then, causing her head to pop back up on a gasped moan she didn't bother to fight. "Did you enjoy coming for an audience?"

Jaden groaned with an animalistic ferocity, her nails digging into the wood of my desk as I picked up my pace, fucking her harder and faster than before. I would admire those scratches in my desk later.

“You’re a jerk,” Jaden hissed, arching her spine to accommodate her position.

Snatching her hair, I yanked her head back, holding her in place before sharply smacking the side of her ass, causing her to suck in a sharp breath.

“And you’re mine,” I rasped, driving in and out of her with the kind of brutality that had her clenching around me all over again. “You’ll come where I want and *when* I want.”

Zoning in, I pushed her over the edge again, a loud cry of desperation echoing from her throat. Her pussy seized around me, gushing that liquid heat and bringing me right over the edge with her. I groaned as I emptied myself inside her, pushing my cum as deep as I possibly could and holding myself in place.

Releasing Jaden’s hair, she fell forward onto the desk, limp and pliable as her breath came in and out in heavy gusts. A light sheen of sweat coated her back, her hair a wild mess that fell in every direction as she tried to smooth it away from her flushed face. But when her breathing didn’t slow down like I expected it to, I grew concerned.

“What’s wrong?” I asked, leaning closer to push more of her hair out of her face so I could see her eyes.

“I feel...” She sounded confused as her words came out breathy and quiet. “I just feel a little dizzy.”

Gently pulling out, I slowly turned her onto her side, her breathing remaining exactly the same.

“Look at me,” I ordered.

She tilted her head, and her eyes tried to find mine, but they seemed to have trouble focusing on one single point.

“I think...I think I just need to lie down for a second,” she murmured softly.

At times like these, my first instinct was usually to call Sid because my paranoia always got the best of me when it came to Jaden. But I needed to

stop relying on him for every little thing when I was more than capable of taking care of my wife when she was unwell.

I may not have a medical license, but I had more than enough knowledge and experience to keep myself and others around me alive.

Scanning every feature of her face, I searched for any additional symptoms aside from her dizziness. Her pupils were slightly dilated, which could be due to the overload of dopamine I just gave her a few moments ago.

“Does your head hurt at all?” I asked, hoping for the negative.

She lightly shook her head. “No.”

I released a subtle sigh of relief, then stood to rearrange my pants before gathering her in my arms and carrying her to the nearby couch. Gently laying her down, I placed her head against the throw pillow and then took her small wrist in my hand to feel her pulse. It was racing.

“When did you last eat?” I asked, trying not to sound too angry.

She licked at her dry lips, her breaths finally slowing but not enough for my liking.

“This morning,” she answered. “Oatmeal, toast, and a bowl of fruit.”

Crouching beside her, I felt her forehead, satisfied that she wasn’t overheating.

“Did you go outside today?”

She shrugged as she closed her eyes for a moment. “I went for a jog earlier.”

Exhaling a slow breath, I pushed my own unruly hair out of my eyes. “It’s ninety-five degrees outside today. You might just be dehydrated.”

I stood back up and strode over to the mini fridge near the bar. After retrieving one of the water bottles, I unscrewed the cap and crouched down again to hold it to Jaden’s lips. She took the bottle in her hand and held it steady as she took a few tentative sips.

For the next five minutes, I forced her to continue sipping the water until half of it was gone, and her breathing was finally back to a normal rate. Taking her wrist again, I was satisfied when her pulse finally slowed.

“Feeling better?” I asked, reaching up to tuck her hair behind her ear.

Jaden nodded slightly. “Yeah, the dizziness is mostly gone. I’m just a little cold now.”

She tried to sit up, but I just pushed her back down and shook my head.

“I want you to rest for a little while,” I said as I grabbed the throw blanket folded over the back of the couch and draped it over her naked body.

She gripped the ends of the blanket in her hands and tucked them under her chin. After smoothing her hair down on the side of her head, I watched as Jaden closed her eyes, releasing a quiet breath as she burrowed deeper into the pillow.

Pressing a gentle kiss to her forehead, I inhaled deeply, relishing in her soft scent before standing to my full height and heading for the door to my office.

Opening it, I blew out a soft whistle and waited for Camaro to hustle past me, moving straight to Jaden. She sniffed her sleeping form for a few seconds before she was content enough to yawn and lay down on the floor beside the couch.

Quietly closing the door, I strolled back over to stand in front of the couch, remarking on the scene before me. Safely tucked away in my office, Jaden’s small frame was swallowed up by the blanket as she slept while Camaro stood watch.

It was like everything was suddenly right with the world, like everything was exactly as it should be. And very soon, it would be even better.

I’d already deduced that Jaden’s dizziness could have come from the hormone fluctuations I was secretly putting her through, which could also

be a sign of ovulation. Only time would tell.

Returning to my desk, I focused on work, busying myself to avoid lingering too long on the fact that Jaden was still naked under that blanket. I still needed to look into the latest tips that had come in on Matt's whereabouts. The fucker seemed to just disappear from the face of the earth.

Given the latest stain on his reputation and the fact he had about a dozen mercenaries on his back, he had nowhere else to go but to ground. But that didn't mean he wasn't still influencing things on the surface.

Three of my safe-houses had been breached in the past week at the same time, my underground vaults emptied and my artillery stolen. The whole operation cost me about thirty-six million dollars, a worthy pursuit for those brave enough to try.

But this group didn't just try. They succeeded, most likely thanks to Matt. The fucker had more intel on me than I realized.

Someone had also tipped off some of the Mexican cartels about my secret little warehouse in Tijuana. Another five-million-dollar loss of weapons and drugs. I'd have to find a different port and warehouse to store those shipments if I wanted to continue easily distributing into Mexico.

There was still so much work to be done, and it didn't help that my brother was not only completely useless, he was causing me more headaches than I had time for. He'd been discharged weeks ago from Sid's care, but he was still far from fit to fight in my opinion. Unsurprisingly, Daniel didn't give a shit about what I thought.

I knew his behavior was going to be an adjustment as he learned to navigate life with his brain injury. He'd assembled his own efforts to locate Matt, but so far, he'd come up with just as much nothing as me. He was still determined to beat the mercs I had hunting Matt down.

Personally, I didn't care as long as he didn't disrupt their efforts.

But he was certainly disrupting my home life. Twice in the last week, I'd caught him fucking some of my maids, who were very clearly not interested in the engagement. I'd been furious and had to quickly morph into damage control mode.

My staff was loyal because I paid them well for their silence, protected them from harm, and treated them with respect and dignity while instilling a healthy dose of fear should their loyalties ever think to shift. Some of them were here by choice. Others were here because they had no alternative.

But if my brother thought he could disrupt the peace and structure of my home, he was dead fucking wrong. I gave him one final warning that if he fucked with my household in any way, he'd be out on his ass, brother or not. I

had enough chaos going on, thanks to him. I would not allow him to add more, especially since I was busy trying to actually create things instead of destroying them.

Lately, I had preferred to spend the majority of my time reinforcing my relationships with my allies, creating meaningful business transactions and finding new sources for product production.

With the *Lobos* gone and the fields destroyed, we'd lost a good chunk of revenue that needed to be replenished elsewhere. So far, Scott and I had yet to find a suitable replacement, and it was becoming problematic. I had a feeling I would need to start renegotiating contracts with certain associates very soon.

After about thirty minutes, I heard Jaden groan uncomfortably, creating an odd grumble of noises before she abruptly jerked to the side and vomited all over my father's favorite and most expensive rug. Camaro jumped back with a whine to escape the splash, whimpering in a panic as she sniffed the air.

"Oh God," Jaden croaked as she looked down at the mess in horror. "I'm sorry. It just came up so fast, I didn't have any time. I don't know

where that came from.”

I felt the corners of my lips slowly curl upward.
Fucking finally.

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EXPECTED



I woke with my stomach twisting away in my gut, the sudden need to vomit incredibly overwhelming. Ripping the covers off me, I yanked myself out from under Darren's heavy arm and raced to the bathroom, just barely making it to the toilet.

Luckily, there wasn't much left in my stomach to throw up, but my abdomen clenched painfully all the same.

When I was finished, I dragged myself to the sink to brush my teeth.

"You okay?" Darren asked from the doorway.

"I'm fine. Just a little nausea."

"Still?"

I side-eyed him before spitting into the sink, irritated by the fact that this was the third time this week I'd vomited. I'd been feeling shitty for the past couple of days, and as best as I tried to hide it, Sloane caught on too quickly.

I could battle the headaches and fatigue all day, but nausea was an entirely different beast.

And the last thing I wanted to deal with was being forced back into another round of mandatory bullshit bedrest.

“Yeah. Still.”

Bypassing Darren through the door, I went back to the bed to lie down, hoping to quell some of the unpleasant aftereffects. Darren silently followed and sat down beside me, his warm hand pressing against my forehead.

“You don’t have a fever,” he noted, pushing my hair from my face.

Looking up at the clock, it was about 7 a.m., too early for me, but I doubted Darren would go back to sleep now.

“I just want to lie here for a little while.”

Darren sighed, his big shoulders sagging while his thumb stroked the side of my jaw.

“I’ll have Sid come see you again this afternoon,” he said, the hint of an odd smile on his lips as he leaned down to kiss me on the forehead.

“Thank you.”

After he left for the day, I kept my ass in bed, breathing through the nausea until I was able to fall back asleep, waking up another hour later. I found Camaro lying down just next to the bed, my arm able to reach her head for scratches from where I lay. I still felt bad that I’d almost vomited on her just a few days ago.

When I felt fine enough, I got up from the bed to take a quick shower, hoping the water would bring back some energy. When it didn’t, I forced myself to get dressed anyway, moving at a fucking snail’s pace until I made it out the bedroom door.

“Oh, you are awake,” Sloane said from my right. “Feeling any better?”

“Not really, but I’ll be okay. I’m going to go down to see Sid.” I didn’t feel like waiting for him to come find me.

“Then I will accompany you.”

I waved her off. “Oh no, you know you don’t have to do that—”

“My orders came directly from Mr. Davis this morning. You are not well and should not be left unattended for any reason.”

I cocked a brow at her. A potential stomach bug should not warrant this much attention. “If you insist,” I replied with a yawn, slowly making my way to the infirmary with Camaro and Sloane at my side.

Sid was studying something in his office, his expression a little more bleak than usual. He actually looked nervous for some reason.

“Still not feeling good, eh?” he asked me before coughing to clear the odd hoarseness from his voice.

I shook my head, watching as Sloane moved to stand against the wall. “Not sure what’s going on, but I’ve just been feeling pretty shitty.”

His brows furrowed. “For how long now?”

I shrugged my shoulders as I stepped up. “Few days.”

Sid’s eyes bounced up and down my form, his mouth forming a tight line as he scrutinized me. But I found myself doing the same to him, noticing the dark circles under his eyes and the droopy lids that nearly covered them. His face had been looking very gaunt lately, but his cheeks appeared a little swollen today.

“Okay, well,” he groaned as he stood from his desk, a subtle wheeze in his breath. “Let’s draw some blood and run some tests.”

Three vials of blood later, Sid had also taken my blood pressure, temperature, heart rate, listened to my lungs, and then went over my symptoms.

“You should have come in sooner, Jaden. I don’t know why you try to hide your ailments.”

I scoffed. “It’s just a stupid stomach bug. It’s not like I’m *dying*, Sid.” I eyed him closely, wondering if he would catch on to the hint that I knew which one of us actually was. He didn’t. That, or he just ignored it.

“Yeah, well, hiding symptoms just makes my job harder. I’ll be back with your test results in a little bit.”

Sid left the room with my blood, leaving me alone with Sloane and Camaro. Getting up from the medical table, I walked over to the leather

couch against the wall and lay down, Camaro followed me to plop down in front of the couch.

Sitting up was difficult to do when my stomach still felt off. I wondered what the fuck I had eaten that would cause me to feel like this. Or maybe I'd caught a bug from one of the guards? Oh god, what if it was because Camaro had bitten me? Darren would be fucking furious if her bite mark caused me to get sick.

Twenty anxious minutes later, I'd practically jumped from the couch when Sid walked back into the room, Darren right behind him. My brows knit together in confusion.

Why was Darren here?

Maybe you really are dying?

I cautiously stood from the couch, my hands automatically clenching into tight fists at my sides. "What's going on?"

Darren's eyes locked with mine, a hardness set in his fascial features while his jaw clenched like he was preparing for a fight. I felt my stomach roil.

"Sloane, take Camaro with you and give us the room, please," he ordered, the weight of his stare still holding me in place.

My stomach dropped even harder as I watched Sloane collect Camaro and walk out of the room, the click of the door shutting suddenly making it difficult to breathe.

Oh, shit, maybe I really *was* dying.

With Sloane and Camaro gone, Darren released a deep sigh and placed his hands in his pockets, finally glancing over at Sid.

Taking the cue, Sid finally spoke. "Well, Jaden, it seems we have some very good news to share."

My eyes slid back and forth between him and Darren, the idea of good news sounding like an ominous trick. I could feel myself starting to panic inside, my heart rate elevating as my breath hitched. But when my gaze

caught the sly grin hiding in the corner of Darren's lips, I felt all the blood leave my face.

No.

No. No. No.

"Turns out, you're not actually sick at all, Jaden," Sid continued.
"You're just pregnant. Congratulations."

And just like that, a bomb went off in the room.

Suddenly, the only thing I could hear was my racing heartbeat mixed with that awful ringing. A wave of dizziness threw off my balance as my stomach clenched from an invisible blow to the gut. My breath caught in my throat, denial trying to convince me I had to have misheard Sid.

My mind went completely blank, like reality was just a whirlwind of white noise and I was only dreaming. It was just a figment of my imagination.

But that familiar stab of ice-cold terror shot its way up my spine as the heartbreak of another betrayal smacked me right in the face. With my mouth quickly drying up, I found it difficult to speak.

"What?" It was all I could manage to say.

Darren's head tilted forward. "You heard him, Jaden."

My focus glazed off to the side, my brain trying to wrap around how it was possible. But it couldn't be.

"No, that can't be right," I argued, looking at Sid for validation. "We replaced my birth control implant. I can't be...be..."

Sid's gaze wavered as his eyes fell to the floor. "Well, actually, Jaden, we—"

"Your replacement was a dud, Jaden," Darren answered plainly for him. I felt my entire body harden in place. "A...a dud?"

"You've been off birth control for the last two months."

Oh, God, I was going to vomit again. This couldn't be happening. Two months? My eyes locked with Sid's, looking for the confirmation that he

had conspired with Darren to trick me like this. But the guilt and regret coating his face told me the horrible truth.

I sucked in a breath of disbelief, horror drenching my voice. “Why?”

Darren tilted his head, his stare narrowing like I’d just asked a stupid question.

“You know why.”

My eyes fell from his to the floor as my brain worked through the web of denial I was still trying to spin inside. But as my hands moved to clutch my lower abdomen, the proof hit me there just like another bullet.

Suddenly, all the fucking we’d been doing made sense. He had been trying to get me pregnant the entire time. And he apparently had succeeded.

“You...” I started, still working to accept what was happening. “You lied to me. You both fucking lied to me!”

Darren’s expression didn’t change, his hardened features unwavering in the face of my obvious distress. Instead, he just tilted his head, his voice cold and detached.

“A lie would imply that I *told* you something I knew was false. I’ve always been honest about what I expect from you, Jaden, especially as my *wife*.”

My eyes widened from his sheer audacity to spin this with his typical twisted bullshit logic.

“It’s still deception!” I argued. “You’ve—”

“Deception?” he mocked, cutting me off. “You mean like how you deliberately deceived me to help Kayla escape? When you lied and told everyone she was dead? That kind of deception?”

My stomach flipped at the memory of what he’d done to me for helping Kayla and covering for her. Regret snaked through my blood, wishing now I had made a different decision back then. My jaw clenched hard as my fists curled in anger.

“Yeah,” I murmured, my voice dropping low as I prepared for the worst. “I can see how much of a mistake that was now. A mistake that I didn’t go with her!”

Darren jolted forward, a snarl on his face as his arm began to rise. “Darren, stop!” Sid grabbed his arm to yank him back, but the attempt made Darren turn to grip Sid’s shirt and shove him against the wall. Wrenching the door open, Darren held Sid fast as he tried to hold on to Darren’s wrist, clinging to his plea. “You can’t hurt her! Not when she’s carrying your child!”

“Get the fuck out, Sid,” Darren snarled as he threw him through the doorway and slammed the door shut. When he turned back around, the dangerous look he gave me should have left me terrified, but I was too pissed off to care. “You were doing so well,” he commented, shaking his head. “I’m disappointed but not surprised.”

My brow rose. “Did you honestly expect me to weep with joy?”

“No. But a simple nod of acceptance would have been fine.”

I scoffed in disbelief. “You lied to me and tricked me into a false sense of security so you could be free to fucking impregnate me without any adversity. And you expect me to just accept that?!”

“Watch your mouth,” Darren warned, taking a menacing step toward me. “You knew this was coming. You knew what I wanted. And you *know* I will do whatever it takes to get what I want.”

“So you thought you’d just keep this little scheme all to yourself? Just blindside me out of nowhere when you finally succeeded? Why the hell wouldn’t you just tell me?”

Darren took another step forward, making me back up one. “Like you just said, avoiding adversity. I knew you would try to sabotage my efforts,” he answered, fury lacing his voice. “I chose an effective, less combative path.”

I screeched in disgust. “You mean you chose a cowardly path!”

His eyes blazed with a barely contained rage, and I was so ready to pull that final trigger. “It doesn’t matter what you think, Jaden. It never has. What’s done is done. Now accept it.”

Enraged, I immediately grabbed the closest thing within my reach and flung a book right at Darren’s head. He dodged it, but I kept throwing anything I could touch.

“You lying piece of shit!” A glass vase shattered against the wall as it flew past his shoulder, followed by a lamp that crashed into a picture frame on Sid’s desk. “I can’t believe you did this to me!”

Anger and panic like I’d never experienced before erupted inside me so violently, I had zero hope of containing it. The white-hot and blinding rage destroyed whatever perfect little wifely image I had created, and bore itself a monster.

He shifted his shoulder again, dodging most of the chess pieces I’d grabbed to fling at him. His eyes promised me regret if I didn’t stop, but that train left the brakes at the station.

“I suggest you calm down before you hurt yourself and our baby,” he warned as he took the brunt of the coasters I snatched from somewhere.

“Arhh! Shut up!” I screamed, covering my ears with my hands, hating every word he said.

I didn’t know what made me do it, but all reason went right out the window as I reached down and grabbed my butterfly knife that I often kept hidden in my bra. I had it flipped open and soaring through the air before I could even think about it.

As Darren lunged for me, the blade pierced right into his thigh, mere inches from his femoral artery. He paused mid-stride as he looked down at the knife now sticking out of his leg.

His jaw clenched as he sighed through his nose, barely even grunting as he yanked the knife out and chucked it on the floor. When his dark eyes met mine, deep-seated dread tore through my stomach.

He charged at me, stepping right into my kick aimed at his abdomen, taking the brunt of it without a single flinch, and nearly knocking me off balance as he bulldozed into me. When I swayed backward to catch myself, Darren reached out to snatch both of my wrists and yanked me to his chest.

“Get off me!” I screamed, jerking at his iron grip. “Get the fuck off me—”

“Enough!” he bellowed, causing me to instantly stiffen, my eyes refusing to look up at him. “You knew this day was coming. This should not be a surprise. Accept it and move on.”

I pushed against his chest, hoping to break free of his hold, but he wouldn’t budge, not a single muscle. And the harder I fought to get away, the harder it was to hold back the tears of betrayal that ran down my face.

“You could have told me the truth! Instead, you hid it from me the whole time! You’re nothing but a fucking cowardice snake!”

Darren then rearranged both my wrists into one hand and wrapped the other around my jaw, squeezing far too tightly.

“Careful, my little wife. You may be carrying my child, but that doesn’t exempt you from the consequences of disrespect. This is supposed to be a happy moment for us—”

“This was *never* going to be a happy moment for us,” I growled, rage grating my voice.

His features darkened. “Why? Because it makes it harder for you to try to leave me now? Is that what you’re still hung up about? That last flicker of hope gone?”

“I don’t want to bring a child into your world just so you can torture it into a monster like YOU!”

Darren smirked then, releasing my jaw with a humorous breath on his lips.

“Tough shit. Securing a legacy is what keeps us in business, keeps us safe as we age. It’s time for you to fulfill that duty to keep this family

secure.”

I scoffed. “Fuck you, your legacy, and your family! I can’t believe you fucking did this to me!”

Darren then shoved my upper body over the couch, pinning me in place.

“*Believe* that it’s going to happen again and again and again until I have as many heirs as I fucking want from you,” he growled, lifting my skirt.

“No! Don’t you dare fucking touch m—”

He was inside me before I could finish my sentence, his steel cock stretching me wide and causing me to cry out. For once, I was grateful the pearls had served me their protective purpose. Gripping my hair, Darren yanked my head back and brought his mouth to my ear.

“This body is *mine*,” he growled, thrusting deep. “*You* are mine. And I will do with you as I always have—whatever the fuck I want. I thought you understood this by now.”

His cock rammed in and out of me with such force, his punishing thrusts reminding me exactly why it was futile to argue with him.

“I’ll never trust your word again,” I muttered through gritted teeth.

“I don’t fucking care, Jaden. You’ll do what I say regardless. Do you understand?”

When I didn’t answer, he yanked my hair so hard I thought it would rip from my scalp.

“I said, do you understand?” he growled, purposely thrusting right into my cervix.

I cried out as my nails dug into the leather couch. “Yes.”

He then shoved the side of my head down into the cushion, his hips bucking into mine with animalistic ferocity.

“Who owns you?” he growled down at me, shoving his cock in even deeper.

I gasped in pain, attempting to pull away from the pressure, but he just yanked me back even harder.

“Answer me.”

“You do, you fucking bastard,” I muttered blankly, gritting my teeth as he surged inside me.

“Why am I doing this?”

As his cock continued to spear in and out of me, it dawned on me that even though he was hurting me, my body was still preparing to come. I fucking hated myself sometimes.

“Because you want to,” I murmured, not even bothering to mask the misery in my voice.

“That’s right. And you’ll fucking take it like the good girl I trained you to be.”

My heart didn’t have the will to fight him anymore. Devastation weighed heavy on my limbs as Darren let out the last of his rage on me, fucking me through my humiliating orgasm until he reached his own satisfaction.

When he was finished, he pulled out and tucked his cock back into his pants. He then grabbed my hips and flipped me over, taking my face in one of his hands.

“You have three days to come to terms with this. Three days to mope around and sort through your emotions. And when your pity party time comes to an end, there will be no more complaints. You will prepare for motherhood, whether you’re ready for it or not. Am I clear?”

I could barely stand to answer him. “Yes,” I whispered as his hot cum leaked down the side of my leg.

“Good girl. Now tell me you love me,” he ordered.

I felt my jaw clamp shut, a sickening feeling storming in my stomach, tearing me apart. When his gaze sharpened at my hesitation, I knew my time was up. But at that moment, I had one flicker of rage still left alive.

I shook my head and snarled. “I fucking hate you!”

Darren's eyes blazed with fury before he reared back and smacked me hard across the face, pain instantly flaring in my cheek. Wrapping his entire hand around my throat, he yanked me closer and squeezed.

"Say the fucking words, or you won't see Camaro until our child is born," he threatened, his voice so sharp it cut right to the bone. My heart tore itself in half at his demand, a sob scratching up my throat as several tears escaped down my face.

"I love you," I muttered through gritted teeth, wishing I could die at that very moment.

A cruel grin curled his lips, his eyes flashing with sinister satisfaction as he basked in his victory. And then he leaned in and kissed me, claiming my mouth with the same ferocity he had on my body. And as more tears spilled down my cheeks, I could feel his thumb gently wiping them away.

When he finally pulled back, he released my face with a victorious smirk on his own, and stood to his full towering height.

"See you at dinner." With a snicker, he turned to leave the room, collecting my knife from the floor before shutting the door behind him.

My knees gave out a second later, causing me to collapse in a heap onto the floor, surrounded by the mess and absolute chaos I could never escape.

And now... everything was lost.

WEAPONIZED



Irritation boiled through my veins as I left Jaden behind in Sid's office. Sloane gave me an odd look as I passed her without acknowledgment, her eyes flashing with what I recognized as concern. But then she schooled herself quickly, waiting for me to get halfway down the hall before reentering Sid's office and finding the mess of a little brat I'd left behind.

Jaden's reaction had been a little more heated than expected, but nothing I couldn't handle. The only surprising part was that she actually managed to stab me in the fucking leg. She'd pulled it out so fast and had it in the air before I realized what it even was.

I thought it might have been another piece from Sid's chessboard, not caring if it hit me. But when I felt the sudden sting in my leg, I was in damn near disbelief not only at her recklessness but also her accuracy.

She'd almost hit my femoral artery, barely just a few centimeters away. I would have bled out in minutes had we not been inside the convenience of an underground hospital wing.

Thankfully, it looked like she wasn't really aiming for anything specific when she threw it. If I knew she had actually tried to kill me, things might

have ended a little differently. Either way, she wouldn't be getting that butterfly knife back for a long time, if ever.

As I stormed back to my office, charged heat expanded in my chest, the warmth radiating in waves that warned my guards to steer far away as they passed by. Jaden was finally pregnant. My goal had been achieved and I was going to be a father—I should be fucking elated. But all I could think about was Jaden's absolute hysteria.

I knew this was going to happen, knew she would be pissed that I had purposely kept my actions from her. Her anger had been enough to actually allow her to bypass her fear of me, giving her the strength to defy me and scream that she fucking hated me instead. So why the hell was I so bothered by it? I'd never cared before. I usually enjoyed it most times.

It wasn't exactly a secret that she didn't want to bear my children, and maybe that was the problem. Did I want her to *want* to have my kids? Maybe. It sure as shit would make things a lot easier right now. A united front on at least one mutual goal would have been nice to experience for once.

But that was the other problem—our goals were not aligned.

Would she act like this every time I got her pregnant? Probably—especially if I continued to keep my intentions a secret. Or maybe she would eventually come to appreciate the family she helped create and would grow to love. Just like she would eventually grow to love me—even if it took decades.

In my office, I found Scott and Daniel engaged in what sounded like a heated argument, their voices cutting off the second they heard me enter. Both their heads turned, their eyes observing my obvious mood before they traveled down to the bloodstain no doubt growing on my pants.

“What the hell happened to your leg?” Daniel asked, his brow rising in surprise.

I sighed as I rounded my desk and pulled out the first-aid kit to patch up the bleeding that continued trickling down my leg.

“What were you two arguing about?”

There was an annoying pause in the air before Scott caught on to my lingering rage and finally answered.

“Daniel wants Lessner dead.”

I scoffed with a quiet laugh. “And why the hell would he want that for our long-time family accountant?”

Ripping the tear Jaden’s knife had made in my pants, I tore it open so I could get a better look at the damage she’d done.

Goddamnit, it needs fucking stitches.

“Because he’s a huge liability that we can’t afford to have right now. He knows too much,” Daniel answered. “I think it’s time we cut him loose. I’ll manage the accounts.”

I almost snorted, but hummed my acknowledgment instead, ignoring the urge to laugh at the very idea as I opened the kit to begin cleaning my wound. Daniel’s brain damage really was going to be a problem if this was how he was thinking now.

“Daniel, that man has more extensive security than the fucking Pope, and you know this. Why are you suddenly so paranoid?”

“I’m just being proactive,” he practically growled. “The less people involved in our business the better.”

I stared at him for a moment, wondering if that was the actual truth before returning to threading the needle and making the first stitch.

“Should we off all of our lawyers then too? Or maybe even our investment analysts? What about our chefs? Are they not all liabilities too?”

“Don’t be a condescending prick, Darren. I’m just looking out for our family.”

“You haven’t even stated why you think it’s even necessary,” I reminded him.

By the time I completed the second stitch, Daniel still hadn't answered me until I raised my irritated gaze to his.

"Just a strong feeling," he finally murmured.

I made a point not to roll my eyes.

Yeah, like I'm going to respect the intuition of a guy with a literal piece of his brain missing.

"Well, until that feeling turns into an actual fact I can verify myself, I want you to leave Ron alone. He's looking into a potential hostile takeover of Rainer Industries for me and he's the only one I trust to do it properly."

Daniel gritted his teeth. "You shouldn't be trusting anyone right now, Darren."

"Does that include you and your judgment?" I barked, glaring at him before taping the final piece of gauze over the four stitches I had made.

Daniel's exaggerated groan was cut off by Scott's sudden interruption as I returned the first aid kit to its cabinet.

"Ok, enough ladies, onto the next line of drama. What did you do that made Jaden stab you just now?"

I could feel my eyes blazing with annoyance as they shot up to meet his, the flames increasing as I caught the humor lingering in his stare. Scott knew my wife too damn well—the fucker could clearly recognize her handiwork from across the damn room.

But instead of killing him for my irrational misplaced jealousy, I exhaled from the emotional exhaustion alone and revealed the "happy" news.

"I told her she was pregnant."

Scott paused for a moment, staring at me with shock, and then immediately burst into a fit of laughter.

"And her reaction was to stab you? Fuck, that's actually pretty hilarious."

"Technically, she threw it at me," I corrected.

“You mean that little purple one you got her for Christmas? I told you that was a bad idea, and you have the balls to question *my* judgment,” Daniel sneered with a dramatic eye-roll.

Scott continued his excessive chuckling. “Damn, she’s got a good arm if you didn’t catch it in time.”

I groaned in annoyance. “She threw it before I even realized what it was.”

“Sounds like you’re losing your touch,” Daniel commented, his eyes exuding a dark glower. “Tell me you left her in pieces for that.”

I leveled him with a glare of my own. “How I handle my wife is not your concern,” I warned him before throwing the bloodied cleaning cloths into the trash. “Also, I really love how the two of you are more focused on the fact that she stabbed me rather than the fact that *she’s pregnant...with my child.*”

I could see Daniel shaking his head from the corner of my eye. “Fine, Darren, Congratulations. It’s actually about time your wife fulfilled at least one of her duties, so it’s great to see she isn’t completely useless. But, seriously, if Katherine tried something like that, she wouldn’t be walking for days.”

For some reason, the word ‘useless’ stung in a way I didn’t expect. Jaden hated that word, and I could understand why.

I dropped my chin and leaned on my knuckles against my desk, narrowing my gaze at my brother. “Well, it’s a good thing you’ve already beaten *your* useless wife into submission so she’d never even dream of it, let alone have the skill to accomplish it,” I shot back.

“Exactly, something you should have done to Jaden a long time ago,” he replied, his voice taking on a dark note.

I snarled at his growing arrogance. “I did, asshole. Don’t you remember? Her robotic devoted submission bored me. And clearly Katherine’s dull mousy subservience does the same for you, otherwise you

wouldn't feel the need to force your dick down every warm hole you see. I'm not so desperate since I happen to have a wife who actually satisfies me so that I don't need to look elsewhere."

Daniel scoffed. "And look at what that satisfaction is costing you," he argued, gesturing his hands through the air at my leg. "She disrespects you at every turn, practically tries to kill you, and you let her do it because you're clearly so damn pussy-whipped!"

If he didn't watch his own disrespect, he was in danger of ending up with his own stab wound as well.

"Watch it, Daniel. In case you weren't aware," I nearly growled, "that was the first time she's acted out since I brought her back from the country estate. There are bound to be slip-ups from time to time. Slip-ups I enjoy punishing her for."

"Ok, ok, drama aside, congratufuckulations, Darren, that's awesome news, but can we please get back to the real reason we're here?" Scott interrupted. "I don't have time to listen to the two of you bicker all day. Rip each other's throats out later. Right now, we have some serious problems on our hands."

"What the fuck happened now?" I snapped.

"The brothels in Vegas were attacked all at once. Everyone is dead, and the girls are all missing," Scott replied.

I sighed as a massive headache began to pound against my temples. With my wound clean and dressed, I sat down in my chair and pinched the bridge of my nose. This was the last fucking thing I needed right now.

"Looks like Matt is finally upping his game," I commented, closing my eyes as I rubbed my temples. "Is that all?"

Daniel scoffed. "Is that all?" he mocked. "Darren, those whores could go to the fucking cops! We need to find them."

How was my brother still this much of an idiot?

“They’re not going to go to the cops, you fucking amateur, because those whores are either dead or being sold elsewhere,” I assured him. “Matt wants us dead, not behind bars. We wouldn’t be in there for very long, and he knows that.”

“What if it’s not Matt?” Daniel argued.

I lifted my gaze and stared him down. “It’s Matt, and you know it.”

“There’s another problem,” Scott added. “The turf is now swarming with feds. We can’t move on it.”

I sighed, unsurprised there would be an investigation, and it would be a long time before those properties could be operational again.

“I’ll reach out to my contact and have him pull some strings. Those buildings are owned through a chain of shells and registered to a dead man. We have nothing to worry about. We’ll wait out the fire, and if anyone tries to move on our turf in the meantime, we’ll orchestrate another gang war to keep them occupied.”

Daniel’s eyes widened. “That’s also a significant amount of money lost, Darren!” he chided angrily. “Especially for that region.”

“We can afford it,” I reminded him.

I watched as his face started to redden. “I don’t care if—”

The doors to my office suddenly burst open, and the small frame of my wife barged in with an attitude like she was ready to set the place on fire. Camaro quickly trailed in after her, growling to herself.

“Mrs. Davis, stop!” Sloane called as she marched in behind her, but Jaden ignored her. “I’m sorry for her disruption, Mr. Davis,” she said as she tried to snatch Jaden’s arm, but she twisted out of her grasp easily.

“Back off, Sloane!” she barked, yanking her wrist away.

“Jaden, what the fuck are you doing?” I growled, my agitation with her defiance reaching an end. “Get upstairs. Now.”

“You wanna fuck up my world?” she snapped at me, eyes blazing with retribution. “Fine! Then watch me fuck up yours.” Her voice held an odd

tone of confidence, her white teeth bared with an animalistic ferocity my cock was more than ready to tame again. “Recognize this?” She lifted a book she had been holding by her side, showing me the front cover of something I hadn’t thought about in years. I narrowed my eyes at the tattered paperback version of *Lord of the Flies* by William Golding. “Your favorite book, right?” Jaden continued. She then opened the paperback and pulled out a folded piece of paper. “You’ll never guess what I found in it.” Holding up the folded paper, she tilted her head and glared at me. “A goodbye letter from your *mother*.” Her words had me pausing, wondering if I had heard her correctly. A *goodbye* letter? “Here, Daniel,” she said, handing him the paper.

I rounded my desk as Daniel unfolded it and started to read. Standing shoulder to shoulder, I looked over the words that were allegedly written by our own mother before she’d been killed.

The room was silent as Daniel and I absorbed the message she’d written just before we’d lost her. But the more I read, the hotter the rage grew in my blood.

How in the hell was this even possible?

“What the fuck,” Daniel whispered under his breath.

When I glanced back at Jaden, the grin she had on her face was dripping with a familiar triumph I recognized immediately. And it made me want to smack it right off her conniving little face.

“How does it feel?” she abruptly asked. “Knowing your helpless *dying* mother orchestrated her own assassination so she could frame an innocent family in hopes of freeing you both from your father’s insanity?” She stepped closer and pointed at the note still clinging between Daniel’s fingers. “She did *all of that* out of LOVE for her children even though it was completely deranged. She inadvertently destroyed multiple families in an attempt to save her sons from becoming the very monsters you allowed your father to turn you into!”

Everyone in the room stayed silent, the air filled with the kind of tension that could suffocate an entire stadium. I could feel Scott's eyes boring into the back of my head as he watched the unfolding scene. Sloane essentially mirrored his actions. Daniel seemed to be too preoccupied with reading the letter over and over again to hear anything Jaden was saying.

"How long have you known about this?" I asked her pointedly.

She folded her arms across her chest and leaned on her hip. "Not long after you first brought me here."

Fuck. That long ago?

"Does anyone else know?" Scott asked from behind me.

Jaden eyed him as she slowly shook her head.

Snatching the letter from Daniel's hand, I marched toward the fireplace behind me, crumpling the letter in my fist.

"Hey! What are you doing?" Daniel asked, his voice hitched.

Turning on the gas fireplace, I tossed the letter into the flames. My hands clutched tightly around the mantel as I watched the last words of my dead mother burn until they were nothing but specks of ash.

And then I forced that very same blaze to incinerate my feelings on the matter with it. I didn't have time to process the actions of a dead woman. Right now, I needed to protect my family from the potential consequences of those actions.

"Why the hell did you do that? That was from Mom!" Daniel shouted angrily.

Turning back around, I leveled my brother with a reality check. "Because if that letter ever got out to anyone else, the repercussions could be astronomical to our reputation and credibility," I answered firmly. "*Everyone's* world changed because of that war, not just ours. If they knew it had all been based on nothing but complete bullshit created by a delusional dying woman, it would cause chaos everywhere."

Daniel stayed silent for a moment as his eyes shifted to the floor, finally nodding in understanding. But when my gaze collided with Jaden's hardened stare, I knew another war of epic proportions was brewing right before my eyes.

More withheld information she had no business knowing, more lies and omissions. The fact that she'd known this long and waited until this exact moment to reveal her little discovery told me she was much more conniving than I'd previously thought. And it made me wonder what else she was secretly hiding from me.

"Does Katherine know?" Daniel suddenly asked Jaden.

Her eyes narrowed as she frowned at him. "She's always known her family was innocent," she answered him coldly. "Which is why Darren murdering her nine-year-old sister was so much harder to bear."

Her gaze then immediately turned back to me, a wrathful fire blazing behind them with so much heat I could feel it warming my skin.

So Katherine had finally found a single vertebra in her glass spine strong enough to reveal the bloodied past she wanted so desperately to change. For the first time ever, a tiny spark of admiration for her had flickered for just a single moment before I quickly snuffed it out.

"Children killing children," Jaden continued, her voice hard with disdain. "What a world to be raised in."

I smirked then, relishing the taste of her bait I rarely got to enjoy anymore.

"I was hardly a child then, Jaden," I reminded her.

She scoffed at my dismissal. "Sixteen is still a child, Darren. Your brain wasn't even fully developed yet," she argued. "Which is why it was so *easy* for your father to mold your squishy little brain into the exact shape he wanted. And now look at you. Your mother died for *nothing*. She'd be so disappointed in both of you."

“Shut the fuck up, you little shit!” Daniel scorned. “You have no idea what the fuck you’re talking about!”

I could feel my hands curling into tight fists as an inferno of fire rivaling a volcanic eruption burst through my veins.

“Daniel, get out,” I seethed, my eyes seeing nothing but red as I stared back at the gorgeous little demon I had created.

“Why? So you can coddle your bitch of a wife some more?” he retorted bitterly.

“I said get the fuck out!” I roared at him, ready to remove him in pieces if I had to.

Scott quickly stepped up and took Daniel roughly by the shoulders.

“Come on, dude. It’s not worth it.”

Daniel growled a series of inaudible grumbles as he reluctantly went with Scott.

“You too, Sloane,” I added sharply. “And take Camaro with you.”

Sloane nodded and whistled for Camaro to follow her, a huffed groan leaving the dog’s mouth as they both turned to leave. When the doors slammed shut, I realized two showdowns with my wife in the last twenty minutes was a new record for us. And it made me want to fucking strangle her.

“What exactly did you think you were going to accomplish with that little stunt just now?”

She cocked a brow at my question. “You finally revealed your twisted little secret,” she answered bluntly. “I thought it was only fair for me to do the same.”

“That’s not what I asked you,” I replied sharply. “What were you hoping to achieve by revealing that letter? *Fuck up my world?* Is that what you thought you were doing?”

Jaden shook her head. “Sometimes all it takes is planting one little seed. And it seems like it’s already taking effect. I can see it in your eyes.”

“What the fuck are you talking about?” I snarled, damn near ready to do something I might actually regret later.

Jaden stepped forward, dropping her arms to her sides, and glared up at me without fear.

“You seem to think that making me a mother to your children is a foolproof plan in ensuring I’ll never leave you. That I’ll stay for them. That I’ll learn to accept and return love, *for them*. But as you can see, your own mother has already obliterated that little theory into dust.”

I snatched her throat in my hand and ripped her toward me, squeezing just enough to bring that fear back into her pretty eyes.

“Three and a half years, Jaden,” I growled. “Three and a half years. That’s how long I’ve owned you. And you’ve waited until now to try to leverage that little piece of information? For what? Did you really think it was going to change my mind? That your duties as my wife would suddenly vanish?”

She huffed a humorous laugh. “Of course not. You’re too damn stubborn for that,” she rasped, her jagged voice vibrating against my palm.

“Then what, princess? What did you think revealing my mother’s insanity would prove? Other than the fact that you’re a conniving little brat bound for a world of misery in the next five minutes.”

She exhaled sharply through her nose, her eyes shadowed with the doubt she failed to conceal.

“You’re trying to achieve something by force under the false impression that I’ll change my mind and become more content with my life if you make me a mother,” she argued back, even as her jaw trembled against my hand. “But that’s not what’s going to happen. If anything, Darren, you’ll just make me more dangerous.”

I smirked at her little threat, somehow missing this kind of twisted psychological sparring only she and I could share. The turbulent delusions of her mind always had me intrigued.

“And how do you figure that?” I asked.

She paused for a moment as her hazel eyes swirled with a storm of chaos aimed directly at me.

“Because the most dangerous weapon on this planet isn’t nuclear power, armies, or even money, Darren,” she murmured softly, her gaze hardening with a ferocity I recognized as the threat it was meant to be. “It’s a mother’s love for her child. And you just handed it to me on a silver platter.”

To be continued in Part 2

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jay Marie has been writing since she first learned the alphabet, but it wasn't until much later that she decided to take the deep plunge into the depths of self-publishing. Her written work conveys a darker side of writing that brings a little thrill to the soul.

She has a passion for writing strong female characters with a brain that can override their sex drives, deliver one hell of a punch as well as take one. They have backbones made of steel and hearts that beat with a ferocity that refuses to be tamed or matched.

Her inspiration comes in the form of a minefield on top of a snow-covered mountain. One step and a new idea explodes in her head, and then before you know it, she has an avalanche of ideas rushing through her brain and it does not stop!

When she's not writing until the late hours of the night, she's working as a full-time attorney and a full-time mom to the cutest little toddler in the world. She also loves jet skiing in the summertime with her biggest cheerleader – her husband, practicing martial arts in her basement makeshift dojo, and to her own astonishment, spending hours on her manicures and pedicures!

On a more serious note, spreading awareness of the horrendous efforts of human traffickers has become a passion project for her. She meets her goals by providing detailed explanations in her stories and donating a portion of her book sales to charities benefiting victims of human trafficking.

With the strong support of family, friends, and community, we can and must work together to keep our loved ones safe by being aware of the vulnerabilities traffickers look for in their ideal victims. Ignorance is not a shield for the innocent. You must give them the sword of knowledge so they will know how to protect themselves when faced with the various veils of deceit. Teach them to cut it down long before it can be drawn over their eyes, and blind them from the truth. Stay aware, stay smart, and stay informed. We're all in this together.

You can find more about Jay at JayMarie.com



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