

SURVIVAL



EVOLUTION
WILL ONLY
MAKE YOU...
STRONGER SERIES

J. MARIE

Survival

A novel by J. Marie

Book Two of the Stronger Series

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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.

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This is just a special thanks from me to you, and not just for reading this story. By doing so, not only have you helped spread awareness, but you helped donate to a charity that supports victims of human trafficking. This horrific industry is very real and is happening every day, all around the world. With a little help, we can chip away at it until it's nothing but a dusty, dirty stain in our history.

I'd also like to thank everyone who supported me in this. Even if we're not that close, it still means the world to me. I love you all.

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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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Chapter One

His

I shook my head slightly as my heart slammed into my stomach, sure I was dreaming, sure this couldn't possibly be real. For a moment, I felt like a deer caught in headlights; yet I really wasn't as surprised as much as I was horrified by the fact my instincts had been right all along.

I had been purchased by the man of my worst nightmares.

The owner was now *my* owner.

He was never really going to let me go, not even to another person. I only wondered what the final straw was that had solidified the decision, but I realized it didn't matter. I was fucked beyond recognition, but at least, I knew exactly who and what I was dealing with – my single silver lining.

The owner glanced at the guard still standing in the room and motioned with his head for him to leave. The moment he walked out the door, I felt the chill of panic and terror slowly start to sink in. Everything was about to get real ugly real fast, especially with that sick look my new “owner” was giving me. I wanted to wipe it right off his gorgeous smug face ... with a cheese grater.

“Now, before we go,” he said heading over to me with heavy, determined steps. I stood up immediately, fear and rage boiling inside me as my hands raised at the ready, but before my fists were even closed, his strong fingers were already wrapped around my upper arms and pushing me back toward the desk. “I have something for you.” He smirked.

“Get the fuck off me!” I yelled as I moved to strike him, but he just maneuvered me like a rag doll and forced me facedown onto the desk behind us. I felt my stomach shrink as pain exploded in the right side of my face. He handled me with much more force than he usually did—not a single hint of hesitation. He didn't have to hold back anymore, and the realization made my heart pulse with anxiety.

His hand then reached around my head, clamping down on my mouth and the entire lower half of my face inadvertently. Tightening his grip, he

nearly squeezed my face until it felt like my jaw would snap. I screamed and fought, but it only came out as a muffled sound.

“Allow me to let you in on a little something,” he seethed in my ear from behind. “Whatever restrictions I had for myself around you before are now gone, which means if I want to break your jaw ...” he said as he squeezed even harder. I screamed as I clawed at his hand and wrist, praying he would let go. I couldn’t breathe, I couldn’t move, and I couldn’t even think. “I fucking will because I can. Because I officially *own* you now.”

My nails dug into his skin, sure I would cause him to bleed, but it did nothing. Until his grip finally let up, his hand remained in place, unyielding in his strength. I whimpered with relief, attempting to calm my breathing as tears began to form in my eyes. But I refused to let them fall. I could get through this.

“Do you understand me, Jaden?” he asked harshly.

Hearing my name on his tongue sent a strange vibe through my system, pulsing straight up my back and plunging right into my stomach. I didn’t like the feeling. His voice and my name didn’t mix well. They felt wrong, like breaking physics wrong, and it disgusted me to the core.

“I said do you understand or do you only respond to slave now?” he roared, the pressure returning to my face from his reinforced grip. I screamed again, nodding as hard as I could with what little movement I had left.

“Good girl,” he said and released my face but kept my body bent in front of him over the desk. I gasped for air, my heart racing in my chest as I tried to calm myself and keep the tears from spilling. “Now, if you can behave for one second, we might actually be able to get something important accomplished.”

He then lifted a black leather briefcase from the floor and placed it on the desk in front of me. Unhooking the latches, he lifted the lid and confusion came over me.

There, laid perfectly on beautiful red satin cushioning were five silver plated rings. They resembled bracelets as they were about a centimeter wide and had tiny diamonds aligning the center of the rings all the way around. Two sets of the rings were the same size, two being very small and oval-shaped, and the other two just a little larger. The last one was much larger and also circular. If I hadn’t known any better, I would have thought they were nothing more than fancy jewelry. I looked up at him in confusion, but

he looked so excited that I doubted he would have answered the tornado of questions spinning in my head.

“The fuck?” I whispered under my breath, returning my gaze to the briefcase.

Still standing behind me and placing his hands on my bare shoulders, his mouth dipped low to my ear. “These are your new chains, my dear. They will symbolize my ownership of you and prevent you from ever running from me.”

“I wouldn’t count on it,” I spat.

His fist slammed down onto the desk just inches from my head, and I couldn’t stop the flinch as fear jolted through my body.

“You wanna bet?” he seethed, that smoothness in his voice almost snake-like as it coiled through my ears.

I hunched my shoulders as a defensive reaction, and I tried to keep my brave face on, but it was becoming increasingly difficult. My head swam with a heavy current of emotions—rage, pain, confusion, fear, and utter hopelessness. I felt compelled to back away from the rings, but with the wall of a man behind me, I wasn’t going anywhere.

Fortunately, he walked away, heading over to one of the drawers of the desk, and pulled out some kind of cloth-like material. I righted myself immediately as he unfolded the material and held it out for me to see. It was a short fire engine red silk nightie with more red lace on the fringe.

“Now,” he said, feeling the material in his hands, “if you can behave and put the cuffs on without a fuss, I’ll let you wear this on our way home. I’m sure you want to be rid of that rag of a dress. But if you want to resist and risk pissing me off, we’ll continue without clothes and you’ll still end up with the cuffs on anyway.”

Goddammit.

Clothes and chains? Or no clothes and still chains? What epic choices.

My eyes quickly glanced around the room as I estimated my chances of either getting to the door or getting to something relatively pointy. Not even so much as a pen was on the damn desk and the door was about fifty feet away as I stared at it, compelling it to open and free me from my new fresh Hell.

“Whatever stupid ideas you have running through your little head, I would seriously reconsider them,” he warned, but my eyes were still on the

door.

I was almost one hundred percent sure he would catch me before I reached the door, and that was assuming it was even unlocked in the first place. I'd be fucked even more than I already was. I stared down at the "chains" that would represent my life, and of all the emotions I was swimming in, rationality won. And it killed me inside.

"Fine," I said rather harshly.

"Smart girl," he replied. "Hold out your wrists."

Smart girl, yet I didn't move. I couldn't. My fingers gripped the wood of the desk like a hawk clutching a branch; letting go would mean losing my control, my everything. At least, if the hawk let go, it wouldn't fall to its death like I would. It could fly. My wings were still working on the process of evolution, assuming I survived the processing period in the first place.

"Now, Jaden," he growled, and I nearly jumped again. "I will not ask again."

Begrudgingly, I held out my wrists as if they were about to be placed in handcuffs. There didn't seem to be much difference. I turned my head away, hiding the tear that slipped down my now hidden cheek as the owner picked up each little cuff and gently linked them around my wrists. They clasped around my flesh perfectly as if they had been made for me, so naturally, there would be no possibility of slipping them off.

"Sit on the desk and put your feet up," he ordered.

Hating every single bit of myself, I did what he asked as he bent down and placed the larger of the cuffs around my ankles, looking very satisfied with himself as he did. Then he grabbed the final ring, the largest of them all, and held it up for me to see. Dread and humiliation filled me as I suddenly realized what it was and where it was going next.

"Lift your hair," he ordered, staring me down, ready for my resistance.

Cuffs were one thing but a goddamn collar? That was too much, and I didn't think I had it in me to willingly let him do that. What was I now, some fucking animal to him? Fuck that noise.

"No fucking wa-" I started to say before he pulled me forward by my hair, turned me around, and slammed my head and upper body down on top of the desk. His hand kept me in place.

"I thought we had agreed no fuss," he said menacingly in my ear.

"You said cuffs, not collar," I retorted through clenched teeth.

“It doesn’t matter what you interpreted. You’re mine now, little girl,” he growled in my ear. “There will be no arguing with me anymore,” he said, leaning over me now. “In time, I will teach you my rules and you will obey them to the T or you will face the consequences. And you already know how much I love to deliver on that. Now, lift your fucking hair or I will fuck you right here until you bleed all over my cock.”

I clenched my fists until my nails bit into my palms. I couldn’t believe this was happening. I couldn’t believe it had come down to this. I knew what kind of person he was, knew what he would want from me, but now that it was happening, I had a hard time believing this was even real. Yet here I was, bent over a desk waiting to be fucked or collared. Neither option was ideal, but I knew one of them was going to happen whether I wanted them to or not.

Hating him and fighting my pride, I complied and reached back, lifting my hair from my neck to accept the one real chain that would truly symbolize my status of property. I felt him clasp the diamond-studded collar around my throat, and I nearly broke down right there. It wasn’t snug, but it wasn’t loose either, the metal feeling icy cold around my neck and sending shivers down my spine. My pride was officially pounded into a tiny cube and shelved just like the rest of my freedoms.

“Get up and turn around,” he said, backing up now.

I shoved myself off the desk quickly and turned with more hatred in my heart than I had room for. The owner gazed down at me with a sick, twisted grin and devious awe in his eyes. I could only imagine what he was doing to me in his head ... and when he was planning to act on it.

“Mmm ... picture perfect.” He smiled with obvious approval.

“Fuck you,” I scowled, unable to filter anymore of my outspoken words.

And then he backhanded me across the face so fast I hadn’t even seen it coming. I grunted as I fell to the floor onto my side, pain exploding in my temple and cheek. I brought my hand to cover my now swelling face and looked up at the piece of shit, but the darkness that came over his eyes was enough to make me shrink a little inside. I didn’t know why it surprised me that he actually struck me with his bare hand; it wasn’t as if he was above hurting women. He did it for a living.

“You had better wipe that attitude off your face, Jaden. Suddenly, I’m not feeling so generous with clothing with such a disrespectful mouth,” he

mocked. He stood over me with his hands in his pockets and the most sinister and satisfied look on his face.

Even though the damn nightie would barely cover my ass, I still wanted something that actually covered me. Hell, I'd wear a potato sack if it were at my disposal.

"Now, get up," he ordered.

I stood; the scowl still present on my red and now swelling face as I glared at him.

The owner smirked at me then. "Tell you what," he said, taking a light step toward me. "I'll change my mind if ..."

I waited for the awful act I would have to endure just for the sake of clothing and the thought made my stomach wrench.

"... you give me a kiss ... right here." He pointed at his cheek, that shark grin of his making my insides curl.

I dropped my arms and narrowed my eyes. Fuck this guy.

"You expect me to kiss you after that little display? You know what? I don't need it that bad," I said with an attitude and turned away from him. If he wanted a kiss, he could kiss my perfect ass.

He grabbed my arm, and I instantly wrapped mine around his to trap it in place, but his other hand came around and tore the flimsy material of the "dress" from my body in one strong tug. The clothing ripped like it was made of paper, and I was instantly naked again, covering myself as best I could with my arms and hands.

"What the fuck!" I shouted at him.

He charged at me then, his large body intense with so much capability as he quickly backed me into a wall, my arms and hands too concerned with keeping myself covered from him to defend myself.

When I felt my back touch the wall, my shoulders hunched and my skin broke out in goosebumps as I stared straight into my now owner's cold blue eyes. I could feel the fire fuming from my own gaze as I burned him alive with my stare alone.

"I expect you to do exactly as I say, exactly when I say it, without question or complaint, no matter what the fuck objections you think you're entitled to!"

His voice was chilling and loud, and it made me flinch even more, my eyes leaving his to hide away from the wrath emanating from his glare. I

felt so helpless and vulnerable standing there naked and small as I attempted to conceal myself from him and failed miserably.

“Drop your hands, Jaden. You don’t get to hide from me anymore,” he demanded.

“No,” I replied weakly, the word nearly coming out as a whisper as he chipped away at my resolve piece by piece.

Before I could blink, his hands slammed into the wall on either side of my head, causing me to flinch again. Anxiety was pounding away inside my head, and I was beginning to wonder how long I could keep my façade going. He kept his hands in place as he slowly lowered his head to my ear, his breath tickling my skin and sending shivers up my spine.

“My previous threat still stands. I will not tell you again.”

My heart was pounding in my chest as I tried to keep my breathing level calm. With easy movements, I gently dropped my hands to the side and clenched my fists until I felt my nails bite into my palm.

“There’s a good girl,” he drawled, his fingers reaching down to clutch my chin in a gentle, yet possessive grip. I turned away from his touch, shivering in disgust, but his hand refused to release me. “So beautiful ... and so mine.”

Don’t fucking touch me.

“Now, would you rather leave here naked, or would you prefer clothes?” he asked.

I exhaled a heavy annoyed breath as I stared off to the side. “Clothes.” I sighed.

He then slowly leaned down and tapped the side of his right cheek with his forefinger, a smart-ass smirk on his lips as he looked down at me. Anger seethed through me as it became clear he was enjoying this little game as his mood improved every time he put my resourceful king in check. I felt like just Mike Tyson’ing it and biting his whole damn ear off, but I didn’t think that would end well.

So I swallowed my pride and raised up on my stupid fucking tiptoes toward his stupid smug face, but just as I was about to drop the quickest, tiniest peck in the world, he suddenly grabbed my chin, holding it in place and kissed me on the lips hard. Shock sparked through my body, causing me to immediately withdraw from his advance, but his tight grip on my chin refused to allow any such movement. He held me there for only a second before releasing me and standing back to his full height.

“Sorry.” He smiled with a shrug. “Couldn’t resist.”

I scowled at him as he held up the little red nightie in front of me.

“Arms up,” he ordered.

I felt extra vulnerable doing so, but I did it anyway and let him slip the pretty red fabric over my head. The feeling of the material felt strange but in a good way. It was soft and silky, the fabric loose yet tight over my body, and I quickly wrapped my arms around my torso, hoping to permanently mend the cloth to my skin. The owner just gave me another one of his twisted little grins.

Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out his phone and clicked something on it. There was a slight beep that came from the collar and I had a feeling he had activated something in it, signaling the beginning of my prison sentence.

“These cuffs, the ones on your wrists and ankles,” he said, still holding out his phone, “contain extremely strong magnets, that when activated, cannot be pulled apart unless they are deactivated. Let me show you.”

He pushed another button on his phone and instantly, my wrists and ankles were pulled together by an invisible force so strong and fast, I didn’t even have time to fight against it. My balance was almost lost when my ankles came together, nearly falling over, but the owner’s arm reached out to catch me before I could hit the floor. Panic then ensued me.

I pulled and twisted my limbs, trying to free them from the force that bound them together, but they would not budge. He chuckled at my obvious annoyance and struggle. He pushed the button again and freed my wrists and ankles.

“The collar around your neck contains a very high-tech GPS signal that pinpoints your exact location at all times. It also transmits a signal to the server at my estate to alert me should you ever try to pass the perimeter I have set for you. I can enlarge the perimeter or shorten it any time, but that will depend on you. If you do ever manage to come too close to the perimeter boundary, you will receive a slight warning shock. Should you ignore the warning and continue past the range, you will have five seconds to return to the designated perimeter before you receive the full voltage. From what I understand, it’s not a pleasant feeling, so I would avoid it if I were you.”

I suddenly felt dizzy, the walls around me beginning to shift as I realized I had just allowed myself to become microchipped with a fucking shock collar. So long as I wore this fucking thing, he would always know where I was. How the fuck could I escape from him like that? I felt nauseated as I tried to get a grip on the spinning room around me, my arm reaching out for the wall while my breathing become erratic as the promise of escape began to dwindle.

And then I felt the warmth of the owner's hands on either side of my face, holding me in place and keeping me steady.

"Shhhh," he said. "Calm down and breathe, Jaden. Everything is going to be fine. I'm going to take care of you."

I looked up at him in confusion. Take care of me how?

"But not before you take care of me first." He winked at me.

Gross.

"Now, whatever questions you probably have can wait until later," he said as he grabbed my arm and dragged me along with him out the doors of the office.

We took the elevator down, and before I knew it, we were standing in front of a large metal door with a key code next to it.

"Come here, Jaden," he said, as he pulled me to his side. His arm slinked around my rib cage as he brought his phone out of his pocket. Seconds later, the cuffs around my wrists and ankles linked together and I felt myself lose my balance from the sudden shift, but the arm around my torso kept me from falling.

"Look at me," he said, putting his phone back in his pocket. Still secured in his right arm, I turned my head and looked up at him in intense bitch mode. "When we exit this door, there will be no screaming or fighting. No one will hear you for miles, and if anyone did happen to hear you, the snipers around this building would shoot them on sight. Do you understand me?"

Snipers? There were snipers surrounding the building? Shit, I hadn't a chance in hell of escaping this place alive. The realization suddenly made me shrink inside all over again.

"Jaden?" he warned, unhappy with my lack of response.

"Yes, I understand." I sighed.

"Good girl," he said and then bent down and lifted me over his shoulder before exiting the building. I groaned in irritation. I hated being

carried. I was a grown-ass woman with two working legs; I could fucking walk.

Warm air hit my skin, and I shielded my eyes with my arms from the intense brightness of the sun even though it seemed low in the sky. The owner kept a secure arm around my legs as he walked us down a cement path. I turned my head back to see a long sleek black limo waiting for us.

I didn't linger on it long as I quickly looked around to take in my surroundings. We had exited a huge building that resembled a warehouse. A shit ton of trees surrounded the area, but my stomach instantly dropped a thousand feet when I suddenly realized what stood among them.

"Palm trees?" I said aloud to myself.

There were no palm trees in Michigan, not even close. So how the fuck had I ended up in a place with palm trees?

"Where are we?" I said a little stronger than I should have.

"Be quiet, Jaden," the owner replied sternly.

I turned back around, irritated with my lack of answers, and then suddenly noticed something black move about the roof.

That was when I noticed the guard with the rifle in his hand.

Goddamn, I had no hope in this situation, but somehow, I doubted the owner would let them shoot his new piece of property if I tried to run now.

Being bent over his shoulder like this, I wanted nothing more than to rise up and gouge out both his eyes with my thumbs, but I knew that was a sure way to get shot by the guard. And even then, what was I going to do afterward? Somersault my ass home? Not likely.

Once we got to the limo, he hurled me inside and I landed on the far end of the seat. Following quickly behind me, I tried to scramble away from him, but he grabbed my hair roughly and yanked me down to the floor, placing me on my ass between his legs. With my back against the bottom of the seat and my ass firmly planted on the floor, I looked up and noticed his knees were above my head by an inch or two. Fuck, that made me feel small.

His hand wrapped firmly around my hair and twisted it around his thick wrist, tightening his hold on me. "Relax, Jaden," he said from behind me as the limo began to pull forward. I tucked my knees to my chest and tried to calm my heartbeat as his grip loosened a little to play with the strands and comb through them with his fingers.

"Where are we going?" I asked, trying not to sound too irritated.

"I told you. Home."

"And where is home?" I continued.

"Wherever I say it is," he replied with a warning in his voice.

I blew out an annoyed sigh through my nose and tried to relax. He wasn't going to divulge any information. I would have to figure it out on my own.

"You were quite impressive back there, by the way," he said.

"Thanks," I replied, not giving a fuck.

"You should have seen the faces of all my clients. I've never seen so many jaws drop from a single woman in all my life."

I made a small noise of approval. "I'm glad they enjoyed the show."

"But that's when the price for you really spiked, you know. They desperately wanted a piece of your fury," he said, smiling. "Would you like to know how much you cost me?"

"Sure," I said. I really was curious.

"Three million," he replied.

Damn.

"Why bother paying for me at all? It's your business. You can obviously do whatever you want with your merchandise," I said bitterly.

"Yes, you're right, I can. And I chose to legitimately pay for you because you don't fully own something without purchasing it first, now do you? Plus, I didn't want my loyal clients to think I was abusing my power."

I scoffed at his response. "But you abuse your power every day."

"There's a difference between abusing one's power and simply taking advantage of a profitable situation," he dejected.

"Oh, is that what you do? Take advantage of the vast and growing market for sex slaves? Make a killing for yourself by preying on the vulnerability of the less fortunate?"

I felt a sharp tug on my hair as he roughly twisted my head to the side. "You'd do well to keep your little misconceptions to yourself from now on. I couldn't give a fuck less about what you think of me or my business dealings, so don't waste your breath. Just do as you're told and you might turn out to be the best investment I've ever made."

"And just what kind of investment am I supposed to be?"

"You'll find out soon enough."

"Ya know, I don't see the point of taking on such a risky investment. You realize I'm just going to kill you one day, right? And I won't stop until

I do.” That was bold threatening him like that and giving away my intentions, but I needed to know what else was going on in his thick skull.

I felt the grip on my hair tighten even more as he slowly leaned down, his warm breath tickling my ear and sending goosebumps down my spine.

“You must have me confused with someone who sees you as a threat,” he said smoothly. “Don’t make that mistake because you’ll just end up getting hurt.”

“And I wouldn’t make the mistake of thinking I’m not. All I need is a pen and I’ll have you bleeding out all over the goddamn floor,” I spat menacingly.

He quickly jerked my head awkwardly to the side, sending sharp little pains down my neck. I felt his lips on my ear as his nose inhaled against my skin.

“And all I need to kill *you* is one fucking hand,” he seethed as his other hand quickly shot to my throat and squeezed. Both my hands instantly went for his forearm, attempting to pull him away to no avail with my wrists still locked. My oxygen wasn’t cut off completely, but it wasn’t exactly the most comfortable feeling. “You see? Even now, with your struggling, it makes no difference. I can do whatever I want to you simply because I’m bigger and stronger than you are. And whatever training you think you’ve had won’t mean shit against me. I’ll always win, Jaden, always.”

I wanted to strangle him, but he was kind of beating me to the punch. I was shaking with so much rage, I thought I might actually combust from it.

“But let’s just entertain the idea that by some incredible miracle you do manage to kill me. If my entire empire doesn’t find you first, my brothers certainly will. And after they’re done executing your entire family in front of you, they’ll make sure you spend the rest of your days as a drug addicted whore with a dependency for cock before they finally grant you some mercy in the form of a bullet to your head.”

I suddenly felt cold, like someone had just bathed me in liquid nitrogen and I was about to shatter all over the floor of the limo. I didn’t even realize the tears that fell down my face after visualizing that threat, my absolute worst nightmare. “Now, is that what you want?” he asked me with a jerk.

I wasn't even sure I could make myself speak after that, but I somehow found the one word I needed.

"No."

It barely came out as a whisper.

"I didn't think so."

He then released me with a jerk and sat back against his seat. I immediately sucked in air all the while coughing it back up as the tears continued to roll down my face. When I finally regained my composure, I sat back against the bottom of the seat and attempted to calm myself between my new owner's legs once more.

"Get it through your head, Jaden," he said noticing my calm. "You're mine now, and there's no escaping it."

Not if I can help it.

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Chapter Two

Welcome Home

~*~

Goddamn, this woman knew how to piss me off and turn me on at the same time. Her strength was beyond sexy and her willingness to stand up to me made the thought of pounding her into the ground that much more desirable.

With Jaden now sitting between my knees, I had never felt more at ease knowing she was mine. I couldn't stop the grin that snaked across my face as I had watched this crazy bitch kick the shit out of my guards right in front of my clients and me. The rage on her face was crystal clear as she carefully analyzed her opponents before striking.

I wasn't kidding when I told her she was impressive. Her motions were fluid and strong, never wavering and not a single sign of hesitation. And damn, I had to give it to her—she was fast. She knew exactly what she was doing, and it was hot as hell. I had never encountered a woman with her kind of strength or skill before, and it further fueled my growing primal desires. It was one thing to fight a person; it was another to actually watch them. Even my dick was fascinated.

I recalled looking around at all the drooling faces of the men, who were almost as twisted as I was, staring her down with a fierce hunger in their eyes. The thought of one of them touching her brought on a carnal rage from within me that demanded blood and pain. I could not let that happen. I would bury them all before they laid a finger on her.

As Jaden had fought with all her might for her ridiculous idea of freedom, all I could think about was one word that blared in the back of my mind ... *mine*. I wanted her fury. I wanted her strength. I wanted every goddamn inch of her screaming underneath me while I drove into her perfect body, claiming everything she had. And then, when I was done, I'd have her begging for more.

I could see her face now, flushed with desire and need, my hand wrapped around her throat as I forced her to admit she belonged to me. She'd fight me at first, probably every step of the way, but she would soon come to realize who was in control. She would learn to fear me, respect me, and eventually ... love me. I would twist and turn her mind until pleasing me was the only thing she craved. It was inevitable. It wouldn't be easy, but I loved the challenge in that. I finally found exactly what I had been looking for, and I wasn't going to wait one second longer to take it.

I had honestly made up my mind last night.

She was so unbelievably mine.

I just wanted to see how much money she was worth to my clients.

I had placed my bid for the auction during the last five seconds of the bidding and smiled when the alarm sounded, alerting the end of the bids. Pride and excitement had filled my chest as I watched the rest of the guards surround my new prize and escort her out of the showroom. I couldn't wait to see the look on her face when she realized who she finally belonged to. It was priceless. The shock and sheer terror in her eyes as I had walked through the door would remain forever cherished in the back of my mind.

I sat back and relaxed in my seat as I watched Jaden silently and covertly attempt to pull at her restraints. Her hands were hidden from me as they were tucked to her chest, but I knew what she was doing. The muscles in her arms and shoulders flexed every so often while her breathing pattern, though subtle, grew weary with agitation. She could fight with those cuffs all she wanted, but she was never getting out of them no matter how hard she tried.

As I ran my fingers through the softness of Jaden's hair, a small smile crept across my face as the wheels in my head began to turn, my desire for her surging to an all-time high. I had big plans for Miss Jaden Wilder, and my dick couldn't wait to get started.

~*~

The car ride lasted about a half an hour, and for the entire ride, I paid close attention to the turns and the amount of time it took to reach them. I couldn't see the roads from where I was sitting, but I could see trees. Many trees. Many palm trees.

The piece of shit behind me was silent for most of the ride. He paid a lot of attention to his phone, but I knew he was watching me. I had stared down at the beautiful diamond cuffs, hating everything they represented, and had attempted to pull them apart every now and then, but their strength never ceased.

The anxiety was getting to me now as I wondered how things were going to be as soon as we got “home.” What would “home” be like? Would it be nothing but dark dungeons for me? Or would my owner treat me to a gilded cage of luxury? Somehow, I didn’t think a man like him would live a life in the slums.

Finally, I could feel the limo slowing as we pulled onto a backroad in a very woodsy area. Within the next five minutes, the limo stopped for a split second and carried on through. We then passed what looked like a large black and gold gate. It was hard to tell with his knees blocking my vision. As we pulled into a circle drive, I could see a large fountain spewing out crystal clear water surrounded by an array of rose bushes.

Gradually, the grip on my hair tightened and brought my attention back to the bag of douche sitting up behind me. “When I open this door,” he said, leaning over me, “you’re not going to put up a single ounce of fight or resistance, or I will make your first night here far more memorable than you’ll ever want it to be.”

Like it wouldn’t already scar me for the rest of my life ...

“Fine,” I scoffed. He jerked my hair again sharply and pulled so hard, I thought the strands would rip from my scalp. “Ah! Yes, sir!” I corrected quickly.

“Much better,” he rumbled and released my hair.

He then opened the door, reached down to my knees, and lifted me to his chest. I felt a small twinge of panic from being lifted like that, but I kept myself in compliance. He turned and stepped out of the car, clutching me tightly before righting my body and throwing me back over his shoulder. He then put one hand in his pocket and proceeded to fucking whistle on his way to the house. I silently shook my head in protest with a scowl on my face.

The things I could do to him from this position ...

Directly in front of me was the gorgeous large fountain in the center of a circle drive with the gate about a hundred yards back. I turned my body

slightly to see the house the owner apparently lived in, and it honestly took my breath away.

The house, or mansion I should say, was absolutely stunning and not at all what I expected him to live in. It was a nice sandy brick with numerous white paneled bay windows and white marble pillars holding up the large dark roof at the front door. Roses and flowers adorned the front and sides of the house that complemented it beautifully.

When we passed through the front door, he gently eased me down onto the cold grey-colored marble floor but kept a firm arm around my torso while he pulled out his phone. When he'd finally deactivated my cuffs, he turned me around and placed his hands on the back of my shoulders.

"Welcome to your new home," he said in my ear with so much delight it made me want to throw my elbow back into his face.

I stood there, taking in the scene before me. We were standing in a grand foyer with a large enchanting crystal chandelier hanging beautifully above us. A small wooden chair and a small table was situated across the way from us, while a little tree in a beige planter sat next to it. Standing strong and intricate was a wide and beautiful hardwood staircase that twirled up to the second floor.

I made a small step forward, hoping I was allowed, as I took a hard look around. My new cage was much bigger and much prettier, but it was still a cage nonetheless. I could feel my rage starting to seep in again as this asshole thought it right to call this my home. He didn't know a damn thing about my home.

Surprised that he let me continue my steps, I nonchalantly walked forward until I was a foot away from the chair. Then, before I even had a chance to reconsider my next move, I gripped the arm of the chair in my hand, turned, and hurled it with all my strength right at the owner's perfectly built body. Thankfully, it wasn't very heavy.

"This isn't my home, you piece of shit! I don't belong here, and I certainly don't belong to you! Ever!" I screamed as the chair flew through the air.

God, it felt good to release some rage and break some shit at the same time, especially if it involved breaking shit on this son of a bitch's body.

The look on his face was priceless as he took half of the chair's impact, bringing his arms up and blocking it while taking a step to the side.

The chair crashed to the floor beside his feet in a pile of wood splinters and expensive cushion.

I took off then, running before he even knew I was gone. I passed what looked like a parlor, eventually running down some kind of hallway. Hoping that even if I didn't get away, I could, at least, find something slim and long enough to fit nicely into his jugular. But I didn't get very far. My cuffs were activated, and I couldn't resist the strength of their pull as they instantly threw me off balance, causing me to crash to the ground. Pain radiated from my side as my shoulder and hip took the brunt of my fall; I tried to roll but failed miserably.

The owner was not far behind. His strides were long, and the power in his footsteps told me I was in for a serious fight. Fear prickled over my skin as I tried to crawl and wriggle away from him, but it was pointless. He grabbed my arm in a tight grip, pulling me roughly to my feet and slamming me into the wall. I pushed and fought against him, but he trapped me with his massive body and took hold of my wrists, pinning them above my head with one hand.

"Look at me," he said calmly. I hated looking up at him. It was just a reminder of how fucking small and weak I was compared to him. "Jaden," he warned. I finally raised my eyes to his, but I had to crane my neck to do so and gave him the most annoyed look I could muster. "Whether you like it or not, you *do* belong to me now, and nothing you do is going to change that. There is no going back, and there is no escaping it. Whatever life you had before is gone and irrelevant. There is just me now."

His voice was cold and calm, and it chilled me to the bone, but then his grip tightened on my wrists and a dull pain enveloped them. "So if I tell you where you'll live, what you'll wear, how you'll behave, or whatever the fuck else I tell you to do, you'll do it without complaint or question. Because the only thing you need to worry about for the rest of your goddamn life now is pleasing me."

My wrists were beginning to throb, and I squirmed involuntarily to alleviate the pressure on them. I didn't even care about what he was saying to me. They were just words, and they meant nothing to me.

"Now, I can understand your rage, and I'll forgive your little stunt back there, but you pull that shit again, and I'll have you crawling on your hands and knees for the rest of the month."

“Oh, fuck you!” I shouted at him. “Is that it? You’re gonna have me as your perfect little slave for the rest of my life? Don’t fucking deny it. I know it’s true,” I jabbed. He smiled down at me—that shit-eating grin back in place.

“That and so much more,” he practically beamed, and I felt my stomach shrink in on itself. “Now, if you can behave, I’ll show you to your room. Can you?”

I thought my glare was fierce enough that he could see the “fuck off” clearly in my eyes. Did I want to behave? What the fuck was I, a child?

“I won’t ask you again,” he growled, his free hand striking out and clutching my throat. I tried to fight against him, but for every second I didn’t answer, his grip became tighter and tighter. “Jaden,” he warned again, more anger in his voice this time.

“Yes,” I finally choked out.

“Yes, what? What are you going to do?”

“Yes, I’ll behave.”

“Good girl,” he said and released my throat. I coughed fiercely as I sucked in the air I had been denied, still fighting against the hold he had on my arms. Would this never get old?

Chapter Three

The Rules

Still gripping one of my wrists, the owner released my ankles, pulled me from the wall, and led me up the staircase. When we reached the top, he tugged me down one of the many hallways and stopped at the third door on the right. Opening the door, he pulled me inside and finally released his grip.

Turning gradually, I looked around at what was probably now my bedroom and a sense of warmth slowly enveloped me. The colors of the room reminded me of fall, as the walls were warm reds, soft peaches, and pumpkin oranges. A bed was to my right and it was a beautiful four-poster canopy with a soft satiny dark red comforter and tons of fluffy, frilly pillows. A white dresser with a large mirror was set against the wall not too far from the bed and a white vintage-looking vanity sat in the right corner of the room between two windows.

Light cream colored drapes fell to the floor to accommodate the tall windows that stretched from the floor to ceiling, but the best window of all was the bay window with a reading nook, decorated with more cushions and pillows that led out from the corner of the room. Sitting in another corner of the room was the comfiest-looking chaise I had ever seen. Cream colored and plush, it was beckoning me, promising me the best nap of my life, but that would have to wait. Behind me to my left was a rather large white desk. Placed next to it was a small white bookshelf adjacent to the white wooden framed fireplace. Why was everything white?

I slowly walked around the room, trying to familiarize myself with it. Further down, directly opposite the bed, was another door I hoped led to a private bathroom.

“What do you think?” he asked from behind me, general curiosity filling his voice.

“It’s beautiful.” I sighed, folding my arms across my chest. It really was, but I still hated the fact I was there. I turned back around to find him

leaning against the wall, his hands in his pockets and the small hint of a smile on his lips.

"I'm glad you like it," he said. "I had it decorated especially for you."

Did he now ...

"How long ago did you plan on purchasing me?" I asked. It had only been a few hours since the auction. He waited a few moments, calculating his answer, and then finally spoke.

"If I'm being honest with myself ... yesterday, but when I saw the way you fought in the viewing room, there was no question about it. You were mine."

"That was kind of the opposite effect I was going for."

"Oh? And what were you going for?"

"I knew there wasn't any hope for me, but I thought maybe if I could show your clients how unsuccessful your methods were at breaking slaves, they'd lose faith in your business."

He laughed at that. "Nice try, but that would have never worked. There are people out there with desires far more twisted than mine are. Broken girl or not, they all sell eventually. If anything, your little stunt just made them want you more. You should be grateful I stepped in to rescue you."

I raised an eyebrow at him. "And what about the rest of the girls? Were they not as lucky as I was?" I suddenly feared greater for Kayla, wondering what kind of sadistic fuck had purchased her.

"Those girls are no longer your concern. They will acclimate to their new lives just as you will."

"Assuming they live long enough," I shot back.

"Again, not your concern." He narrowed his eyes at me, that silent warning to drop the matter, but I wasn't very good at subtle hints.

"Well, tough shit; it is my concern. I care about those girls because they aren't just chattel to me as they are to you." He stepped away from the wall during my little rant and began sauntering toward me, but I didn't care. I continued on, giving him exactly what I wanted him to hear. "And if you think I'm just going to forget about it, then you're dead fucking wrong."

He was only a foot away from me now, so tall and solid like a brick wall. It was so easy to be intimidated by him, but I refused to show it, standing my ground and refusing to allow my feet to take a single step backward.

“If you’re so concerned, then maybe once their new owners are finally done with them, I’ll have them deliver to you what’s left of their bodies. Just to bring a little peace to your mind,” he said, his voice smooth and venomous, chilling me to my very core.

My stomach churned and dropped at the thought of a sick and twisted individual abusing Kayla or any one of those poor girls. I hated him for his cruel words.

“You’re such a cruel bastard,” I said in disgust.

“And don’t you ever forget it,” he shot back harshly.

I stared at him with so much hate in my eyes I thought they would burst, but I wasn’t finished with him yet. I needed to move the subject along and get him to divulge more information.

“If you’re so cruel, then why ‘rescue’ me?” I asked, bringing my hands up in quotations.

“Because of your fight, your strength, and your resilience. Your resistance does something to me I’ve never felt before. It’s strong and intense, and it has a hold on me greater than anything I’ve ever known. I couldn’t ignore it any longer. I had to have you. Very soon, Jaden, you’ll come to see that you and I are one and the same. It was difficult for me to admit at first, but now, I see it couldn’t be clearer. I could tell from the first moment I saw you that you had exactly what I’ve been searching for, and I’ve been searching for a very long time.”

“And just what is that?”

“I’m a bit of a hurricane, Jaden, and I need someone strong enough to be able to withstand it. And I know you’re the perfect one to do that.”

“Is that supposed to scare me? That’s precious,” I mocked.

I stared him down. I would not let him intimidate me, no matter how much of a threat he was. I had the ability to turn my fear into anger and aggression, and I would show him my hurricane was just as strong and destructive as his was.

His chuckle was low and devious, and his eyes gleamed with intensity. Without warning, his arm shot out for my throat, but my reflexes, unaffected by my fight downstairs, deflected his strike. But I lost it when his leg viciously swept the back of mine and I fell to the floor on my back. He was on top of me before I had another chance to react.

“I know ... you’re little miss tough shit, aren’t you? Nothing scares you, right?” he growled inches from my face, his hot breath warming my

skin. I pushed against him, trying to find space and room to maneuver, but there was none. He pushed himself harder against me, practically crushing my body under his. "I can't wait to be the one to change that."

"Fuck you! No one intimidates me!" I tried to shout at him, but it came out as garbled, gasped air. My fight was officially back, and I wasn't letting it go this time.

He chuckled again and pressed his forehead to mine. "We'll see about that," he declared confidently.

Taking his weight from me, he picked me up by my neck and threw me against the wall, his big body trapping me in place.

"Just what the fuck is it that you want from me?" I shouted at him.

Placing his hands on my shoulders, he seemed to relax a little. "I want your utter and complete obedience, Jaden. I want your body. I want your loyalty. And I want your mind. I want you screaming my name while I fuck you into submission every night. And then I want you begging me for more." He smiled cruelly at me.

For the first time, I was fucking speechless. I stared at him with a look of shock and disgust on my face because that was all I could muster. My brain and heart could barely handle what he just said to me.

"There are going to be rules for you, kitten," he continued, relaxing a bit now, "and they are not only for my benefit but for yours as well."

"Yeah, well, you should know by now I don't do well with rules." I rolled my eyes, discovering I could finally talk again.

"You might be surprised at how easily I can motivate you to follow them," he growled, gripping my chin.

I glared at him again, imagining a stampede of bulls with spiked hooves trampling him.

"The rules are simple," he started. "You will obey every order I give you. No arguments, no hesitations, no questions. *You* are under my rule now, and whatever decision I make for you is final. As I mentioned before, your submission to me is non-negotiable. I'm a bit of a control freak, Jaden, but you'll come to understand that soon enough."

I scoffed at him. Control freak was probably a bit of an understatement.

"The second rule is you will always be ready for me. That means you will always look presentable. No more sweatpants and messy hair. You will always look your absolute best no matter what. Hair, makeup, nails, clothes,

the works. You will also be permitted to work out, as I expect you to keep up your trimmed physique, but nothing terribly extreme. I don't need you trying to turn yourself into one of those mutant female bodybuilders. I haven't determined how I feel about this yet, though," he said trailing his finger over my abs. "Regardless, I expect absolute perfection and nothing less. You can also expect the same from me."

There was no fucking way I was letting him soften my stomach. I had worked hard for those abs of steel, and I was keeping them, damn it.

"Rule number three. Armed guards live in the security wing of the estate and patrol the grounds. They are here for my protection as well as yours. You are not to speak or even look at them unless absolutely necessary. The only man you will ever need to speak to or look at will be me. I'm a jealous and possessive man, Jaden. I don't want others looking upon or stealing the attention of what's mine." He smirked then and I let out an exasperated sigh, blowing the hair out my face.

Goddamn it; jealousy was the worst emotion a man could possess. I hated dealing with it. It was so irrational and constituted a lack of trust in me. I just didn't have time for that shit.

"Rule number four. You will never run or hide from me unless I tell you to. That means no trying to escape and not a single attempt to bar yourself from me. If you ever do try to run, make no mistake, I will catch you, and when I do, you will know nothing but pain and suffering for a very long time."

Fuck him; I would get out of here eventually, no matter how much he threatened me. Normally, I was very fast on my feet, regardless of my short legs and stride. He was just lucky I was barefoot and unaware of my surroundings.

"The fifth rule entails your etiquette. You're a young lady, and, thus, will be expected to act like one. You are to remain polite, well mannered, and maintain an excellent posture. No slouching and no swearing. You will pay me the proper respect I deserve at all times. You will come when called and answer my direct questions accordingly. Though I thoroughly enjoy your feisty attitude, there is a time and a place. You should watch the amount of sass you let fly off that silver tongue or yours unless you want to find yourself in trouble often. But, for the most part, I suggest you just keep your mouth shut if you want to remain respectful."

Ha! Feisty attitude? Did he not know me at all?

“As far as your attire, you can wear anything I have provided for you in the closet and dressers, but know that my tastes are very particular when it comes to what I like to see on a woman.”

That didn't sound good. He probably had a bunch of slutty dresses and miniskirts waiting for me in those drawers. Fucking pervert.

“You should also know I'm a firm believer in punctuality. God help you if you are ever late for anything. If I give you a specific time to be somewhere, you'd better not be a second late, or you will learn very quickly how important punctuality is to me.”

Well, now I was definitely fucked...

“And for the last rule. Don't *ever* lie to me. I will know if you are, and it is not something you want me to catch you doing. I expect nothing but complete honesty. You can also expect the same from me as well. I will never lie to you either. You will come to find I am always a man of my word, Jaden.”

Oh, I would be honest with him, all right. Brutally fucking honest, but only for a short period of time. I had a damn good poker face, and it would serve me well against this dictator from Hell.

“Should you ever break any of these rules, you will be punished immediately and severely. Remember, your new goal in life is to please me. So long as you keep me happy, Jaden, I will keep you happy, and you will never want for anything.”

“Except my freedom,” I dejected, furrowing my brows at him.

He sighed heavily. “I know it's a lot,” he said, cupping my face in his hand. “And it may take some getting used to, but eventually, all of this will become second nature, and you will soon find yourself enjoying your time here with me.”

Was this guy on drugs??? He really thought I was eventually going to enjoy myself? What kind of shit was this guy on? There was no fucking way any of this was happening. If he wanted a challenge, he was certainly going to get it, but he would fail at this one miserably. He just didn't know it yet.

“But you already know I'm going to fight you on all of this,” I said turning my head and smirking. “You honestly cannot expect that after all of the fighting I've already done, I'm going to just roll over and play dead.”

“As a matter of fact ... I'm counting on it,” he said darkly, smirking down at me. “And I am going to seriously enjoy breaking you.”

“Isn’t that what you said last time?” I asked, challenging him with a smirk on my lips.

“Last time you weren’t mine. Things have obviously changed ... including my methods of persuasion,” he said with a dark promise in his eyes. I remained unfazed.

“Well ... good luck,” I said straight to his face. A low chuckle vibrated from his throat.

“I don’t think I’m the one who will need it. You *will* be trained to my liking whether you want to or not.” His gaze bared down on me, threatening me with his blazing ocean blue eyes. “Now,” he continued. “Do you understand the rules?”

“Yes.” A dark look came over his face. “Sir,” I corrected.

“See? You’re learning already. Now, come on,” he said enthusiastically, tugging me along. “Let me show you your closet.”

He opened the door, and I thought we had actually stepped into another bedroom. It was a huge walk-in closet with a long marble island in the center of the room, two cream leather ottomans on either side of the room, and another leather couch to match by the window. Hanging from the racks were probably a hundred dresses, all in different lengths, colors, and patterns. Most of them were different shades of pink, and my nose instantly crinkled in disgust.

I let my hand feel the fabrics as I walked along, noticing how soft and delicate they all were. But why the fuck was there so much pink? I couldn’t hide my irritation as I continued my observation. Turning around, I found him leaning against the doorframe; he took up most of the space with his size as he kept his arms crossed over his chest.

“Something wrong?” he asked almost amused.

Yeah, you’re not bleeding out all over the floor when I mentally stabbed you in the throat three seconds ago.

I thought about the words I was about to use, but he was the one who insisted on complete honesty.

“Yeah, just who the fuck were you shopping for? Barbie?”

He threw his head back and let out a genuine laugh, the soft deep roll of his laughter vibrating through my skin. “Not a fan of pink?” he asked with a bright white smile.

“Not really,” I replied, eyeing the clothing. “I’m not a very colorful person to begin with. I’m more of a jeans, concert t-shirt, and Converse

kind of girl.”

“Not anymore,” he replied seriously. “You will not find any of those things here while you’re in my possession.”

My skin nearly crawled off my bones as he spoke that last part. The thought of actually being considered a possession or insinuating that I belonged to someone in any way was seriously enough to make me throw my fist through the wall. I was a fucking person, for God’s sake; not a goddamn object to be owned.

After a few seconds, I suddenly realized something. “Wait ... no jeans?”

“No pants, no shorts, no leggings.” He shook his head.

“Why?” I asked a little harsher than I had meant to. No pants? The fuck kind of shit was this?

He exhaled an annoyed sigh. “It’s your first day here, so I’ll let some of your misbehavior slide but know that you are testing me,” he said as he narrowed his eyes at me.

I felt myself shiver with his silent warning. I really hated when he looked at me like that. I raised my hands up in surrender and took a step back. I wasn’t sure if my body was ready for the “hurricane” he declared he had brewing inside.

“I actually enjoy the femininity of a woman, and I find that pants contradict that image. Plus, they’re too much of a hassle when taking them off. I prefer you to be easily accessible.” He winked.

I rolled my eyes in annoyance. He could easily access my fist to his face if he preferred that.

“Watch it, little girl,” he warned. “I don’t take kindly to sarcasm, and you’ve been pushing it as it is.”

“Just what am I supposed to wear when it gets cold outside or when I want to work out? I don’t see any sweaters or cardigans, and I can’t work out in a dress.”

This question wasn’t so much about the clothes as it was for the revelation of where the hell I was and how long I going to be here.

“It doesn’t frequently get cold here, and should you ever become chilly, I’m often told I’m a walking furnace,” he said, spreading his arms out and smiling so wide I was sure his cheeks hurt. Like I’d ever come to him for warmth even if it was the last source on Earth. “And there are some skorts in the dressers you can wear for your workouts.”

Skorts? What the fuck was this, Catholic school gym class?

“Now, if you can hold off on some of your questions, I have some business to attend to. Why don't you take a shower, get cleaned up and dressed, and meet me downstairs for dinner in two hours? That should give you plenty of time to get ready.”

I nodded, almost excited at the promise of a real shower for the first time in days.

“Do not be late,” he cautioned.

“I won't.”

With that, he turned from the doorway and headed out, shutting my bedroom door behind him and leaving me to my new beautiful prison cell.

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Chapter Four

Introductions

The second I heard the door to my bedroom close, I collapsed on the floor. For the first time in days, I was finally alone. I sat against the wall and pulled my knees to my chest, clutching my legs tightly as though they would fly away if I didn't. I felt the shakes coming on as the panic I had buried deep under my rationality finally clawed its way back up. I lost my breath in the wake of the aftermath of what I had been holding back for so long, and all it took was a singular moment of clarity to come along and shatter me.

I had been sold.

Me—a human being capable of love, compassion, and kindness had been sold like a prized dog breed. What was worse was that a man who was capable of none of the above had been the one to purchase me. And it terrified me. I now officially belonged to someone, and I didn't even know his name.

I glanced up from my dirty and dry knees to find a glimmer of my reflection in the full-length mirror across the room. I didn't know if I had the guts to look at myself and what I had become, but I decided I wanted to remember every horrible thing this man did to me so when the day finally came that I brought him to his knees, I would remember exactly why.

Not having the strength to stand, I crawled my shaky body over to the mirror, the sight of my reflection becoming worse and worse with every move. When it was clear and unmistakable, I nearly broke down all over again. It took everything I had to look and face the ghost of the girl who peered at me from the mirror. There were so many bruises; I thought I looked like a damn Dalmatian. They were everywhere. My face, my throat, my hands and knuckles, my arms and legs, but the most prominent was the long shoe-shaped one that stretched across my entire chest. It was healing, but far too slowly for my liking.

I had lost a lot of muscle tone since my time in that cage, and I thought I looked far too skinny and sickly. Purple bags hung under my eyes from stress and lack of sleep, and my skin was pasty as fuck and paler than usual. My hair was a tangled mess and the red “dress” I had been given was already ripped at the side. How did this guy even find me attractive? I looked and felt like total shit.

I hated looking like this; it was the image of weakness and vulnerability. I preferred to look strong and healthy, and I was definitely lacking, but I vowed I would return to my superior physical state and then some as soon as I was able.

The new diamond studded silver rings that adorned my wrists and ankles glistened under the lighting of the room, and I became instantly angered by their presence on my body. They were honestly beautiful; like jewelry, if I didn’t know any better. I fiddled with them for a second before realizing no matter how much I wanted them off, they would still remain. But what hurt my pride the most was the collar resting around my neck. The true sign I really was a prisoner. But it would not be for long. This was only temporary.

Fighting the strain of my body, I stood and slowly padded over to my new bathroom, completely unimpressed with the lush beauty of the all-white marble and bright natural light. What really caught my attention was the giant Jacuzzi tub nestled in front of a large bay window. It held a perfect view of the ocean at the back of the house, the shore beckoning me to swim away with the tide. I stared out the window and took in as much of the scenery as I could. Though the scene was picture perfect, I hoped to God I wasn’t on some estranged island.

I walked away from the window, noting I would have to take advantage of that tub another time. I headed to the large shower in the corner, which sported three showerheads and even a small seating area. I turned the shower on and continued to explore the bathroom as I waited for the water to heat up. I wanted it scalding.

Looking in the drawers and cabinets, I discovered thousands of dollars’ worth of designer makeup, hair products, and styling tools. It was a girl’s ultimate fantasy. Luckily for him, I actually knew how to use all of this. My mother had been a cosmetologist all her life, and I didn’t escape my childhood without knowing a few tricks on how to make myself look pretty. I just never indulged in it much.

Once the steam started to fill the air, I turned and jumped into the shower letting the hot jets spray all over my still damaged skin. It felt amazing, and for a long time, I just stood under the spray and let the water wash away all my anguish

As my body began to relax and finally find comfort, I felt the tremors return. My body trembled and shook uncontrollably, and I knew what was coming, what needed to happen. If I wanted my body to be strong, I would have to expel my weakness. I needed to purge every last drop of my affliction in order to conquer my nightmare and I didn't resist any longer as I fully unleashed the hell in my aching, bleeding heart.

I violently released all the pain and grief I had been holding in and screamed and cried the hardest I ever had in my entire life, slamming my fists down on the wet tile until they throbbed. My tears fell hard and heavy as I eventually curled into a ball on the floor of the shower and cradled myself under the spray. I could have sworn that even though the shower was scalding, its heat had nothing on the liquid fire that flowed from my eyes. I wept with everything I had as I cried for the loss of my family, the loss of the love of my life, for the loss of Kayla and the other girls, and for the loss of myself.

I had worked so hard to get to where I was, and now, it had all been snatched away from me like some cruel joke. I had dreams and goals, but they'd been replaced with the demand to please another who thought he owned me. I wanted so badly to go home, to wake up in Jason's embrace and find that all of this was just a twisted nightmare. God, I missed him so much, and it killed me not knowing how long it would be before I felt his arms around me again.

But I vowed I would get back to him. Come hell or high water, I would escape this place and exact my revenge on this fuck who thought he could rule me. I would somehow have to fool him into thinking that he did, let him believe me brainwashed and content. I would play the part perfectly. I, of course, would have to keep up my fight, at first, let him think he really was breaking me down to his liking, and play his perfect little submissive pet. Then, when I finally had his complete trust, I would strike. And I would strike hard and without mercy. I was going to make this man actually care about me until he finally fell in love, assuming he was capable of love ... and then turn his world upside down. And in turn, I would make him think I

was in love with him, too. I'd have him so tightly wrapped around my finger, he wouldn't be able to feel himself slowly choking to death.

And fuck his empire. I'll take that shit down, too.

Once I felt I had forced out every last tear my body had banked, I pushed myself from the floor and finished cleaning not only my body but also my soul. After washing and pruning the shit out of my skin, I emerged from the shower a brand new person.

I grabbed the towels I had placed on the counter and wrapped my hair and body. Looking at myself in the mirror, not only did I look a hell of a lot better, but I also felt it. I still had scrapes and slight bruising here and there, but nothing I couldn't fix with my makeup skills.

Toweling my hair dry, I put in some leave-in conditioner and let the damp strands air dry while I applied my makeup. I went for a soft smoky look that brought out the hazel in my eyes. Thankfully, I was able to conceal some of the redness and bruising from my lovely owner's handling of me. I even managed to cover the ones on my arms and legs, but the one on my chest was a little harder to conceal. By the time I was done, it had appeared as if it was simply fading. I hoped it would be gone in the next few days.

I then gave my hair a perfect blow out, and it felt so good to have my tresses finally brushed and styled, my mid-length red-layered locks falling beautifully down my back. I was beginning to feel human again, but I knew once I went down to dinner, I would magically turn back into the object I knew I was.

Heading into the walk-in closet, I managed to find a soft navy blue ombré high-low dress that, of course, fit me perfectly. How did he even know my size? I also found a matching white lace bra and thong set in the drawers, thongs apparently being the only source of underwear he allowed me. Studying my shoe selection resting on the shelves next to the clothes, I eyed the vast number of stilettos, pumps, wedges, and boots that dominated the minority of sandals and ballet flats.

Surprisingly, there was a single pair of black and hot pink Nike running shoes on the bottom shelf. I almost went for them but figured he wouldn't appreciate my sense of humor. I thought about the stilettos and enjoyed the idea of gaining a few inches and possibly stabbing him with the heel, but it was too difficult to fight in heels; whatever inches I gained

wouldn't make a bit of a difference anyway. The fucker would still tower over me.

I decided on a pair of plain black flats and slipped them on my feet. Another perfect fit. He had some speedy shoppers. I figured it had probably been close to two hours, and deciding it was much better to be early than late, I walked out the door and headed downstairs.

As I took my sweet-ass time walking down the hallway and taking in what was supposedly my new home, I scanned every square foot in front of me, searching for any flaw I could find.

Various pictures of black and white adorned the walls, and the railings and sidings all appeared well kept and clean. Making my way to the stairs, I took them slowly, each step on the dark wooden stairs not making a single sound under my weight. I took note, as that would come in handy with my later attempts of coming and going unnoticed. I would definitely be testing my ninja skills here.

But as I looked at the walls and ceilings, I noticed little black bulb-like objects stationed in the corners. Fuck, he had cameras everywhere. I thought I had even noticed a few in my room. I suppose that was to be expected.

Descending the stairs, I looked over the portraits hanging on the wall—family ancestors, no doubt. This sadistic fuck may actually be a family man. But then I saw him, only it wasn't; he was young in this portrait, maybe eight or nine years old. I recognized the hard features of his face immediately as he stood next to an older man with dark brown hair and a full beard. A frail, beautiful woman with long black hair sat in a chair in front of them while an even younger child, maybe four or five, stood beside her as she held a toddler in her lap; another boy maybe one or two years old. They looked like the perfect family.

As I looked them over, I wondered what kind of mother raised a monster like the one dwelling in this house. Where was she? Where was his father? Was he the true responsible party for all this? And what about the younger brothers? What were they like? Questions spun in my head as I continued my way down the stairs, questions I wanted answers to.

Turning the corner at the bottom of the stairs, I found the dining room. It was spacious and full of natural lighting as it brought out all the soft chocolate browns and creams of the walls and pictures. Plants decorated the corner by the large, bay window, and a beautiful dark oak

table sat in the middle of it all with seating for eight people. A grand chandelier lit the remaining shadows as it hung beautifully above the table. A vase of fresh white roses completed the picture and their scent filled my nose making me feel a little at ease.

That was until I noticed him sitting at the head of the table with a newspaper in his hand. He was staring directly at me, and I stopped in my tracks.

“Wow,” he said, looking me up and down. “You look absolutely stunning.”

The compliment caught me off guard, and I didn't know what else to say but what I truly wanted to.

“I know,” I said with a nonchalant tone, deciding to own his compliment and then shrug it off. It's not as if I put *that* much effort into my appearance, but I knew I cleaned up nice.

“You're welcome,” he said narrowing his eyes at me. Perhaps, I should be a little more gracious the next time he paid me a compliment. “You're actually a little early, though. Dinner won't be ready for another fifteen minutes,” he said looking at his watch and returning to his newspaper. “But if you'd like, we can discuss some more pending topics we have yet to shed light on.”

“Okay,” I drawled, still keeping my distance and placing my hands on one of the chairs furthest from him.

“Why don't you have a seat first?” He gestured to the place setting at his right. I pursed my lips in protest, but slowly made my way and sat down, pushing the chair slightly away from him and crossing my legs.

“Where would you like to begin?” he asked me, amusement gleaming from his eyes.

“I think it's only fair that you shed some light on yourself,” I said as I eyed the silverware next to the plate, more specifically the giant steak knife. “I don't know anything about you, and if I'm here to please you, I think I should be well informed.”

“A fair point.” He nodded in agreement. “What would you like to know?”

“How about a name?” I replied, turning my eyes away from the knife.

He smiled at me then, entertained by my question, but why the fuck wouldn't I want to know his name? I needed it so I could mark it on his gravestone unless he preferred “Here Lies Scum of the Earth.”

“My name is Darren Davis,” he said confidently. “But you may call me Darren.”

Darren Davis. For whatever reason, I kind of liked it. It suited him.

“How old are you?” I continued.

“I’m thirty-one.”

Damn, I had to admit, he was doing well for thirty-one.

“Were you born here? Wherever here is.”

“Yes, this is my family’s home. It belongs to me now.”

I was hoping he would give up our location, but I may have to be more direct with that later.

“What’s your educational background?” I wanted to know what kind of education he had; if he had even participated in normal civilian life rather than only leading a life of simply selling women to the highest bidder.

He gave me an odd look but answered my question. “I was homeschooled by some the best tutors around the world until I went to college.”

“You went to college?”

“I did. I went to Stanford.”

California?

“What did you study?”

“Business, political science, and psychology.”

So he was hot and intelligent. This was a bad duo.

“And you graduated?”

“Of course.” He glared at me as if I were accusing him of dropping out. “My father expected perfection, and he got nothing less from me. I graduated top of my class with a Master’s in Business and a minor in Political Science. I also have a Bachelor’s in Psychology.”

“Congratulations,” I said. “I was in the midst of obtaining my Juris Doctorate from Wayne State, so thanks for putting a pause on that.”

That was bold of me, but he deserved to know what he ruined for me back home.

“I’m aware of where you went to school. And debt would have smothered you for the rest of your life. So you’re welcome.”

I pursed my lips. Of course, he knew what school I attended.

“Yes because Stanford is so cheap,” I countered. What the fuck did he care about my debts?

“Don’t think I went to Stanford with my father’s money. I was there on an academic scholarship,” he said, leaning in on his forearms as they rested on the table.

“Good for you,” I replied irritably.

He just smirked at me. I was quiet for a few seconds before I realized I had an interrogation to finish.

“How about siblings?” I asked, even though I already knew that answer.

“Yes, I also have two younger brothers just like you.”

Great, more shit that we have in common.

“Would they happen to be in the same kind of business as you?”

“More or less, but that really doesn’t concern you.”

“Why is that?”

“Because I said so,” he said harshly.

Well, that subject was off-limits for a while.

“Okay, so ... where are we exactly?” I asked, hoping to God that he would answer me.

“That doesn’t concern you, either. For now.”

I raised an eyebrow at him. Why the fuck didn’t he want me to know where he lived?

“You don’t think I deserve to know where I’m being held captive?”

He narrowed in on me then, leaning forward from his chair, an obvious warning blazing from his cold blue eyes. “When I want you to know something, I will tell you.”

“Fine.” I shrugged, paying no attention to his attempt at intimidating me. “But it will only be a matter of time before I find out myself, and I’ve already gathered enough information for a well-educated guess.”

This was his family’s home, he went to Stanford, the weather is hot as fuck, and there were palm trees everywhere. My stomach dropped at the assumption that I was now potentially living all the way on the other side of the country ... in California. Maybe.

“I wouldn’t fight me on this, Jaden.”

“I’m not fighting you on anything. You said you wanted honesty, and I’m just telling you I will find out eventually.”

“Would you prefer to spend your first night here in a cage in the dark?” he asked sternly.

I instantly glared at him. What the fuck? He was threatening me with a cage? I had just spent several days in a dog cage. Like hell, I was going back into one.

I backed off then and sat back in my chair feeling defeated and pissed off.

"I didn't think so," he seethed.

We sat in silence for about thirty tense seconds before a young man who looked to be in his late teens finally brought out what appeared to be our dinner. He carried a long silver tray containing two plates. As he set my plate down before me, his eyes found mine, and I quickly sent him a subtle but pleading look for help. He quickly glanced away as he set Darren's down and stood back up to right himself. When my eyes suddenly caught a glimpse at Darren, my stomach did a back flip from the look he was currently giving me.

I felt hope drain out of me like a leaky faucet as the kid turned and walked away, my eyes following his every step as he left me alone with this monster and disappeared quickly behind the door.

Faster than lightning, Darren's hand instantly clutched my lower jaw and roughly pulled me to him. My stomach clenched and my heart skipped several beats as I was met with dark and dangerous eyes burning with anger.

"What did I tell you about looking at other men?" he growled at me. "Have you forgotten my rules already?"

"I'm sorry," I grunted through clenched teeth, my hands clutching his wrist. "I was just acknowledging another person. Old habit."

God, would I never get to look at another man again? That seemed a little unreasonable.

"Acknowledging is one thing. Blatantly staring is another and I won't have it. I told you I'm a jealous and possessive man, Jaden. I wouldn't test that boundary if I were you," he fumed.

"Got it," I replied harshly.

"Good," he said, releasing me and relaxing back into his chair. "For your sake, I hope that you do."

Flexing my now aching jaw, I looked away from his penetrating glare to stare down at the food placed down in front of me. Unfortunately, the delicious scent had the opposite effect on my stomach as it just made the knots slowly turning inside twist even tighter. I looked down at the grilled

salmon, mashed potatoes, and green beans, and even though it all looked amazing, I didn't think I could stomach a single bite, not to mention the portions were way too big. I had never been a heavy eater. I sipped on the glass of water instead.

"I suggest you eat, Jaden. I don't like wasted food."

"Not much of an appetite," I shot back. "Plus there's way too much food on this plate anyway."

"That's too much for you?" he asked surprised.

I held up my fist for him to see. "My stomach is literally only slightly bigger than my fist." I pointed at my hand. "And right now, half of it is filled with stress and murderous rage. Not much room for anything else."

He chuckled a little as he took a sip of his wine.

"Jaden, I expect that entire plate to be cleaned within the next fifteen minutes."

I raised an eyebrow at him, but the glare I received back told me he was actually serious.

"Can't we compromise on at least half?"

Oh, now I was already willing to compromise??? What the actual fuck, Jaden?

Pussy.

"If you stop talking and start eating, maybe I'll consider it," he said agitated, scowling at me.

Now, I was getting pissed, and his demand just made everything worse. Listening to Darren was going to be a lot harder than I thought, and it took so much self-control not to stab him in the face with my fork. I put on my best bitch face and gently picked up the fork hidden from the view of my plate, but it felt gigantic in my hand. Lifting it, I realized it had a genuine weight to it as it was probably the largest fork I had ever seen. I looked at it as if it was made for mutants—mutant giants.

"What's wrong now? Don't like my silverware?" Darren asked me with a hint of sarcasm.

"Who are these made for? Giants?" I asked annoyed as I fumbled with the stupid thing to get it to fit comfortably between my fingers.

Darren just laughed at me. "Should I have Pascal bring out the children's cutlery?"

I gave him a serious scowl, and then almost accepted his sarcastic offer, but thought better of it. So I had small hands, big deal—just made the

pain of my punches that much more concentrated, like getting stabbed with my fist instead.

I pushed the food around a bit before taking a small bite of the salmon.

“There’s a good girl,” Darren approved, returning to his plate.

Fuck him, but the taste was fantastic; however, my stomach still wasn’t very happy about it. I knew I needed to keep my strength up, but I honestly didn’t think the knots would allow me to keep the food down.

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Chapter Five

Mine

Darren ate his dinner quietly while he continued to read his newspaper, finishing his plate much quicker than I did. With him slightly distracted, I took this time to study him. Occasionally stealing glances here and there or simply keeping him in my peripherals, I scrutinized his mannerisms, his build, posture, and the way his eyes squinted when he focused on something. I noticed the size of his hands and the texture of his skin, smooth, yet calloused in certain areas. And then I spotted something on his right middle finger that I hadn't noticed before. He was wearing a wide silver ring with what looked like some kind of triangular symbol on it. How had I never noticed it before?

Darren then looked over, noticing my half eaten plate as I continued to push the remaining food around with my giant ass fork. He sighed heavily as he stared me down. I gave him a soft pleading look. I really couldn't finish it, and if he continued to silently berate me, I would seriously end up throwing it all up and then it would be an even bigger waste.

"I'll settle for two more bites," he said, nodding at me.

Hmm ... so the man did know how to compromise, after all.

I sighed through my nose as I looked back down at my plate. I quickly scooped up two more tiny bites and chewed quickly. The look on his face was not one of satisfaction.

"You didn't say how big the bites had to be," I said, covering my mouth and swallowing.

He rolled his eyes, sighed, and stood.

"Come on. I want to show you something," he said, holding out his hand.

I eyed his hand as if it was a droopy, drooling dog about to slobber all over me. The thought of touching him like that made me want to vomit up the dinner I had worked so hard to keep down.

“Give me your hand, Jaden,” he demanded, more warning blaring from his tone as he glared at me.

Reluctantly, and hating everything within a single square inch of me, I placed my hand in his, and it engulfed mine entirely. Pulling me from my chair, I let him lead me through what appeared to be a living room and out to a patio at the back of the house.

Still trapping my hand in his, I kept up with him easily as we walked through the grass, even though his stride was twice the length of mine. He seemed to notice as my short legs pumped faster to accommodate his speed but with zero strain.

“You always walk this fast?” he asked with a light chuckle.

“After four years, I’m used to it.” I shrugged.

He stopped then and stared down at me, his brows furrowed with caution. “Well, now I’m just curious.”

I shrugged again not knowing what he expected me to say.

“My boyfriend is six-foot-three. I grew accustomed to his pace.”

I stared up at him, studying his reaction. It was probably stupid for me to test him like that, but for some irrational reason, I wanted to piss him off. I started to regret it when his face suddenly went frigid cold, and it began to scare me a little.

“That little confession,” he said coldly, tightening his grip on my hand until a sharp pain coursed through my bones, “was a very big mistake.”

Before I had a chance to react, he’d thrust me up against the rough brick of the house and forced his lips down on mine so ferociously I could feel them swelling under his onslaught. Driving his tongue into my mouth, it explored and conquered every corner, and I fought hard against him.

Tired of my struggle, he took my wrists in his hand and pinned them above my head while his other hand trailed under my dress. I fought even harder as his lips claimed mine in the most aggressive kiss I had ever experienced, but with my hands trapped above my head and his body covering mine, my legs had nowhere else to go.

His remaining hand curved up my thigh, finally cupping the forbidden flesh between my legs that apparently no longer belonged to me. I revolted at his touch, furiously groaning in protest as his fingers trailed back and forth over my lips. I had never been so grateful to have been permitted to wear underwear, even if it was only a thong. I was surprised he had allowed that since it didn’t make me one hundred percent completely accessible.

Maybe he was the type who liked to rip clothing from a woman's body. Guess I would find out soon enough.

Finally releasing my mouth, his hand gripped tighter at my pussy, causing an extremely uncomfortable pressure, and I gasped aloud from it. "This is mine now," he growled, squeezing tighter for emphasis, and I winced in obvious discomfort. "All of this, all of you, belongs to me. Your body first and foremost, and very soon your mind and then ... your heart, until the only thing that remains is your soul, and I won't stop until I have that as well."

"It will never be yours." I fought back. "None of it."

"You seem to think you have a choice in the matter," he snarled, gripping my face roughly with his hand.

"God, get off me!" I screamed at him, fighting harder than before. "You were the one who said you wanted honesty!"

"Yes, and let's finally have some. Admit to me that you're mine and I'll let go of you."

"Fuck you!" I spat at him. "You can lie to yourself all you want, but it will never be true."

"Do we have to revert to our time in the playroom? I will gladly provide you with another insightful session if that is what it will take to remind you of what you are and who you belong to."

I could feel my fight slipping then. Darren was so strong, so much stronger than I was, and I felt so weak in his grasp, like a tiny fly caught in the web of a vicious spider. I hated it. I hated myself for my weakness, but what could I do? I was small, and he was big. Simple and shitty as that.

"Stop," I whispered, looking away from him. "Just stop."

I knew I was stronger than this, but at this moment, the vulnerability was becoming too much; I felt the tiniest I had ever been. His threat of repeating that session was enough to make me cringe. I wasn't just afraid of the physical pain; I was also afraid of the mental anguish he would force me to endure. And that was the most destructive of all. I was better than this, though, so why was I giving in? My aggression was slipping into ice-cold fear as I realized that no matter how much I fought him, all he had to do was push me up against a wall, and I was defenseless.

"Admit it, Jaden." I shook my head, fighting back the tears that threatened to spill. How my body had managed to create more after my withdrawal in the shower, I'll never know, but they were so ready to go.

“Tell me you belong to me,” he repeated as searing intensity bored from his eyes.

“Even if I said it, I wouldn’t mean it. I’d be lying to you,” I tried to rationalize with him.

“That’s where you’re wrong, sweetheart. You’re stating a fact, and just because you don’t want to believe the fact doesn’t make it any less true. The simple truth is I bought you, and anything that I purchase makes it my property. And that is what you are, little girl—my property to do with as I please. Property implies ownership, and that is what I have over you. I can’t make it any clearer than that unless you want to see the receipt.” He paused for a minute to study the pain in my eyes. I hated him so fucking much.

“You will never leave me, Jaden. You need to accept that and move on. You are mine, and I will *never* let you go. Run and I will find you. Fight me and I will break you. Now, tell me what I want to hear or I will drag you back into the house and finish what I started in the playroom. And believe me, by the time I’m done with you, you won’t even dream of defying me ever again.”

I looked up at him, hating him so much as a single tear slipped down my face. I didn’t think it was possible for me to have any tears left, but apparently, I was wrong. I should have opted for the waterproof mascara, but I didn’t think I would be this fucking weak.

“Now,” he demanded, gently rubbing my tear away with his thumb as if it meant nothing. “I won’t ask again.”

God, I hated this game; these mind games he played with me to get me to accept something I refused to believe. I knew he loved hearing me admit his dominion over me, and I could feel his hard cock rubbing against my stomach as I tried to deny him. I didn’t want to go through another one of those sessions because somehow, I believed he would make it so much worse than last time. Finally, I just gave in to his demands.

“I ...” I started to say, but then I paused, looking up at the sky and praying for some kind of miracle. Anything to get me out of this. Darren turned his head in warning, demanding I finish my sentence, but I didn’t know if I could. “I ... I’m yours,” I whispered in defeat, looking away from him.

I’m not yours! I shouted in my head.

“Louder so I can hear you. Who do you belong to?”

“I ... belong to you,” I said slightly louder. *I belong to no one!*

“That’s my girl,” he said against my forehead.

“I hate you,” I whispered, closing my eyes to stop the tears from falling.

“I know, baby,” he said, kissing my forehead, his warm hands holding my face. “But the sooner you accept your new life, the sooner you can enjoy it. Now,” he pulled back, gazing down at me, “don’t ever let me catch you mentioning another man like that again or I will track him down and quickly remind you of where your loyalty lies.”

My eyes widened in terror at the thought of his threat. It wasn’t the first time he had threatened Jason, but that didn’t make it any less terrifying that one day he might just follow through on his word. Especially since he had declared he was so good at keeping it. I would fucking end him before I let him hurt anyone in my life, but God knew what kind of connections a man like him had. I would have to calculate my escape very carefully if I wanted my family to survive.

“Is that clear?” he snapped.

“Yes, sir,” I replied.

“Good. Now, come on. We’re going to miss it if we don’t hurry up.”

Miss what?

Chapter Six

Good Night Kiss

Darren kept a solid grip on my left hand as he continued to tug me along the beach to the docks. The sun was very low in the sky, and it looked like it was getting ready to set. Walking across the beautiful soft white sand, we made our way to the long wooden dock that stood out about fifty feet from the shore into the clear blue water. Once we reached the end, he stopped and turned me toward the setting sun that had just touched the water.

“This is one of my favorite spots,” he said genuinely.

“I can see why,” I said, my eyes taking in the most magnificent sunset I had ever seen.

The warm colors spread across the sky in pinks, oranges, and yellows, setting the scene ablaze. The wind caused the water to ripple as though it were on fire, matching those of embers in a bonfire while the warmth of the sun soothed my skin. I would probably return to the house with a hundred new freckles, but I didn’t care. If there were ever the slightest hint of comfort, I would claim all of it until there was none left. The only thing making this experience less than enjoyable was the fact that this man was the only reason I was seeing it.

I let go of Darren’s hand and wrapped my arms around myself, keeping my eyes focused on the beautiful scene ahead of me, but it was a difficult task. Even though the sun was warm, the chilly evening breeze off the ocean was enough to make my body shiver. I hated it and could never explain it, but if it were eighty degrees outside, my body would find some way to block the heat from entering. I was usually always the cold one among my peers and friends. It was a weakness that, no matter what I did, could never improve.

“Cold?” Darren asked me slyly.

“Nope,” I replied, but the goosebumps on my arms were seriously contradicting me.

“What did I tell you about lying to me?” he asked me, narrowing those deep blues at me.

“I’m fine,” I retorted back. I didn’t need to give him an excuse to touch me, although we both knew he didn’t need one.

“Your stubbornness is going to get you in serious trouble, Jaden.” He sighed, tugging me to his chest and wrapping his long arms around me. My hands remained crossed in front of my chest in an attempt to maintain some distance, but it was without success. Unfortunately, the warmth radiating from his body was enough to silence my pride and just soak it up.

“Don’t worry,” I said against him. “I’m sure you’ll learn to like it.”

The chuckle that rolled up his throat made me want to push away from him even more, but I knew that was pointless.

I could feel him looking down at me, watching me instead of the sun, as he should have been. His large hands ran up and down my back until his strong fingers found their way to my shoulders, massaging away the tension in my muscles.

“You’re so tense,” he said softly. “Just relax.”

Having him tell me to relax did not help; it just made me angrier. But I knew I would cause myself more harm than good if I continued to keep my shoulders hunched and body rigid. I just didn’t want to accept comfort from him. I didn’t want him wiping away the tears he created.

“Ya know,” he said, peering down at me, “the sunlight is turning your hair into the most beautiful shade of red I have ever seen. And I happen to have a thing for redheads.” I could almost hear him smiling.

“Shocker,” I said not giving a shit about what he thought of my hair color. What guy didn’t have a thing for redheads?

A light chuckle vibrated up his throat, causing his chest to stutter against my cheek.

After a few short minutes, it suddenly dawned on me that this was the first time Darren had ever held me. It was a strange sensation as he was doing it just to keep me warm against my own stubborn wishes to freeze. He wasn’t squeezing too tight, but strong enough to hold me up. He was warm and solid as a rock, but comfortable enough to relax into, and soon, I actually found myself needing it.

After all the violence and darkness I had been subjected to, when warmth and comfort were offered, my body apparently would never refuse it, even if it was offered by the devil himself.

I could hear Darren's heart beat in his chest and laughed in my head as I had wondered if he even had a heart to begin with. Maybe it was mechanical. But nonetheless, it beat with a fierce intensity, pounding away inside him. And then I wondered how it would feel to stand here and listen to it slow and beat for the final time. I might grow to tolerate his random tenderness, but I would never forget what it was that got me here in the first place. I would never forget my family and the mission that would drive me to eventually escape this man.

It wasn't much longer when the sun sank into the depths of the water, its glowing light swallowed up by the waves of the ocean until all that was left were the golden colors painted in the sky. In the absence of the warm rays of the sun, I could feel the ocean breeze against my skin, yet I still was not cold. Darren's body blocked the bulk of the wind and his warmth spread across my skin. He wasn't kidding when he said he was a walking furnace.

As the sky turned to night and the stars became visible, Darren released me from his embrace and tilted my head up to face him. His gaze was soft and tender as he looked down at me and smiled lightly.

"Now, you can't tell me that wasn't the least bit enjoyable," he said with a small smile.

"No, I suppose I can't," I lied bitterly.

Ha! Fuck him!

"See what happens when you behave? I may be a monster to you now, Jaden, but eventually, you will come to see me as something more entirely. Something you can learn to love."

I kept my poker face in place as he spoke to me about love. Was he seriously expecting me to fall for him? Na-uh, bitch; it's the other way around. Hell would freeze over first once I sent him there. And what the hell did he know of love? Just like he said, he was a monster, and monsters weren't capable of love. But fine, let him think that. Let him think he would beat me at this game; it just made it easier for him to trust me, which would be his ultimate downfall.

"Just remember," he said, bending down to kiss my forehead. "I always reward good behavior."

The resolve of my poker face broke into a twisted scowl. And then I wondered if he considered personal space a reward.

"Come on." He smiled, taking my hand again and pulling me back toward the house. "We still have other things to discuss."

“Like what?” I asked.

“Like the plans I have for you tomorrow.”

“What plans?”

“I have to return to work in the morning, but I will be back early.”

“More slaves for you to sell?” I asked snidely.

That was ballsy of me and my stomach did a small backflip for my lack of discretion. He stopped and turned to me, a fierce look in his eyes.

“You would be mistaken if you think human trafficking is the only ring I run. I’m invested in far more dangerous trades than you will ever need to concern yourself with.”

My stomach clenched tightly as he bore down on me, a warning clear as day across his face. He was serious now, and I found myself sinking away inside.

“You have no idea who I am or what I’m capable of, Jaden, and you’d do well to remember that and watch your smart mouth from now on. I’ve been lenient with you today, but tomorrow, you will not be so lucky. I would focus on behaving if I were you.”

I just stared at the healing black eye of his, remembering how good it felt when my fist made contact. I simmered my attitude and lowered my eyes in defeat just as I knew Darren wanted me to.

As he continued his pace, he began stating his demands for tomorrow.

“Breakfast is served every day at 9:00 a.m., lunch is at noon, and dinner is at 5:30 p.m. I would embed those times in your head if I were you. I’d hate for you to forget. I will not always be there to join you. I’m a very busy man and will not be around very often, but that doesn’t mean the rules don’t apply, so remember them. However, for the next week, I will try to be here as often as I can.”

Don’t try too hard, I almost said.

“I will be leaving at 9:30 a.m. tomorrow and will be back around 3:00 p.m. I have scheduled a manicure and pedicure for you, as well as a haircut at 1:00 p.m. Make sure you are ready for them. Do you have any questions?”

A mani and pedi? Why? I wanted to ask but didn’t feel the need to invoke his anger again.

“No.”

“Good. When I get home, I will give you a full tour of the estate. You are to remain in your room until I return. Understand?”

I would have to stay in my room for the entire time? Well, tomorrow was going to be a fun-filled day.

“Yes.”

“Good.”

By this time, we had reached the patio, and he pulled the glass door aside so we could walk through. When we finally stopped in front of my bedroom door, he paused and placed his hands on my shoulders and a shiver crept down my spine, goosebumps forming down my bare arms. I stared into his dark blue eyes as they pierced through my resolve, and I could feel myself melting under his gaze.

“Before we say good night,” he began, “I want something from you.”

Oh, joy ...

“What?” I asked.

“A good night kiss.” He smirked.

Poker face out the door, my lips curled into a disgusted scowl, and his eyes immediately lit up with warning. I felt my guard come up as I instinctively put my left foot back and turned my right side to him, my defensive stance coming alive.

He noticed and took an intimidating step toward me, but I didn’t budge. Darren towered over me, an intense look on his face as he challenged me to refuse him.

“You have two choices,” he said low and menacing. “You give me what I asked for and you can go to sleep without issue. You deny me, and I’ll fuck you nice and hard right here on this floor until I’m good and satisfied. So what’s it going to be?”

I released an irritated sigh. I always loved the options he gave me.

“You have until the count of three to make a decision,” he warned. “Before I make it for you. One ...”

I felt my heart rate spike as a small twinge of fear shocked through my veins.

His eyes narrowed. “Two ...”

I leaped toward him, cutting off the “three” that was about to leave his mouth. I reached on my tiptoes and quickly forced my lips to his. Luckily, he saw my lunge and met me halfway so I could complete his request.

I kissed him hard, violently, and hatefully, as if I was trying to assault his mouth with my lips. He responded with the same amount of aggression,

his hand coming up against the small of my back, forcing me against his hard body while his other hand gripped my ass.

I wanted him to know I hated him and I never wanted him to second-guess that, ever. He already hadn't cared when I said the words out loud, but I hoped my physical reactions could provide more clarification.

Our lips moved together while I shot my tongue into his mouth, me being the one taking this time, but I didn't get very far with that. Adrenaline spiked as both of his hands reached down, cupping my ass and lifting me to straddle his hips. He pressed me roughly against the wall, and I instinctively wrapped my arms and legs around him, holding on as we competed against each other for most aggressive kisser. Heat rose in my body as his thumbs traced along my rib cage and he released my mouth to further assault my neck and throat with his lips. I couldn't help but tip my head back and give him the access he was looking for while his erection pressed into my pelvis.

His five o'clock shadow scratched my skin as he nuzzled into me, sending little waves of pleasure through my body, and I shuddered under his touch. My hands traveled along his shoulders and back of their own accord, feeling the hard muscle that hid underneath his shirt and jacket. He was raw power all wrapped up in a gorgeous package. The thought that a man like this had this much of an interest in me was exhilarating, but he was still the enemy and I would never forget that.

Darren finally released me, pulling me from his body and allowing me to slide down and stand on my own two feet. His palms rested against the wall on either side of my head while both of us tried to catch our breath. Our chests heaved up and down as we stared at each other, the electricity in the air palpable with lust. A feral hunger registered in his eyes as he stared down at me, and I felt myself shudder a little inside as terror began to fill me. Would he keep his word now that I had given him what he wanted?

"Go," he suddenly growled, his breath still erratic.

"Huh?" I replied huskily.

"Go ... now, before I rip you apart."

I felt myself jump in surprise as I quickly ducked under his arm and slipped past him as fast as I could. I could feel his eyes on me as I turned the knob to my bedroom and glanced at him one last time. His eyes were looming with a lustful hunger as he watched me, and I didn't wait another second before practically sprinting into my room and shutting the door behind me.

What the fuck just happened? My blood was pumping, my heart was racing, and I even felt a little light headed. And I was fucking wet.

Fuck.

I paced the room, running my hands through my hair as I tried to get a grip on myself, but as I did, images of the day flashed through my head. The auction, the drive here, Darren's rules, my reflection, dinner, the docks, and now that kiss. My life as I knew it was over ... and this was only day one.

Panic rose in my stomach, my dinner churning inside me as I fought to keep it down, but my sudden anxiety was not helping. I couldn't stop my thoughts from racing a mile a minute as I realized I nearly enjoyed that good night kiss. And it made me fucking sick.

I jetted for the bathroom, feeling my dinner rising up, and I managed to make it to the toilet just in time. I hurled up everything I ate, completely emptying the contents of my stomach into the bowl. When it was over, my body shivered as I flushed away my dinner and took deep breaths in an attempt to relax myself. I honestly felt better now that my stomach had room for the knots again.

When I was finally calm, I washed away the evidence of the arousal I didn't want to admit was there between my legs. I then washed my face, brushed my teeth, and rummaged through the drawers for something to sleep in. I found some silky little nighties and slipped a bright purple one over my head; I wasn't even surprised when it fit perfectly against my body.

Plopping myself on top of the bed, I thought I had fallen on top of a cloud. It was soft and lush as my body melted into the embrace of the bed. A huge upgrade compared to the padding I had been sleeping on in my dog cage. Wrapping myself in the luxury of the comforter, I curled into a ball and relaxed against the fluffiest pillow I had ever laid my head on.

I laid there for a while, just basking in the warmth and reflecting on my status in life. Even though I now had Darren, I was more alone than ever. No one was on my side now, no one was fighting for me but myself. And then I thought of Kayla. I wondered who had bought her and if she was all right. Her company had helped keep me sane during our days as slaves back at that warehouse, and now, I had no one but the monster who lurked within these walls.

It was going to be the toughest test of my life, putting up with Darren's bullshit and making him feel like he was my king or some shit.

Maybe I would just skip to the chase and kill him the first chance I got. But then what about the guards? They would probably just kill me. Unless I got Darren alone ... maybe off in the woods where I could easily stab him with something. Then I'd take his phone and deactivate my collar and GPS, but he'd no doubt have a password. I'd have to get him to activate it somehow and then strike.

This plot would take time, not as much time as my original plan, but I'd still have to get him to trust me just a little. Maybe in a month's time, I could accomplish my goal. I'd have to train, though, and ready my body for battle. Darren was big, and he had skill I was sure I had barely tapped. Maybe I could set up a trap in the woods. So many ideas swam in my head, but I needed more information before I could set anything in stone. I could probably get what I needed once Darren gave me a tour of the estate. Then I'd go from there.

Satisfied with my new plan, I burrowed further into the pillows and blankets and drifted off into the sleep I desperately needed, dreaming of blood and black eyes.

~*~

Holy fuck.

I had never been so close to breaking my word in all my life. That was not the kiss I was expecting. Not even close. I figured she'd give me a quick peck, and I'd have to catch her chin to keep her there while I took what I really wanted, but she just charged in. And fuck if it didn't drive me to want to fuck her right then and there against the wall.

Her bravery was so sexy, but I met her exhilarating aggression head-on with my own, and I felt it growing, overshadowing my self-control. The terror in her eyes only made my dick that much harder, and I had to let her go before I reneged on my own deal and fucked her into oblivion.

Pushing off the wall, I walked away from her door quickly before I turned around and changed my mind.

Fuck. I had never felt more elated in all my life. I finally had her, in my home and under my control. For the rest of her life. She was so perfect, so alive, and so tempting. I knew things weren't always going to go that smoothly, as she would need time to adjust, but I had all the time in the world to bring her to her knees. And I would enjoy every minute of it.

I headed down to my office with the intent of finishing up some work to get my mind off her, but instead pulled up the security feed to Jaden's bedroom on my desktop. I watched her curl into herself under the silk sheets. She was awake, though; I could see the weariness threatening to pull her under, but she was fighting it, lost in thought of her new situation as well as likely plotting her escape.

The thought had me laughing on the inside. Even if she somehow managed to escape the property, if my men didn't find her within the first twenty minutes, the local police department I had in my pocket certainly would. She'd probably try to go to them for help, but they would just hold her there until I came to get her. What would come next would be a night that my little warrior princess would never forget. I would rip the thought of any further attempts of escape out of her head and replace it with pain until she no longer knew what the word "escape" even meant. She was mine, and I was never letting her go no matter how much she tried to fight me.

Eventually, Jaden would grow tired of the fight. She would grow tired of losing, but I wasn't about to let her dwell on it. I knew how to engage the fire in her, but I also knew how to keep it at a reasonable temperature. Most days, I would want room temperature, but then some days, I knew I would want full-on supernova. Jaden was fucking adorable when she was angry, but she was so much more fun to play with when her rage finally took over.

The shock on her face when I opened the doors to collect her was the most amazing thing I had ever seen. In that very moment, my strong little fighter was more terrified than any other moment I had had with her, and I loved it. I wanted more of it, and it excited more than I ever imagined knowing I could have and take as much as I wanted from her, whenever I wanted.

Jaden looked so sweet and delicate, wrapped tightly in the sheets and grasping her pillow, but she didn't belong there. She belonged in my bed, under my sheets, under me, but I had to be patient for that. She was so much like a wild animal, but once her training was complete and she acclimated to her new life, I would eventually be able to trust her. But for now, I would have to wait, and I fucking hated waiting.

Chapter Seven

Fight or Flight

“Wake up, Jaden,” a low soft voice whispered to me.

I tossed and turned in my bed, fighting something in my head, but I didn’t know what it was.

“Come on, babe. Wake up, you’re dreaming,” it said again and I felt a large warm hand gently shake my shoulder.

And then, finally, my eyes opened and I jack-knifed out of bed, my loud gasps on the verge of screams as I tried to cling to my state of sudden reality.

“Hey, Jaden, it’s okay. It was only a dream.”

And then I felt a familiar warm hand on my back, rubbing softly up and down, and I noticed myself calm almost immediately.

I looked over to find Jason sitting up in bed with me, concern on his face as he tried to comfort me. A huge wave of relief abruptly washed over me as my hand reached up to touch his stubble covered face. He felt real. This felt real. And when I finally came to that conclusion, I quickly clutched him to me, holding him as tight as I could so that he could never let go, instantly melting when my skin connected with his body heat. So real.

“Hey, what’s wrong? What happened?” he asked me softly with that same concern in his voice again. It made me want to cry.

“I just had the most horrifying dream ever.”

“You’re okay, Jaden. Everything is fine,” Jason said reassuringly.

God, just hearing his voice was a symphony of relief, a chorus of salvation, giving me the soothing confirmation that I was safe, that I wasn’t a prisoner and that I was home ... where I belonged.

“I know,” I said, sniffing back tears, thankful none of it was real.

He pulled back, taking my face in his hands, and softly rubbed my cheeks with his thumbs.

“Tell me what happened,” he said.

“I dreamed I was kidnapped and sold into human trafficking. And this guy. This fucking horrible guy, who ran the place, bought me and made me his sex slave and I ...”

I suddenly felt strange. Like sick to my stomach strange.

“And what, Jaden?” Jason pressed.

“And ...” I tried to continue with my story, but my stomach continued to ache with a strange pressure that seemed to wrap itself entirely around my torso. I suddenly couldn’t breathe; I felt the panic rise as my blood rushed and my heart began to race. Darkness shrouded my vision, and I could no longer see Jason.

“Jason?” I called out to him, but there was no answer. “Jason!”

I felt the pressure grow until my limbs gradually locked in place. Something was constricting me, coiling and tightening around me like a boa constrictor, squeezing the life out of me.

“No, no, no, no!” I screamed. It wasn’t real. It wasn’t supposed to be real.

Darkness consumed me until I felt invaded by it. I couldn’t move, I couldn’t breathe, couldn’t see, yet all I could hear was a hauntingly familiar voice echoing in the background. “Mine,” it kept saying. “All mine.” I fought with all my might to move, but not a single muscle was able to penetrate the force. I couldn’t even scream.

Jolting from the bed, I screamed so loud I shattered my own ears. The sheets were a scattered sweaty mess around me, and my chest heaved as I sucked in heavy breaths. My heart was racing and I put my head in my hands to try to calm myself down. Tears poured from my eyes as I came to realize that dream had been the false one, and I was still trapped in my nightmare. I was panicking, and I could feel the walls closing around me. I had to get out of here. I had to get the fuck out. Now.

I got up, put the Nikes on, and ran to my bedroom door, nearly breaking the damn thing off its hinges as I threw it open and raced out of the room. My heart was pounding as I shot down the hallway, my steps light and quick, barely making a sound as I moved like a fucking panther in the dark.

I turned the corner towards the stairs and my heart abruptly stopped in horror, a shocked gasp escaping my lips, but thankfully my legs had a different strategy in mind. Terror clutched my heart as Darren stood not more than twenty feet from me, casually leaning against the wall, shirtless,

in tracks pants, running shoes and blocking the stairs. He was waiting for me.

How the fuck did he already know? I knew I was running only sixty seconds ago!

Because he has a security team and cameras everywhere, you dumb fuck. That's how.

"Going somewhere?" he asked me, raising an eyebrow.

A single glance of him was all the motivation I needed to simply skip the stairs, grab the railing, and nimbly throw myself over the edge, feet first. I didn't even think, just reacted; too much adrenaline pushing my momentum to slow me down.

I only met Darren's eyes for a second before my hand released the railing, and I was somewhat amused to see shock and possibly concern over his face as he jerked forward to stop me.

My landing was not soft, but as soon as my feet hit the hard marble flooring, I instantly bent my knees and rolled with my remaining momentum in the direction of the door. I rolled up, grabbed the handle and yanked the door open, thankful as fuck that it wasn't locked. But as a noisy alarm blared in the background, I quickly realized why the door remained unlocked as I sprinted past two armed guards standing just outside the door.

"Hey, wait! Stop!" they shouted, but I was already at a dead run by the time they realized what was going on.

My heart continued to race as the adrenaline pumped through my veins. I ran around the fountain, pumping my legs as fast as I could when I started to hear a familiar loud, angry voice behind me.

"Jaden!" Darren shouted as he raced after me. Now, the adrenaline was really rushing and I instantly kicked up my pace.

Other voices shouted around me, and I listened to the sounds of dogs barking and heavy footsteps all around me, orders bellowed from all directions, the clicks of guns clattering in my ears, all of it sending me into overdrive. Would they really shoot me?

"Don't! Stand down! I've got her!" I heard Darren shout. He must have been telling his guards to fall back. What the fuck for? What the hell was he doing?

No sense in sticking around to find out.

Shooting off from the circle drive, I took off into the night, driving right into the shade of the trees, seeking shelter in the shadows. I had hoped

to bide some time to put a plan together. Maybe if I could make it to the gate, I could flag a car down or something.

What the fuck kind of plan is that supposed to be?

Just what the fuck was I doing? What the fuck did I think was going to happen? That I'd just walk out the front door and everything would be all hunky-dory? This was by far the stupidest thing I had ever done. I was only originally running because I irrationally panicked from a dream, and now I was running because I knew who was chasing me.

Darren was hot on my heels now. I could hear him in the distance behind me, his loud footsteps heavy with anger and determination. Damn, he was pissed, and the aggression in his voice had scared the shit out of me. I didn't want to be me when he found me, but that ship had sailed now. I was committed to my escape, and I had to follow through with it.

I knew he could hear me running through the woods like an animal; there was no stealthy way around it, but at least, the darkness of the trees would shadow me from his sight. At least, until he got close enough.

And then it suddenly occurred to me. Why hadn't he just activated my cuffs? He could have stopped me in my tracks and found me as easily as he had before, yet he continued to pursue me freely. He could even just track my signal if he wanted to, not much work involved here. What the fuck was he doing?

He's hunting you down, girl. Run ...

Fear laced through my veins as I came to realize that was exactly what he was doing. He was enjoying the chase, probably hoped all along I would give him this opportunity, but it only made me kick up my pace. I could hear Darren getting closer as he raced after me; luckily his bigger body couldn't maneuver through the woods like my smaller frame could. I weaved in and out of the branches, ducking when I needed to while he just bulldozed through all of it. And yet, it didn't even slow him down. Shit, he was fast.

But then I saw the gate in the distance, the gold-plated embellishments shining in the moonlight like the beacon of hope I needed. A fresh spike of adrenaline renewed me, especially since I saw headlights coming from my far right in the distance. Here was my chance!

Darting in and out of the trees, I tried to confuse Darren, but the noise of my steps gave me away. My hope was turning to panic as I felt him on my heels now. He was so close that I swore I could feel his breath on my

neck, which only made my eyes tear up from my impending failure and the anticipation of his brutality. He was going to catch me. I could feel it.

I sensed his arm reaching out for me, but as I turned to dodge his attempt, he maneuvered just as quickly and kicked up his pace. Darren's strong arm finally snaked around my waist like the boa constrictor I had just dreamed about and lifted me right off my feet.

"Gotcha," he breathed and I screamed in aggravation.

Not even missing a beat, I shoved my elbow back into his face and clocked him right in the corner of his mouth. His teeth cut into my elbow, but it was worth the grunt he made from the contact. Even my legs refused defeat as they kicked at his lower body with everything they had, but it didn't seem to matter. Darren had caught me. Fuck.

I fought against his hold, but his arms were like steel bars that continued to tighten around my body, and I could see myself slipping back into the nightmare I had just tried to run from.

"Stop! Get the fuck off me, you son of a bitch!" I screamed at him, but it all went unnoticed.

Once Darren was done dragging my fighting body out of the woods like some errant toddler, he slammed me down on the ground hard and pressed his body on top of mine.

"Just where the fuck do you think you're going, huh?" he spat, pissed off but still amused at my stupid attempt. Fuck, he wasn't even breathing heavy, and here I was trying to suck down as much oxygen as I could. Damn, how fit was this guy?

"Getting the fuck away from you!" I shouted, trying to catch my breath.

"You and I both know that's never going to happen. Your life is with me now, Jaden, accept it and move on."

"Like hell it is! One way or another, I *am* getting the fuck out of here!"

"Yeah? And just how the fuck are you going to accomplish that, huh? I can track your every move, Jaden, and I didn't even need to use my phone for that. An electric current awaits your perimeter breaches, and even if you somehow managed to find some sort of success, where are you going to go? You don't even know where the fuck you are."

"I'm a smart girl. I'll figure it out," I spat.

"No, you won't. You'll go running to the cops the first chance you get. But they won't help you because, guess what, I own them, too."

I tried to break away from him then, forcing my head in the other direction, but it didn't make a bit of a difference. I wasn't going anywhere, not without his permission. It didn't surprise me that he had the cops in his pocket, but it only put a small damper on my plans to escape. At least now I knew who I could trust outside these gates. No one.

"Face it, Jaden. No matter what you do or where you go, I will always find you and bring you right back to me ... where you belong."

"I don't belong here and I never will! Now, get off!"

"Let me give you a little reality check here, sweetheart. You ran from me and I caught you just like I told you I would," he seethed. "You're mine now, Jaden, and there will be no more denying it. Whatever life you had before is over. Your future is with me now."

"Go fuck yourself," I spat.

"Oh no, little girl." His voice was liquid venom in my ears as he glowered down at me. "That's your job now. But first," he said dragging me up by my throat and onto my feet, "I'm going to show you just how pointless running from me is."

Still keeping a tight grip on my neck, Darren dragged me back into the woods, and I knew instantly he was taking me past the perimeter. I fought and kicked against him, but I had already tired myself out from the chase. Once I felt the sharp tick at the back of my head, I could tell Darren had felt it, too, and then he threw me as hard as he could into the woods, and I stumbled and rolled on the ground. I knew I only had about five seconds, and Darren wasn't going to let me back into the safe zone. I stayed low on the ground, knowing once the volts hit me I was going to crash. Better to already be low than to fall from standing up.

And then I felt it.

The sharp current cut through my veins like shards of glass, and I screamed in total agony as it felt like my body was being ripped apart. I writhed in pain, thinking that my head was going to split open as my muscles and limbs convulsed under the current. It was, without a doubt, the most painful thing I had ever experienced, and my body quickly shut down, needing only a few seconds to welcome the numb blackness that claimed me.

I woke up still lying on the ground, face first in the dirt, with my limbs limp at my sides. My body felt like spaghetti as I made a small moan still remembering the shock that had rocked my entire being. I could sense Darren standing over me, and I didn't have the strength or the energy to fight him anymore. I felt paralyzed and numb.

He reached down, picked me up, and swung me over his shoulder like the rag doll I was. I was nothing but dead weight as my arms and legs hung lifelessly down his body. He kept a firm hand on the back of my legs to keep me secure as he walked back to the house. Before I knew it, he settled me back onto my bed, took off my shoes, and actually tucked me in.

But then his hand went to my jaw, taking my entire face in his palm and gripping it tight. He lowered his mouth to my ear and whispered menacingly.

"Don't you ever fucking run from me or this house again. And I especially don't ever want to see you fling yourself over the balcony of those stairs ever again. You're not going anywhere, Jaden, so accept it already. You try that shit again, and I promise you, your next punishment will be far worse than you could ever imagine." With that, he got up and headed for the door. "Oh, and Jaden." I turned my eyes to acknowledge him. "Don't you dare be late for breakfast tomorrow." He then shut my door quietly, and all the strength I had used to stay awake dissolved as I fell back into darkness.

Chapter Eight

Game On

I felt the morning sunshine on my face as I rolled over in the blankets, the soreness in my limbs from last night's electrocution essentially diminished. I slowly raised my still heavy lids to notice the clock on the nightstand beside my bed. It read 8:28 a.m.

Quicker than I ever had before, I shot out of bed and ran to the bathroom. I had thirty minutes to get my ass ready or shit would hit the fan. I showered my body quickly, washing my hair as fast as I could before brushing my teeth. I toweled myself off and braided my wet hair over my shoulder, not having nearly enough time to dry and style it. I threw on some quick mascara and eyeliner and raced to the closet to put on the first thing I touched. It happened to be a frilly light pink sundress. I immediately regretted the choice, but I would have to gripe about that later. After changing into a matching pink bra and thong, I slipped on a pair of nude flats and ran out the door, adrenaline pumping through my veins. Looked like I wouldn't be needing coffee this morning.

I stopped at the spiral staircase and attempted to regain my composure before slowly and gracefully descending the stairs. I noticed the two guards standing outside the house beside the door as I came into the foyer. They wore dark sunglasses and the same military get-up as the other guards I had seen before. No sneaking out the front door anymore.

As I entered the dining room, the grandfather clock I had not noticed in the foyer chimed, almost practically announcing my entrance. I found Darren sitting at the head of the table as he had yesterday, dressed in another impeccable three-piece suit. His light blue dress shirt brought out the color of his eyes perfectly; the gold and blue tie and matching vest was a nice complement to his hair and skin tone.

What the fuck? Why did I care? Sure, he was beautiful, but I still fucking hated him.

“Morning, princess. Sleep well?” he asked me, his eyes taking me in and making me extremely uncomfortable already.

I immediately scowled at that.

Princess? Bitch, please.

I sauntered over to my assigned seat and sat down.

“I slept fine, thank you,” I replied bitterly. But my mood improved a fraction as I noticed a small cut on his lip from where my elbow made contact last night. Fucking good.

“Good. Then you should have no trouble explaining to me why the *fuck* your hair is still wet,” he practically growled.

I felt my stomach backflip and land in a puddled mess, but I wouldn’t let it show.

I shrugged. “I accidentally overslept. I must have been that comfortable.”

Fuck him. If he was going to pull me, then I was going to push him right back.

Slowly, like that of a predator, Darren rose from his chair and leaned over the table toward me. His eyes blazed with an intensity that I didn’t want to challenge, but I knew I couldn’t back down. I felt my body tense as he stared me down.

“Do you think this is a game, Jaden?” he asked me seriously.

What an excellent question ...

I leaned back in my chair, relaxed as fuck, as I answered his dumb-ass question.

“Of course, this is a game,” I shot back. “It’s always been a game, and it always will be a game until someone finally breaks. And I don’t plan on losing.”

He lunged forward, but I was already out of my seat. By the time he walked around my chair, which I had deliberately left in front of him, I was already on the other side of the table.

“Breaking so many rules already ...” He shook his head at me, the promise of punishment in his eyes.

“Yeah, because you’re such a fair player as it is,” I retorted, gripping the edge of the table. This was going to turn ugly real quick.

“You were nearly late, your hair is still wet, and now, you’re running from me again. Please explain to me why I should be fair right now,” he challenged.

I squared my shoulders and practically slammed my palms on the table in frustration.

“Because one, I was not late. I was right on time. Two, my hair may be wet, but at least, I cared enough about your rules to do something with it instead of leaving it down, and three, if I were running, I would be out of the house by now.”

“And now we can add back talk to your list of offenses.”

“Offenses?! How about defenses!” I nearly yelled.

“Enough, Jaden!” he roared, and I felt my insides quiver as my resolve shrank a bit. His voice could terrify and liquefy me all at the same time. “I’m going to give you to the count of five to get your disobedient little ass back over here *or* you can make your punishment that much worse by making me come and get you.”

I gaped at him, fear growing in my belly, but my feet felt like they were stuck in cement. I couldn’t move. I didn’t know if it was because my body was physically protesting or if fear paralyzed me, but the promise of that threat had my psyche conflicted as fuck.

“One ...” he began, tilting his head to the side as he watched me. I didn’t move.

“Two ...” I could hear my heart begin to pound as the blood rushed through my veins, anxiety beginning to spike.

“Three ...” My breath felt heavy as I realized I still hadn’t moved a muscle. I couldn’t think clearly. All I knew was—punishment or no punishment—I didn’t want to be anywhere near him.

“Four ...” He emphasized the word, warning me I was one number away from probably getting my ass beat. I felt my knees bend in anticipation, and instantly, I knew I was going to make him chase me again.

“Five.”

And just as if a starter pistol had gone off, I ran because as soon as the word left his lips, he leaped across the table faster than I thought a man of his size could accomplish. I didn’t even make it out of the dining room before he caught me by the arm and spun me around.

I let the momentum benefit me as I brought my fist up and decked him right in the face as I turned. My knuckles pulsed with a sharp pain at the contact, but I didn’t even register it as adrenaline coursed through my veins. And apparently, neither did Darren as he ignored my hit and dragged me back toward the table by my arm and braid.

He slammed me down on the table, face first so that my feet dangled, and held me there by my neck while he bent down to my ear.

“What did I tell you about running last night? What did I say would happen?”

I didn’t say anything, just fought against him as I tried to maneuver and wriggle. Nothing worked.

“What did I say, Jaden?” he roared down at me, and I flinched at his tone.

I sighed heavily in defeat. “That you would catch me.”

“And what did I just do?” he asked vehemently.

“You caught me,” I admitted, rolling my eyes. As if I needed to say it out loud.

“That’s right,” he said, jerking my body. “And I will every time. Running is useless, Jaden, and it will only get you in more trouble, so I would advise against it.”

He then pulled out his phone. Seconds later, I felt the tug of the cuffs. I resisted their pull as best I could, but they connected so fast there was hardly any time to fight them. My wrists and ankles struck together as the cuffs connected, binding my limbs. Darren then wedged his foot between my cuffed ankles and pressed down so that I couldn’t move my legs. And then he lifted the back of my dress to expose my practically bare ass.

My heart dropped to my stomach as his warm hand grazed over my flesh, gripping it and squeezing. I struggled then, trying to pull away, but he wasn’t letting up and I wasn’t going anywhere.

“This is what happens when you break my rules, Jaden,” he said and then smacked my ass with his palm. Really fucking hard.

I jolted forward, my breath leaving my lungs in a harsh gasp as I bit back my cries. And then his hand came down harder than the last time. I cried out as the smack lit my skin on fire, and I found myself trying to pull away from its sting.

Fuck, was he seriously spanking me?

Smack after smack came down on my ass until he’d landed a full-blown ten smacks, and I could feel my skin break out in welts and bruises. Tears had inadvertently fallen down my face, as I could no longer hold them back; the pain Darren brought down on me was too much for my eyes to withhold the moisture. He then roughly gripped my hair and yanked my head back.

“Should I fuck you right here? Over the table like this? God knows I’ve been dying to get inside you since the last time my dick took that sweet little pussy over the edge. Would you like that, Jaden?”

I slammed my fists down onto the table to divert his attention to something other than his dick for a split second. I didn’t feel like getting fucked by him ever.

“No,” I said harshly.

“Tell me you belong to me and maybe I’ll grant you a little mercy,” he seethed.

I clenched my fists together, tightening the muscles in my arms as I fought against my urge to tell him to fuck off and die, but it would only cause me further aggravation.

“Now,” he growled, gripping my hair even tighter.

“I belong to you,” I replied angrily.

“You’re goddamn right, you do,” he snarled and smacked my ass hard again, gripping it roughly and causing the pain to flare up even more. I cried out and tried to pull away, but with my feet dangling and his grip on me, there was nowhere for me to go.

Darren then leaned down and drawled in my ear, “Next time, you’re to count each strike out loud. Otherwise, I might forget what number I’m on and keep going. Understand?”

Next time? He was already betting on next time. Like I was gonna let that shit happen.

Another smack cracked against my skin, and I gasped from the sudden jolt of pain.

“Answer me,” he snarled.

“Yes,” I yelled through clenched teeth.

“Good girl.”

He then finally let me up and practically tossed me back in my chair, my ass immediately blazing with pain at the contact. I tried to relieve the pressure on my skin as best as I could by not letting my ass touch the chair, but it was difficult with my limbs still linked together.

“Sit,” Darren scowled at me and sat back in his own chair, watching me.

I gently planted myself down, my lips forming a tight line as I fought against the sharp ache in my flesh. Darren eyed me for a while, his mouth turning into an evil smirk as I glared right back at him, hating him, all the

while fighting against the stupid whimpers that threatened to expose the serious pain I was now suffering from thanks to his alpha male antics.

After a short minute, he finally checked his watch, took a sip of his coffee, and stood.

"I have to go," he said, straightening his jacket and tie. "Pascal is making your breakfast. It should be done shortly. As soon as I walk out that door, you will have fifteen minutes to finish eating, and then the perimeter range will shorten to your room. I expect your plate to be completely empty," he warned, glaring at me.

I looked away from him. Like I had the stomach for food right now.

"Jaden," he said, taking my face in his hands and forcing me to look up at him from my chair. "While I am gone, it is paramount that you remember my rules. There will be no talking to anyone and you are to remain in your room until I return."

"And my appointment?" I asked hoarsely, pissed off even more at my new confinement.

"The ladies will be led to your room by Scott, my head of security. They do not speak English, so don't even bother trying to communicate with them. I would hate for you to tip them off and force me to commit to an extreme amount of damage control," he glowered at me knowingly.

Damage control meaning one thing ...

Darren then kissed my forehead and stared intently into my eyes, making my stomach shrivel. "Behave," he said, his voice low and smooth but still another warning. And then he headed for the door.

"Wait!" I shouted at him, turning around in my chair, "You can't leave me like this!" But he only ignored me and walked right out the front door, taking his newspaper with him.

Bitch.

Chapter Nine

Company

Ten seconds after the front door closed, my cuffs deactivated and my wrists and ankles were finally free. I breathed a small sigh of relief as I listened to the car pull out of the circle drive. I was finally away from him, even though it was just an illusion. I knew Darren could still see me and could probably hear me as well.

Just then, the scent of eggs filled the air and my mouth instantly began to salivate even as my stomach protested big time. Placing the plate containing a still too large veggie omelet down before me, David returned to the kitchen without a word. He didn't even look at me. He must have known better, unlike me.

Not wanting to withstand the sting in my ass any longer, I swiftly stood and paced back and forth in front of the table looking down at the omelet I did not intend to touch. I knew very well that Darren would be pissed if I didn't finish it, but the realization that his control over me didn't require his immediate presence bothered me more than it should.

My appetite was officially gone, having been taken over by the large knots twisting away inside my stomach, not to mention the pain still stinging my ass, but I knew I would need my strength for later. I somehow managed to finish half the omelet, fumbling with Darren's stupid large-ass fork while standing, and decided I had made a diligent effort to eat it; that would have to be enough for now. I wasn't sure what to do with my plate, but Darren had left his coffee mug on the table, so I figured someone would take care of it.

I headed to the foyer and stopped in the middle of it to study my surroundings, but the rays of the sun shining through the window caught my attention. I looked out the window of the front door and envied the freedom of the tiny finches that splashed around in the fountain of the circle drive. I wished I could fly away from here too, but there was no more flight in my survival code; there was only fight now.

As I leaned against the window, I heard a slight cough far behind me. I turned immediately before the sound finished leaving whoever's lips they were and found a man, dressed in all black standing just beyond the foyer. He had short black hair, a short trimmed black beard, and was just as tall and muscled as Darren. I had a feeling this was Scott.

"I'd get upstairs if I were you," he pointed, his low rough voice scratching in my ears.

Yeah, he must be Darren's head of security. I scowled at him and sighed heavily as he turned his back to me and walked away. So now, I had another man telling me what to do while Darren was gone? I supposed someone had to be present to enforce his rules until I learned to obey them properly. It had only been ten minutes since he left, and I was still being pushed around.

I thought about going after the guard, as I was sure he had a gun somewhere on his person. If I eliminated him as a threat, I could make my way to the security room. I was sure there was one on the estate. Maybe then I could tamper with some shit and get this fucking collar off and the fuck out of here, but then I was positive Darren would see, activate my collar, and I'd wake up somewhere in a state much more horrible than I could imagine. I had only one true target, and I hoped that if I severed the head from the body, the rest of the beast would fall.

Turning to the stairs, I headed for my room and slammed the door behind me. I circled my room, wondering what in the hell I was going to do until 1 p.m., pissed off that I was trapped in this tiny confinement of mine.

Realizing the only thing I really wanted to do at this moment, I grabbed the Nike shoes that had been tossed carelessly by the side of my bed, noticing the fragments of dirt on the soles and not giving a single shit about it. I rummaged through my drawers, and to my surprise, I found a simple, bright pink t-shirt and found the skorts Darren had mentioned at the bottom of the dresser. They would have to do.

I walked over to the middle of the floor, changed my clothes, slipped the shoes on, and started stretching to get my body ready. It felt good to finally let my limbs flex as far as they could, which was farther than most people could. I had been able to do the splits since I was six years old. I had taken gymnastics as a kid, and once I had mastered that, I went for something a little more extreme.

My dad always wanted me to be able to protect myself, and he could only teach me so much. I practiced in several different styles to accommodate my need to learn and fight. Martial arts helped push my body in ways I never thought possible, and my increasing flexibility was extremely fruitful when it came to my kicking ability. I might not be tall or long enough to reach Darren's head, but I could definitely reach his throat.

Once I was done stretching, I started with some jumping jacks to get my blood flowing. After about a hundred, I dropped to the floor and did several variations of push-ups until I reached a hundred of those as well. As my heart rate increased, my breathing became labored, and I welcomed the sweat that started to bead down the side of my face as I pushed my body in my most favorite of ways.

Rolling onto my back, I did several different types of sit-ups, and relished in the burn as my abs contracted and pulsed under my skin. It was time to end their little spring break and bring them back out into the open. After about a half an hour of that, I shadowboxed for a while, throwing all kinds of combinations and a few kicks here and there.

I wished I had some music to go with my workout; maybe that was something I could ask for later if Darren would allow it. So I improvised and sang "Break Stuff" by Limp Bizkit in my head and a little out loud to myself. They were one of my favorite bands as they allowed me to channel my rage and aggression perfectly to my workout. I imagined Darren as my punching bag, and it drove my motivation to fight him and kill him even further. Eventually, I *would* break his fucking face.

Giving myself a two-minute break, I stopped and stretched my limbs again. I was sweating like crazy, and it felt so good to finally give my body what it had been craving. I loved to work out; I practically lived for it. I enjoyed the more challenging workouts, too. Kickboxing, rock climbing, martial arts, volleyball, advanced yoga—I loved that stuff. The more challenging and competitive, the better.

I decided to engage in some good strength training and planted my hands on the floor before springing my lower body up into a full handstand. I breathed through the strain in my arms as all the muscles in my body contracted to hold me up. My record was forty-two seconds, and maybe now that I had all this time, I could beat it for once. I was only about twelve seconds in when I heard a knock at the door.

Irritated and not wanting to break my concentration, I yelled, "Come in!" as I continued to hold my position. I didn't give a shit who it was or what they wanted. I knew everyone could see what I was doing anyway and there was no way in hell it was one o'clock already.

I heard the door open and that same security guy I had seen in the foyer walked into my room, holding a silver tray and a big bottle of water. Once he set it down on the dresser next to him, he stopped to regard me.

"How long have you been holding it?" he asked me.

"Twenty-two seconds," I said quickly, trying to stay focused as my limbs began to shake and sweat dripped from my forehead.

"Well, someone wants to talk to you," he said, holding up a phone. "He's on speaker."

"Jaden," said Darren's serious voice on the other line.

"What," I said with a little more attitude than I had meant, but I was fucking busy right now.

"I know what you're doing," he said angrily. "And you better knock it the fuck off."

"The fuck are you talking about," I said, trying to keep focus, but my body was starting to waver.

"You think I don't know what you've been doing?"

"You said I could work out."

"Yes, I said you could work out, not train."

I let out a small laugh. "So I am a threat to you, after all."

"Don't flatter yourself," he retorted. "You're training because you think you have a shot at escaping me. This is the kind of thinking that warrants punishment, Jaden, and I won't have it."

Shit, he was on to me already.

Just play dumb, Jaden.

"No idea what you're talking about. This is how I work out, and I am this close to beating my record, so can we be done here, already?"

Yeah, that little bit of attitude was probably a bad idea, but I hated being interrupted when I was trying to focus on something. Fuck, thirty-five seconds.

Darren was silent for a second, and I thought he was going to hang up, but then my wrists were suddenly pulled together and I was completely thrown off balance. Luckily, I tucked into myself as I fell and rolled down before landing on the carpet with a grunt.

“What the fuck!” I shouted at the phone, pissed that Darren had screwed up my focus. “Thanks for fucking up my concentration, asshole!”

“One more unwarranted word and I will set off your collar. Do you understand me, Jaden?” he seethed from the other line.

I hesitated for a moment, afraid if I spoke, he might activate it anyway, but I knew he wanted a verbal answer.

“Yes,” I said tentatively, my wrists tight against my chest. I really didn’t want to relive the pain of yesterday.

“I don’t give a shit what you’re concentrating on. When I address you, I expect all of your attention, not half of it. And if you want to continue to avoid that shock from your collar, I suggest you keep your smart mouth in check before you open it. I won’t tolerate that kind of disrespect from you, little girl.”

My mouth stretched into a tight line.

Bitch, call me little one more time and I’ll show you just how little your brain is.

“I also hope next time you’ll think twice before lying to me again. I told you before that I will know if you are, and I can only tell you how lucky you are that I am not there right now.”

I heard someone say something to Darren on his side of the phone. Someone must have come into his office. “Hang on!” he shouted to whoever it was.

“Just so you know, Scott has been authorized to use force if he has to, so don’t push him. I don’t want to have to come home any earlier than I already am.” He hung up before I had a chance to reply.

I sat there on the floor and glanced over at Scott, who only glared back at me before pocketing his phone and heading back out into the hallway.

Asshole.

I remained on the floor and waited several minutes for Darren to release my hands and ankles. When it never came, I finally decided, fine, I would show him I still wasn’t completely immobile. I pressed the back of my hands flat against the top of my head and pushed off the floor with my feet, essentially somersaulting to the bathroom to clean myself up.

In mid-somersault and about three feet from the bathroom door, my hands and ankles were released from the force that held them together and I stood up as I rolled out of the somersault. I turned back to the bedroom for

only a second to glare into the room and then headed into the bathroom, my workout effectively ruined.

Remembering my hair was going to need to be wet anyway if I was going to get it cut, I took another shower and figured I would just reapply my makeup anyway. By the time I was done, it was 12:30 and I hurried over to the table to eat my lunch. It was a simple salad with lots of veggies and Italian dressing. Not much for carbs, but it would have to do. After I finished the salad and downed the bottle of water, I hunted down the simplest dress I could find. I found one that was a bright ocean blue with a flowing skater skirt, slipped that on, and changed my thong and bra again. Ten minutes had passed and I heard another knock at the door.

Right on time.

I walked over to the door, not bothering to put shoes back on and slowly opened it, afraid it might just be Scott again. When I did, there were two much older women standing in front of me, with Scott standing right fucking behind them, a nasty warning glare on his face.

The first lady had a wild pixie cut with bright burgundy red hair, red lipstick, and looked to be in her mid-fifties.

“Hello,” she said with a smile and a very thick Russian accent. I was sure that was the extent of her English. The other woman had long brown hair, was probably in her late thirties, and honestly looked a little nervous if not very timid. I nodded and smiled at both of them and opened the door wide for them to enter. They smiled and came into the room, immediately setting up at the table in the corner of the room.

Scott followed in after them, but only just entered the room before addressing me.

“I don’t have time to sit here and babysit you through this, so follow the rules and they won’t end up dead,” he scowled, nodding over at the women as they began to set up shop. “Got it?”

“Yeah,” I said, turning away bitterly and leaving him at the door. I heard him shut it behind him.

The older women laid down a thin tarp-like sheet under one of the chairs and gestured for me to sit. I obliged her, and she quickly started to brush my still damp hair. I suddenly decided to try something I knew couldn't be too suspicious to Darren. I just wanted to be polite, right? I turned to the woman brushing my hair, and she stopped to look at me.

I placed my hand on my chest and said my name. Then I pointed at her and waited to see if she would respond. She let out an exhale through her nose and gave me a tiny smile.

“Irina,” she finally spoke.

I smiled brightly and nodded, letting her continue brushing and spraying my damp hair with water. I turned to the other one and did the same thing. She was not so inclined to respond, but eventually she did.

“Anya,” she whispered without looking at me.

These women were obviously scared, and I supposed they had good reason to be. Darren must be paying them well to be here, but I could tell they knew something wasn’t right about my situation.

Once Anya was finished setting up, she held her hands out to accept mine and put them in the bowl of warm water in front of me. She let my fingers soak while Irina sectioned out my hair and started snipping. Good. Chop it off. Less hair for Darren to pull.

Once Anya finished pushing back my cuticles and buffing my nail beds, she pulled out the acrylic nails from her bag. Surprised, I instantly pulled my hands back and started shaking my head. I did not want fake nails. I hated them for their annoyance, and I knew I would surely break them. I thought they would just polish them and be done with it. Anya looked over at Irina nervously, unsure of what to do with my protest. Irina came around to me and smiled, clasping her hands together, unsure of how to respond.

“Ehhh ...” she started, “no choice.” She smiled at me as if she had no idea what she just said.

That motherfucker! Well, fine, if he wanted to give me claws that I didn't give a shit about breaking, then that would be his stupid-ass mistake. He was just making it easier for me to rip his goddamn throat out.

“Fine,” I said and gave my hands back to Anya.

Both women continued their work, and by the time they were done, my hair was about an inch shorter, perfectly layered and styled, and my nails now had fake flawless French tips. Even my toes displayed a perfect French tip. Thankfully, the nails weren't super long so I might be able to manage with them.

By the time they left, escorted out by Scott, it was two o'clock, and it took everything I had to let them walk out of my room without a single plea for help. I thought about maybe slipping them a note, hoping maybe

someone they knew could read English, but it wasn't worth the risk of Darren finding out and killing them.

With the women now gone, I only had an hour before Darren would be home. I redid my makeup, which took me forever since I now had an extra set of bullshit on my nails to deal with.

Feeling the anxiety in my blood, I decided I wanted to feel that wonderful ocean breeze in my hair and headed for the balcony. As I opened the beautiful French doors, I stopped myself just before the threshold. Did my perimeter include the balcony? I really hoped it did as I slowly put one foot in front of the other, waiting for the warning shock. It never came. Breathing a sigh of relief, I walked out and rested my arms on the white stone railing. It truly was a beautiful sight as I found myself at ease just taking it all in.

I found solace in the rays of the sun that peeked through the fluffy white clouds, warming my skin. The numerous amount of green trees bent to the wind of the ocean, and I actually had a small twinge of excitement as I noticed a few palm trees out in the distance. I had a perfect view of the beach, and I honestly thought about how nice it would be to feel the salty water splash against my skin. Maybe one day Darren would let me go swimming if I earned it.

After a while, the door to my bedroom finally opened and I turned quickly to find Darren walking toward me. My stomach instantly tightened with hatred and I didn't even bother to hide the scowl on my face as my eyes locked on his big moving body; the one that exhibited more grace and agility than a man of his size should be able to. He moved like a shadow – a very beautiful, confident shadow. Ugh.

“Daddy's home.” He smiled wickedly as he sauntered toward me.

Eww.

“Did you really just say that?” I asked, crossing my arms over my chest, my stomach now revolted by his sick jokes.

He chuckled as he came closer, looking quite amused. “Did you behave yourself while I was gone?”

“Obviously,” I said, holding up my hands and spreading my fingers for him to see. “Though I don't know why you bothered with these. You've essentially just given me claws and they're only going to get broken.”

Darren's eyes darkened as he leaned against the doorframe of the balcony. “Jaden, not a single nail is to be broken. Do you understand me? If

you find yourself in a situation that may cause one to break, then I suggest you remove yourself from that situation.”

I gave him a look as if he'd lost his mind.

“That would technically be everything I do.”

“Exactly.”

He gave me a wide devilish grin, and it just made me want to slap it right off his stupid smug face. Goddamn him; he knew just what to do to keep me tame. It was as if I had been muzzled, for fuck's sake.

“Well, aren't you clever,” I scowled, folding my arms back over my chest.

“Now, you're catching on,” he said, taking another step in my direction. I felt myself begin to seize up, but then felt better when I noticed the faint marks on his face from my attacks. It warmed me to the core knowing I could still make the man bleed.

My body became rigid with tension as Darren closed the distance between us, his long arm stretching out to stroke my freshly cut and styled hair. He released a long slow breath as he stared down at me, that possessive glimmer in his dark eyes that made me want to gouge them out. I still might.

“You're so beautiful,” he said softly. “Do you know that?”

I didn't know what to say as I looked up at him with uncertainty. I didn't care to accept any of his compliments; though, I suppose anything nice coming from him was better than his dominance.

He gazed down at me with the softest smile, his eyes wide with what almost seemed like adoration, and for some reason, my insides began to melt a little. It made me too uncomfortable, so I glanced away to break whatever connection he was trying to force. But then his large warm hand gently gripped my chin and brought my eyes back to his.

“Don't look away,” he spoke softly, his thumb tracing along my jawline as his eyes drove right into my soul.

I felt the exposure of my vulnerability, and I didn't like it. I wanted this to end. I gently placed my palm on his forearm, the same arm that held my chin in place, and almost pleaded with my eyes for him to let me go. His smile seemed to soften even more as his hand released my chin but then slid over my cheek and into my hair. Wrapping his fingers in my tresses, he slowly pulled me in for a gentle but firm kiss on my lips.

His lips were soft, warm ... welcoming. My body bending with his while my hands found themselves pressed against his chest, trying to maintain some distance. Yet the feel of this kiss almost had me wanting more. Butterflies swarmed like a flaming tornado in my stomach as Darren moaned into my mouth, his tongue dipping in while his other hand gripped my hip and pulled me in closer.

I nearly whimpered from his touch, the mixture of fear and heat swirling in my belly, and I didn't like it. His body heat warmed me, the hard muscle under my hands enticing, and his lips sent me into a world I knew I should fear because if I wasn't careful ... I might lose track of my yellow brick road.

When he finally released me, my heart was pounding, my blood was rushing, and I could feel the heat blooming in my core. Fuck. I tried to conceal his effect on me by focusing on his response. It was clear from the hardened length in his pants that he very much enjoyed that. But I seriously hoped he wouldn't act on it.

Finally breaking the connection I so desperately wanted gone, Darren released a heavy breath and looked up ahead of me at the perfect scene behind me.

"Do you like the view?" he asked me.

I turned around to take another look, but I found it very difficult to concentrate when his big arms came down to rest his hands on the railing, trapping me once again. His body enveloped me, and it made me feel uneasy. Darren was so much bigger than anyone I had ever known, which made his presence that much more threatening. I felt like a caged animal being toyed with by a menacing predator. I shook that thought from my head. If anyone was in danger in this situation, it was Darren because I was the snake in the grass waiting for the right moment to strike. I would still have the element of surprise.

"I asked you a question, Jaden," he said darkly.

I shook myself from my train of thought and tried to focus on anything but killing him right now. "It's great," I said quickly. "But I thought you were going to give me a tour." I needed to learn the layout of the house.

"Yes, I did say that."

"And you say you're a man of your word," I prodded. He chuckled as I called him out. He knew I was right.

“That I am. Come on,” he said, taking my hand.

As we got to the bedroom door, I froze and Darren noticed my hesitation.

“What about the range?” I asked quickly as anger started to spread across his face from my sudden defiance.

“It was lengthened the moment I entered the house.”

“Oh,” I said, surprised a little.

“Jaden, as long as I’m home, the range will cover the entire house, but that doesn’t mean you’re allowed to roam it. Not until I can trust you to follow my rules.”

Right. Every privilege had to be earned, didn’t it?

“Noted,” I said with a nod. He then pulled me from my room and commenced the tour.

Chapter Ten

Reality

Darren showed me all around the mansion, keeping my hand in his the entire time. Even when I pulled to get a better look at something, he refused to let go or even let me walk any farther away from him. I felt like a dog on a leash.

The house had about a dozen bedrooms, fourteen bathrooms, and four offices. I learned that my room was on the east wing of the mansion and Darren's was on the west wing. He did not show me which room was his, though. I guess I would have to wait to find out. As we walked through the halls, I found it difficult to keep up with where we were. I had a feeling if I hadn't stayed close to Darren, I would have gotten lost. I also noticed how masculine all the furnishings and decor was, as if the entire house was created in Darren's image. I was glad that my room was lacking in that department.

The upstairs also had a built-in movie theater with lots of comfy couches and chairs. I was allowed to watch any movie or TV show I wanted, and if the selections were lacking, I could make requests. There was even a little snack bar for popcorn.

Every now and then, I would see one or two men walking around the house dressed in black fitted military gear. Seeing them made me a little nervous for some reason, but I made sure Darren didn't catch me staring at them by attempting to look the other way. No need to cause trouble at the moment.

As we went downstairs, I was finally able to take in the large living room with a spectacular view of the ocean from the wall of windows. A massive cobblestone fireplace stood off against the wall with sleek black leather couches, glass coffee tables, a large flat-screen TV, and a white Persian rug completing the scene. The kitchen was a chef's dream with all stainless steel appliances, dark marble countertops, and dark wood cabinets.

There was a basement down the hall that led off from the living room containing a fully stocked bar and kitchen, pool table, entertainment system, another fireplace, and brown leather couches.

Downstairs also contained a weight room with many punching bags, exercise machines, weights, and plenty of mirrors everywhere. There was even an octagonal fighting cage in the corner of the room along with grappling mats covering a good twenty square feet. Damn. As we entered the gym, we passed several men grappling and lifting weights, but they paid no attention to us and Darren paid no attention to them. I guess this was also where his guards trained when they were off duty. Darren showed me the locker room, showers, and sauna that was all attached. As we left, I noticed another door at the opposite end of the room that he had yet to show me.

“What about that door?” I asked. I assumed it was a closet, but I wanted to be sure of everything in this house.

He sighed heavily at me but gave in to my demand.

“I’m only showing you this to put your curiosity at ease.” He tugged me along to the door and stopped right in front of it. “But know this. If I ever catch you in here or lingering at the door for too long, you will be punished severely, do you understand?”

“Yes,” I said a little confused. Jesus, what the fuck was he keeping in there?

He gave me one last warning look, and I knew he was serious. He opened the door with a fingerprint scanner and led me inside, tightening his grip on my hand. Inside was a very barren room with glossy wooden floors, mats, more mirrored walls, and more hanging punching bags. There were also several variations of Wing Chun dummies and at least five cork dart boards screwed into the walls. But then I noticed what was hanging on the wall closest to me and my jaw nearly hit the floor.

Weapons. Lots of them. Not guns or rifles, no, these were weapons for a martial artist and my mouth dropped in envy at the vast selection he had in his possession. There were several sets of katanas strategically placed on the walls and various bo staffs standing tall in a beautiful wooden rack, some for show and some for actual battle. There were even sais, commas, arnis, nunchakus, shurikens and small throwing knives all hanging from the walls. I could feel my hands twitching to get a hold of one of them. It all looked so beautiful and tempting.

“Wow,” I whispered under my breath, taking a small step forward, true appreciation seeping through. “Now, this is impressive.”

Darren coughed, and I was brought back from my trance. I turned to look at him, realizing he had been studying my reaction the entire time.

“Did you ever train with weapons?” he asked in a very serious tone. I thought about lying, but maybe he would believe a partial truth.

“Only a little.” I shrugged. “I’ve had some training with the bo, but that’s about it.”

I had a lot more than “some” training. I had been practicing it since I was eleven years old, and it was one of my favorite weapons. I had dominated in competition with it and hoped none of those videos were online. I had also dabbled a little with the sais and the sword, but that really was the extent of my weapons training. The rest of my life got in the way.

Darren nodded at my answer, thankfully seeming satisfied. “This is where I like to train, and you are not ever to disturb me when I am in here. Do you understand?”

“Yes, I understand.”

I didn't know why he was so nervous about me knowing about this room. Obviously, he did still see me as quite a threat should the right weapon ever come into my hands, but in all honesty, when it came to my escape, I wouldn't be going for a Japanese sword. I'd be going for a goddamn gun.

“But there is one contradiction I can't help but point out,” I dared.

“And what is that,” he asked narrowing his eyes at me. This was his warning stare; I had that much figured out.

“You do see me as a threat. Otherwise, you wouldn't forbid me from this room.”

I didn't know why I was provoking him, but if ever there was an opportunity to build myself up, I would take it, even if it meant Darren's retaliation.

His sigh was heavy and filled with annoyance as he rolled his eyes. He took both of my hands in his and stroked his thumbs over my still bruised knuckles and fingers, examining my freshly manicured nails and lingering on the busted knuckle from punching him in the mouth this morning. I noticed the swelling in his lip had gone down a lot since then.

“These are going to break,” he whispered under his breath.

“Huh?” I replied, confused.

“Okay, Jaden,” he said. “I’m going to indulge the little fantasy you have where you think you can beat me. I’ll warn you right now, you can’t, but I’m fine with letting you try so that you can see for yourself which one of us is the superior fighter. If this is what it will take for you to realize there is no escaping me, then so be it.”

He let go of me and walked to the center of the room, his hands fucking with his phone before taking off his jacket, shirt, and tie and tossing them to the floor by the wall. All he had on now was the black tank top he wore under his clothes and his dress pants and shoes.

“Pick one,” he said, waving his arm to the wall of weapons.

Had I just heard him right? He was really giving me the opportunity to fight him with a weapon? Fuck, this was it. I was finally going to unleash all my skill on this son of a bitch, and I would show him what it meant to be superior.

My confidence shone brighter than the fucking sun as I headed straight for one of the bos and walked into the center of the room. I decided on the weapon I had the most skill with. The thought of beating Darren to death was far too enticing for me to pass up.

The bo I chose was tapered oak and a bit too big for my size, but it was lighter and, therefore, faster. Unfortunately, it wouldn’t hurt Darren as much when I struck him if I had chosen the straight bo, but they were heavier, resulting in slower movements, and I felt I really needed speed for this fight. Typically, I trained with a straight bo staff for strength training, so when I finally switched to a tapered bo, I was lightning fast. Unfortunately, I was also definitely not dressed for battle, but it would have to do. I could adapt.

God, my heart was pumping fast at the thought of finally getting to fight him. Last time had not gone so well, but this time, I would be in much better shape and I had a better weapon. Adrenaline and anxiety raced through my veins and made me feel jumpy. But I was ready. I had so much rage to unleash, and he was going to seriously regret ever taking me from my home and my family.

Darren smiled and grabbed the straight bo staff, and I suddenly felt my anxiety spike. Great. He then came back to stand about ten feet away from me.

“You don’t have to do this if you don’t want to, you know. You can back out now before it’s too late.”

A little giggle escaped my mouth as I rested the bo against my back and pulled my hair into a tight messy bun, never letting my eyes waver from Darren. Once my hair was secure, I took the bo in my hand and spun it around my palm, over my head, behind my back, and up around my neck before letting it twirl back into my hands without missing a beat. I pointed the tip of the bo directly at him.

“I am so gonna fuck you up,” I snarled.

Darren smiled and spun his bo in his hand, flipping it around gracefully over his head and around his body, stopping it the same way I had.

“You had better hope so.”

We then closed the distance between us and I spun my bo over my head gaining momentum and went for a sharp strike at his side. He blocked it easily, deflecting my blow and countering with a strike at my lower body. I dodged and followed through with a pass at his legs, but he blocked that as well.

I could feel each strike and block in my palms as the bos connected, and even though it hurt like hell I was used to it, having trained advanced combat style for many years even though the practice was pretty much dead. I tried to keep my breathing even as I maneuvered around him, the two of us swinging our bos and blocking or dodging each attempted strike. We circled each other now, anticipating the other’s next move.

“Such a little liar,” he tsked.

“Or maybe I’m just a really fast learner,” I countered.

“Not yet,” he said. “But you’re gonna be.”

He charged at me then, and though I deflected, his force caused me to lose my balance and fall back hard on the floor. He swung his bo down on me, but I brought mine up across my chest and blocked it, kicking his knee. He took the hit, stumbling only slightly and brought his bo back down, going straight for my ribs, but I rolled out of the way and swung my bo at him to gain some distance while I took back my bearings.

“Tired yet?” he mocked.

“I’m just warming up.”

“Good. I would hate for you to disappoint me.”

I swung at him this time with so much speed and determination that I actually gave him a good smack on the back and tried to follow through with another blow to his legs, but he moved out of the way. My strike didn’t

appear to have done much, as he just shook it off and came at me again. The strength in his next attack was enough to send me off balance a second time, and I could feel myself getting ready to fall, but as I did, I turned, landing on my hands still gripping the bo. I managed to execute a cartwheel kick, my feet hitting Darren square in the chin and jaw. Absolute perfection.

We bantered back and forth for a few more minutes, but Darren's strength and ferocity never faltered. I had to admit he was good, but so was I. Sweat was pouring down both of our faces and our breathing had become labored as we refused to give in to each other. Suddenly, I started laughing at the audacity of this situation.

"Something funny?" he asked, amused.

"Oh, it's just that you talked such a big game back there, yet I'm still standing." I smiled.

I was provoking him now, testing him, hoping he would make an emotional mistake. I found that happened a lot when it came to the male ego, but he just slowly shook his head at me.

"It really never occurred to you that I was taking it easy on you?"

I stopped and stared at him in total disbelief. He was bluffing. He had to be.

"Are you fucking kidding me?"

"Watch your fucking mouth, Jaden." He glared at me.

"No, fuck you! I think you're full of shit. Otherwise, you would have ended this by now."

"Are we really going to do this again?" he said, rolling his eyes. "Did you learn nothing from the last time you tried to pick a fight with me?"

"I recall that fight being under unreasonable and unfair circumstances," I replied, glaring at him.

"I never said it was fair. But the circumstances are what they are, so get used to them."

"The only thing I'll get used to is ramming this bo down your throat," I seethed.

"Good luck." He laughed wholeheartedly.

"You're so fucking full of yourself, ya know that?"

"If you don't watch your smart mouth, you're going to be full of me in a second," he threatened with that menacing glare of his.

"Try it. See what happens to you."

“Don’t challenge me, Jaden. You’re already going to lose this one. I’d hate to hurt your pride any more than I’m already going to.”

“Like you give a shit about my pride,” I countered.

He laughed at me then. “I suppose that’s true.”

After a moment of silence, I let my words fly. “Just why the fuck am I here, huh? I’m sure you have no problem finding women who are *willing* to be with you.” I was stalling now, but I was trying to regulate my oxygen level and regain some energy.

“You want to talk about that here? Now?”

“Why the hell not? I’d like to hear it before I end you.”

He laughed hard then, and it was pissing me right the fuck off.

“You know, you’re so adorable.” He chuckled. “Like ... a cranky baby tiger, all cute and fierce at the same time ... but never a real threat,” he ended darkly.

Now, he was just insulting me. A baby tiger? Really?

“I wouldn’t patronize me if I were you,” I shot back at him.

He was serious now. “You’d better get used to it, little girl. For the rest of your life, that’s all you’re going to know.”

“Don’t count on it,” I dejected.

“You see, this is why I chose you,” he said, casually waving his free hand in my direction. “Yes, you’re right, I can have any woman I want, and believe me, I have had many women, but none of the hours I’ve spent with them can compare to a single moment spent with you. They can never give me what you can, what you *will* give me. I can’t stand weakness, Jaden, and that’s what all those other women have been. Weak. I need someone strong, someone worth the fight, someone I can appreciate and respect. After everything I’ve put you through, you’re still able to persevere, and I love that about you.”

He had to be fucking joking. Yes, I was a strong person and I was very aware of that, but he wasn’t presenting all the facts that were becoming so obvious to me. He might love my strength, but only because it made the satisfaction all the more sweeter when he tore it down and replaced it with fear. Fear of him. I found it very hard to believe I was the only candidate in this entire world to fill that position for him.

“You’re gonna tell me that out of the billions of women on this godforsaken planet, you couldn’t find a single one who was in any way like me?”

“Not a single one,” he said, shaking his head slightly.”

“Maybe you should have stopped shopping down Barbie Boulevard then.”

He chuckled at that one. “Maybe, but then you just happened to fall right into my lap. Search over.”

“I didn’t fall anywhere. I was taken, you asshole!”

“And look how fortunate that turned out to be.”

“God, you are such a self-righteous piece of shit,” I said and started waving my bo back and forth in figure eights on either side of my body. I was ready to finish this.

“You’re gonna regret that,” he said, now moving his bo back and forth over his hand.

I increased the speed of my figure eights, brought the bo up over my head, and swung hard at his neck. He blocked and the energy transfer made my hands throb as they absorbed the shock. Suddenly, his speed increased, and I found myself working harder to block and dodge his attacks. My offense was starting to diminish, as I had no time to counterattack; all I had time for was to block each never-ending blow. Fuck, he really had been holding back.

I pushed my aggression further and tried to throw more strikes at him, but the strength in his deflection was enough to practically consider it a strike. I couldn’t believe the speed he had while wielding a heavy bo. It pissed me off that he was strong enough to manage such speedy techniques. Stupid fucker.

After a few short minutes, I found myself getting tired, and I did everything I could to deflect and stall his attacks, but he was relentless in his assault. Finally, his bo smacked hard against my back, then again on my stomach, and finally at my thighs. I cried out at the contact, the pain radiating through my body, but shook it off as he continued to circle me. He came at me again with such speed, I almost didn’t block the blow that would have landed at my ribs, but then he switched it up and threw a reverse kick into my side, sending me flying to the ground. Before I allowed myself to dwell on the pain, I rolled up from the floor and grabbed at my now pulsing ribcage.

“Give up yet?” he said, striding toward me.”

I was hurting, but I wasn't done fighting. I never would be.

“Stupid question,” I groaned aloud.

“Stupid answer,” he growled.

I dodged another strike, ducking under his latest swing at my head before deflecting again, and it took so much more strength to muster his blows. My energy was depleting, and I hated that he seemed so in control of himself, even though he was sweating and breathing heavy.

“Sorry, love, but I think it’s time to finish this.”

He closed the distance and swung. I redirected, but as I countered and brought the bo down to his head, he grabbed the tip of my bo and held it in place. I instantly pulled, but it remained clutched in his hand while a twisted smile crept across his face. Son of a bitch. I didn't wait another second before kicking him right in the gut, but he pulled my bo down and elbowed me right in the temple.

I stumbled back, and he ripped the bo out of my hands and swung at my legs hard, tripping me and causing me to fall backward onto my back. My head was spinning from the blow, but I rolled over and crawled away from Darren, determined to stand back up. I was exhausted, and it suddenly occurred that he was beating me.

No, no, no! This was my chance, and I was losing!

“I admire your strength, Jaden, but it’s time to surrender,” he said, slowly walking toward me, dropping both bos to the floor. “You're finished.”

“No,” I growled, and forced my body to complete a perfect kip-up, bringing me back to my feet, my hands at the ready. “I’m not done.” My body was throbbing in pain, but I would never let him see it.

“Yes, you are. Look at you. Did you really think you could ever compete with someone like me? You barely even come up to my shoulder, for fuck’s sake.”

I snarled at him. “You and I both know that size doesn’t mean shit in a fight. I think you could stand to give me a little more credit than that. You are sweating, after all.”

A cool evil chuckle vibrated up his throat as he watched me and it made the scowl on my face only grow wider.

“As much as I would love to give you all the credit in the world, Jaden, I unfortunately can only give you so much. You’re impressive, there’s no doubt about that. You’re even better than some of my own men. But none of that matters because in the end, there’s only one person you

have to get through, and that's me. So if you think size doesn't matter here ... you're going to have to prove it to me."

I gave him a knowing smirk.

Challenge accepted.

His last comment somehow managed to summon my last bit of energy because when Darren stepped toward me, I threw a reverse hook kick at his face, following through with a roundhouse kick when he dodged the hook. But before my last kick touched the ground, he thrust his open palm straight into my chest, knocking the wind from my lungs, and sent me crashing to the floor, tears involuntarily peeking out from my lids.

Fear crept into me now as I coughed up the air that no longer existed in my lungs. I was done. I could feel it, but I didn't want to be. I wanted to keep fighting, but I had nothing left. Even as I tried to rise from the floor, my body refused to let me.

What would Darren do to me when my body could no longer sustain his attacks? Would he just hurt me more? Rub it in my face? Make me admit more self-damaging things I didn't want believe? I hated him so much. Hated him for his strength. For his speed. For his size. But what I hated him most for was his ability to make me feel like I was nothing. Like no matter what I did, it wouldn't even put a dent in him. I probably couldn't even compare to his shadow.

Darren squatted over me then, resting his forearms on his knees. "That was a good try, Jaden, but you and I both know who the victor is."

"Fuck. Off," I said, trying to roll and get back up, but he pressed my shoulder back down and slapped my face hard.

The shock sent splinters into my stomach, and my cheek screamed as I could feel the heat of my blood rushing to the point of contact. He grabbed my throat and lifted my head from the floor to his face.

"I've had just about enough of that disrespectful little mouth of yours. You lost, Jaden, just as I said you would. However much a threat you think you are, you are nothing compared to me. I am the only threat there is now, so I suggest you start to accept your place if you want to survive my wrath."

I just glowered at him, so pissed at his words that all I wanted to do was scream. His grip on my throat tightened even more as he cut off all my oxygen. My hands clutched at his wrist to hold myself up to prevent further choking.

“I could literally crush you, Jaden,” he snarled through clenched teeth. “It would be so easy, like snapping a twig. That’s how much of a threat you are to me. No matter how hard you try or how much you train, you will never beat me. There is no escaping me, so stop fighting it. You belong to me, little girl, and now, I’m finally gonna take what’s mine.”

Releasing my throat, he flipped me over onto my front, reached under my dress and ripped my thong from my hips. Terror filled my heart as I fought to get him off me, but my body was completely drained off all energy.

“No! Get off me!”

He pressed his heavy palm into my back, and I could hear him unzipping his pants. The tears started coming then, and I couldn’t control them as they streamed silently down my swollen face. He reached around the front of my body and grabbed roughly at my pussy, practically lifting my hips from the floor. I cried out at his violent touch as his large fingers slid over my clit. I pressed my knees together and squeezed my thighs shut, attempting to bar him from entry. He then smacked my ass so hard I momentarily lost all concentration as the pain electrocuted through my still sore skin.

That little distraction gave him enough time to spread my legs with his knee and place his body between them, keeping them wide open for him. Darren was still rubbing my clit and I could feel my body start to surrender to his touch, even as my mind wouldn’t. Leaning over me and taking my hips in his hands, I could feel the head of his dick pressing at my entrance.

“You lost, my dear, and now, I’m gonna claim my prize.”

He didn’t wait another second before driving into me with such force I would have been thrust several feet forward had he not been holding on to my hips. Pain and pleasure exploded inside me as I fought with my body to relax under him. I knew the tenser I was, the greater the pain would be.

“Fuck, I’ve waited way too long for this,” he moaned.

He pumped himself into me hard and fast, and it didn’t take long for my core to become extremely swollen and sore. My body rocked back and forth under his, pressing me roughly into the hard floor, and the horrible sound of his grunts echoed through my ears. There was nothing left for me to do but wait for it to be over.

Darren then flipped me over onto my back, and I immediately brought my hands up to scratch his eyes out with my freshly manicured claws. Of course, he expected it and took my wrists in his hands and pinned them down at either side of my head. With nothing left in me, the only thing I could do was close my eyes and wait for him to finish.

“Look at me, Jaden,” he ordered me as he slowed his thrusts.

I shook my head and kept my eyes closed even tighter. I couldn't face him. Couldn't deal with the reality that he had won and was now proving it to me. His next thrust was so forceful, it felt like a direct punch to my cervix, and I cried out in pain, involuntarily opening my eyes to the ceiling.

“I said look at me!” Darren snarled, switching my wrists in one hand above my head while his other clutched my jaw in a tight grip, forcing my eyes back to his. I glared at him with enough fury to cause an atomic explosion, but he was less than impressed. “Who do you belong to, Jaden?” he sneered down at me, smiling in the cruelest way.

I looked away from him again, attempting to fight with what little energy I had left, but there was no use. He was just too big and too strong. I groaned under his weight as he pressed into me, fighting with only mental capacity now, but it was becoming pointless.

Darren brought his face down to mine so the only thing I could see was the dark ocean of his eyes that drowned me under his penetrating stare. It made my stomach clench into tiny knots as I attempted to avoid him.

“I asked you a question, little girl,” he growled, tightening his grip on my jaw and wrists. “Tell me who you belong to or I will continue to drag this out until you do.”

Darren turned my head to the side and licked a slow devious path up my neck with his tongue as he continued his short deliberate thrusts into me. “And you should know ... I can go all day,” he whispered into my ear.

More tears spilled out down the side of my cheeks and pooled into my hair. I couldn't admit it to him, even though there was no argument about it. Saying those words would never hurt more than they would right now. But I desperately wanted this to be over.

“I belong to you,” I whispered through clenched teeth.

“That's my girl,” Darren drawled with approval, rubbing his nose up the column of my throat.

He then picked up his pace, and I could feel him getting ready to finish. With a loud roaring grunt, he shot his entire load into me and

growled as his orgasm released.

He breathed a long satisfied sigh as he pulled out, and I could feel the small drips of his cum seep down my leg. He let go of my wrists and I just rolled over onto my side, curling into myself, beaten and broken down. I felt like nothing; like I was worth nothing, and I feared that this was what my life would be like for the rest of my days. My pussy throbbed in pain as silent tears spilled from my eyes down my face and I just wanted to die right then and there.

Darren stood over me, and I was sure he felt so proud of what he had done. Beaten and raped his defiant little slave girl; showed her who was boss. Let her prove to her own self that she had no shot of ever defeating him simply because she was smaller and weaker.

He was trying to break me down, destroy my confidence, and destroy everything about me that he deemed unfitting. I couldn't let him break me. I wouldn't let him win. I had to keep up my fight long enough for him to believe he truly had broken me. And then, when he thought he had me completely under his will, I would strike.

"Get up, Jaden," he said calmly. I moaned in protest; I didn't think I had the strength to lift a single limb. "Now."

I slowly rolled over to my stomach, and one by one, I pressed my elbows in and pushed against the floor with all my might. My body felt like it weighed a thousand pounds as I managed to lift just my upper body. Tired of waiting any longer for me to obey him, Darren reached down, grabbed my hair, and yanked me to my feet.

"When I tell you to do something, you say 'yes, Darren' and you fucking do it. I don't give a shit what you feel like," he roared, one arm around my waist as he clutched me to his chest and dragged me to the door.

Leaving the gym, he pulled me down the hall and stopped at a door. After he had unlocked it with a key code, he dragged me down a set of carpeted stairs. It felt like we were going into a separate basement. He entered another door, flicked a light on, and before me was a room very similar to the one Darren had punished me in back at the warehouse. He had his very own playroom. Motherfucker.

However, one thing was specifically different about this room. In the far right corner toward the back of the room was a long black cage. It was smaller and the bars were thicker than the ones at the warehouse, and there was no padding in this one at all.

Darren then grabbed the back of my head, gripping more of my hair and pushed me toward the cage. No, no, no, no fucking way! I wasn't going back in a cage!

"No! Please, Darren, don't!" I pleaded.

"No?" he snarled turning to me. "Now you're gonna tell me no? You don't *ever* get to tell me no. I've told you this already. That word no longer exists in your vocabulary." He shoved me to the ground in front of the open cage. "Now, get the fuck in there."

My body shook in uncontrollable fear as I crawled my way into the cold, black cage. I turned and sat against the back end of it while Darren crouched down and locked it.

"Before I go," he said, standing and leaning over the cage. "I want to leave you with a little bit of information to dwell on for a while—what my real intentions are." I listened very intently now, almost anxious to hear what he was about to say. "You see, I have big plans for you, Jaden, much bigger than you may be ready for, but in time, you will be. I'm not just looking for someone to bury my dick in. I'm looking for my companion in life. When I decide the time is right, I will take you as my wife and you will bear my children. And I expect many sons from you."

I sat frozen in place, unable to breathe, unable to blink. All I could feel was the icy fear that spread over my entire body, chilling me to the bone. This could not be happening.

"Now, when I come back here." He pointed at me. "I expect a whole new attitude from you." Then he got up, turned off the lights, and left me alone in the dark.

Chapter Eleven

Checked

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God-fucking-dammit, she was so perfect; stubborn, but perfect. Jaden had so much fight in her, and I loved every bit of it. I loved it even more when I snuffed it out of her and brought her to heel. She was the perfect combination of defiance and fear all wrapped up in the sexiest little package I could have ever asked for. And she was absolutely driving me wild.

This morning had been a huge turn-on, even though I was pissed at how she arrived, but the end result was just as exciting. I wanted to bury myself in her so deep I'd get lost, but I wanted to wait, and it was so worth it. I had forgotten how fast she was when she managed to land that punch right at my mouth. I wasn't used to women like her, but I loved her skill; it made fighting with her so much more exciting.

Even her bōjutsu skills were entertaining. It was one thing to perform, but it was another to fight, and not many trained like she and I obviously had. She was so full of surprises, and I couldn't wait to find more.

After I had left her in her cage, I headed toward my security room on the first floor. I knew the cage would be a sure way to get Jaden's attention as defying me meant consequences she would seriously want to avoid.

I opened the door to find Scott sitting at the desk containing all the computer monitors that displayed the feed from the cameras around the estate. All of our guns and ammunition filled the cages connected to the walls; the server containing all the auction history, buyer information, and acquisitions stood in the back of the room with special provisions to keep it secured from any potential threats.

This was a secret tool of mine if a business partner ever tried to fuck me over. I had a good majority of their illegal activity, and not only would they receive a bullet from me, but their families would also get to know all

their dirty little secrets. There was no connection to me, of course, but I liked having an extra weight over their heads just in case.

Scott glanced over at me while he rested his chin in the palm of his hand. A smirk was ready to form on his face as I walked over.

“What’s she doing?” I asked and sat down on the second chair next to him.

“Shivering,” he replied without looking at me.

I stared at the monitor and noticed Jaden had, in fact, curled into herself, her knees tucked to her chest and her arms hiding inside her dress as she laid on her side.

I relaxed back and stared some more, watching her attempt to keep warm to no avail. If she were looking for warmth or comfort in that cage, she wouldn’t find it. I purposely made sure that metal stayed cold by keeping the temperature down there an extra ten degrees below the upstairs temperature. I wanted her to need my body heat when I finally let her out so that she would have no choice but to melt into me instead of cringing away. I planned to get inside her head that way. Punish her and then comfort her afterward. I knew there was no way her mind and body would deny her comfort if it was needed and I presented it.

“She’s one hell of a fighter,” Scott said, breaking my train of thought. “I have to give her that.”

“Yeah, she does have some skill,” I replied. “But it’s nothing I need to worry about. I can handle her just fine.”

“I bet she could kick Dominick’s ass, though.” Scott laughed.

I chuckled at that, too. My youngest brother was twenty-two, and even though he was six foot one and one hundred and sixty pounds, he still wasn’t much of a fighter. I had been training him for as long as I could remember, but he was a little busy running the clubs in Vegas and having fun with girls to bother keeping up with it. He knew enough to keep himself out of trouble, but his skill wasn’t where I wanted it to be.

“Probably,” I joked. “Have you heard from Dan?”

“Last I checked he was still waiting to hear back from Juan.”

I nodded. My middle brother, Daniel, was handling a shipment of firearms for me in Panama. He had been waiting for our buyer, who was relatively new to the game, to get the cash cleared, but this shit was taking too long and it was making me nervous. Normally, I didn’t deal with new meat in the market, but I was doing it for a business associate who had a

connection I was looking for that would work well for me in the future. These shitheads had better not fuck this deal up because if anything happened to my brother down there, there would be a shitstorm waiting for that cartel.

“I’m gonna hit the gym,” I said standing up. “Let me know if you hear from Dan.”

“Yep,” Scott replied.

I left Scott and headed to my room to change out of my now fucked-up black slacks and traded them for some track pants and my Adidas. Jogging down the stairs, I walked into the gym, turned on some Limp Bizkit, wrapped my hands, skipped the gloves, and went straight for the heavy bag. I still had so much energy pent-up after that nice little battle with Jaden, and I wanted to take it out on something that wouldn’t break in half when I was done with it.

Over and over, I slammed my fists into the bag, sending it flying all over the place while I circled it. Jab after jab, hook after hook, I kicked and pounded the bag until my muscles ached and my arms and legs grew heavy. But even then, I wasn’t satisfied.

Unwrapping my hands, I headed over to the treadmill and ran until I lost track of time. With every step, Jaden lingered on my mind like an addiction I couldn’t fight. I didn’t know how to bring her to her knees without breaking her fully. I feared that if she became too obedient, she would bore me. I needed to keep her fight alive, all the while keeping her fear of me just as strong. Her fear and defiance turned me on in a way I had never experienced. I knew I loved the challenge in all of this, and now that I had exposed my true intentions, I wondered if Jaden would fight me even harder. I had just pocketed her reproductive rights, after all.

Thinking about Jaden as my wife had me thinking of all kinds of different scenarios in my head and about how well she’d fit into the role. Seeing her domesticated, taking care of my children and me had my insides warm, and I honestly liked the idea. And then when bedtime came, she’d fall right back into my feisty little slut when I’d tie her to our bed and fuck her until her eyes rolled into the back of her head ... and then she’d beg for more and I’d oblige.

I never thought of myself as being much of a family man, but when you reach a certain age, things begin to change and your cravings evolve into something far more important—leaving a legacy behind. Dan

announced he and his wife of two years were pregnant, and for some reason, that got the ball rolling for me. The idea that I would be Uncle Darren in the next five months had me nervous as shit. This would be the first baby from our generation, and I didn't know yet how to correctly introduce a child into this life. I knew my mom fought to have my brothers and I spared, but she never had much control over our upbringing, and she had even less influence after she died. My dad was hard as shit on us, but it made me the man I was today, and I was good with that.

My dad taught me almost everything I knew about the business, about life, and how and when to take it. I killed for the first time when I was ten thanks to him. I shot a drug dealer who owed my father money right in the head in this very house. I never even blinked. I was calm and collected, and when it was over, I walked out into the trees and threw up all over the bushes where my father couldn't see.

Later that night, my dad told me he was proud of me, and I was ecstatic because that was all I ever wanted to do. Young boys always seek approval from their fathers, and that was what my sons would seek from me, so I needed to be prepared for when their time finally came ... but I needed to tame their mother first.

Seven miles later, I finally felt better, got off the treadmill, and headed upstairs for a quick shower. I then changed into a pair of jeans and a black t-shirt and made my way down to the basement to collect my naughty little princess from her cage. Three hours in that cold-ass basement should have swayed some sense into her by now.

~*~

I was fucking freezing and dehydrated as hell. I had been in this tiny cage for God knew how long—hours, at least. I had been a hot sweaty mess at first, but the cold metal cage saw to change that. I pulled my hair out of my messy knot in hopes it might help to warm me, but it did very little. Eventually, I had fallen asleep, exhaustion finally taking over as I laid on my side with my arms inside my dress, huddling into myself for warmth. To my surprise, not a single nail from my manicure had broken. They must have been forged out of Adamantium or something.

I woke up some time later to find my body shaking rapidly as it failed to keep warm, and it was so dark, I couldn't even see my own hand in front

of my face. My thighs were sticky and gross from Darren's earlier display of physical dominance. I had never been more grateful for that birth control implant from the warehouse than right at this moment.

The whole time, I had been driving myself crazy with fear at the thought of being married to this monster and giving him little baby monsters to raise. It made me sick to my stomach, and I couldn't stop the tears that fell from my lids in heavy drops. This was not the life I wanted to live, not the life I thought I was destined for. I couldn't let him do this to me, but I didn't know what to do now. He was so much bigger and stronger than I was, and no amount of training would matter against him. I would need to figure something else out. If I let him think he had broken me, he would most likely speed up the "plans" he had for me, and I wasn't ready for that. I had to get my shit together first.

As I buried my freezing cold nose into my clothing, I knew Darren was watching me; I knew there was a camera somewhere, no way there wouldn't be. He was probably enjoying the sight of my suffering knowing I was in his control. I wondered how long he would leave me down here.

During my little confinement, I now had plenty of time to think and reflect. Though my entire body was sore and my aching core still throbbed, I decided I could either lie here and pity myself or I could plot Darren's destruction. The problem was I didn't have enough reliable information at my disposal. I would need to know absolutely everything before I could strike.

Darren had family, and he already warned me of the vendetta that would ensue should I ever become successful in his death. How the fuck was I going to get around that? I'd somehow have to take his empire down first and then bury Darren in the ashes. Whatever decision I made would inadvertently affect my family if I didn't execute my escape with absolute success. I couldn't leave a single stone unturned. Like an entire infestation of termites, every last member of the colony had to be eliminated. I just had no idea how I would do it.

But, God, what if I failed? What if Darren caught me plotting or foiled my attempt? How bad would he punish me? I had a strong feeling my family would be the direct recipient of my punishment. I couldn't let that happen. I couldn't fail. I had to strategize every scenario and plot accordingly. But in order to do that, I needed to get inside his head. I needed to know everything about him. I needed to get him to let his guard

down and fall for me. He had to feel comfortable enough to trust me, to know I wasn't going to try to run from him anymore. I would have to make him believe it so that when the time finally presented itself, when I had all the variables to the equation, I would strike and succeed with flying fucking colors.

Some time later, I heard the door open and I braced my arm over my eyes to shield them from the brightness of the light. Finally, Darren's face came into view, and he crouched down next to the cage.

"Are you ready to behave now?" he asked me.

I nodded, as I remained where I was in the cage. He tilted his head to the side and eyed me as if waiting for something.

"Yes, Darren," I finally croaked out, my mouth and throat dry from my earlier exertion.

"Good girl," he replied unlocking the cage. He stepped aside and gestured for me to come out.

I pushed myself from the floor of the cage; my muscles strained and ached from my position and earlier battle with him as I crawled out. The pain between my legs had subsided slightly, but I was still terribly sore from his violent onslaught. Darren helped me stand while I kept my eyes on the floor. I was now an array of emotions, fear trembling through my body, anger radiating in my chest, but a newfound hope rose front and center.

Placing his hand around to my lower back, Darren pulled me against him and held me in a tight embrace. I didn't even fight it as I graciously accepted the warmth that came off him in waves, and I shivered as my body reacted to the change in temperature. His hands caressed my back, soothing it gently as I trembled, and I found it strange how quickly I allowed myself to become comfortable.

I hated this man with my entire being, but here he was, gentle as can be. I wanted to cry for accepting his sudden act of kindness, but I honestly needed it. He sighed as my body melted into his and I buried my nose in his chest to warm my face. I then noticed he had changed his clothes since our battle. He was now wearing a black cotton t-shirt and what felt like a pair of jeans.

"You know ... I didn't enjoy having to put you down here. I much rather prefer you to be at my side, but you left me no choice. You need to learn who is in control, Jaden. Do you understand now?"

"Yes," I whispered. I could barely speak.

“Yes, what?”

“Yes, Darren,” I tried to clarify.

“Good. Now, let’s get you cleaned up. It’s past dinnertime”

He kept a heavy arm around my hips as he walked me into a nearby bathroom. I was grateful for his support, as I didn’t think I could keep up with his pace for once.

“Sit,” he said, pointing at the toilet. I gently sat down, attempting to hide the wince from the throb between my legs that blossomed once more from the pressure. I immediately leaned over and rested my head in my hands, trying to relax while Darren drew a bath next to me.

I could hear him rummaging throughout the bathroom, pouring shit into the water. The scent of eucalyptus filled my nose, calming me. I honestly loved that smell. When the tub was filled, I listened as Darren removed his clothes and took my hand to pull me up. He lifted my dress up over my head and removed my bra with the simplest pinch of his fingers. I had no idea what became of the thong I had worn earlier. Then, to my protest, he lifted me in his arms and placed us both in the scented hot water. My body jerked from the temperature, but after a few seconds, I settled easily.

Darren placed me between his legs and leaned me back against his chest. My skin crawled as my bare body touched his. I wanted nothing more than to inch away until I was completely on the other side, but I knew that wasn’t going to happen.

“Relax,” he said, his hands rubbing my arms to release the tension in my muscles.

Eventually, I just gave up my fight and sank against him. I was exhausted, defeated, and sore. I just wanted to curl up in a giant soft blanket and disappear from the world. I had never been more embarrassed in all my life. I had lost. I had fucking lost, and now, here he was subtly claiming his victory over me. I wasn’t going to fight him anymore today, now that I knew what he was capable of. I would have to change my strategy—find a weakness and use it to my advantage somehow.

“Sit up,” he suddenly said, and I allowed him to help me return to an upright sitting position. He then grabbed a pitcher from the edge of the tub, dipped it in the water, and gently poured it over my head. The warm water poured down over my body, completely drenching me and warming me all over. He then took some shampoo and began rubbing it into my hair.

I wrapped my arms around my knees as Darren gently massaged my scalp with his strong fingers. It felt so good I nearly moaned. When he was satisfied, he rinsed my hair several times until it was soap-free before slathering my ends in conditioner. He then pulled me back by my shoulders to rest against him again. He poured more soap into his hands and began to massage and clean the rest of my body.

He started with my shoulders, then down my arms, rubbing in slow circles, until he reached my hands, massaging them and being especially gentle around my knuckles, which were still bruised. My internal struggle was beyond real as I fought with myself not to cringe away from him. I didn't want him to touch me in the slightest, not after what he had just done to me earlier, but I had to get over my fear of him. I had to pretend it was okay. I don't know how, but by some miracle, I was able to relax and somewhat enjoy what he was doing to me. It must have been the eucalyptus.

Eventually, his soapy hands found their way to my chest, and I immediately tensed and allowed a small vocal protest to slip past my lips.

"Stop," he said lightly, yet I could not mistake the annoyance in his voice.

I closed my eyes, biting my lip as he handled my breasts; not in a sexual way, but simply just to clean them. His touch lasted only a few seconds before they made their way down my torso and stopped at my hips. His hands grazed up and down from my ribs to my hips, over my abs and back. His trail sent a chill through me even though I was nearly neck deep in hot water.

And then his hands found my legs. He started with the outside of my thighs and worked his way down my calves and to my ankles. Eventually, he made his way back up on the inside of my legs, and my stomach began to churn with knots, fearing that he may be seconds away from his next helping of my body.

When his hands found their way to my inner thighs, I closed my knees, hoping to deter him, but that was pointless. Darren just slid his hands back between my thighs and parted them with ease.

I made another small verbal protesting moan, but he just softly shushed me.

"Relax," he said and kissed me on the side of the head.

Instead of focusing on relaxing, I tried to focus on falling asleep. I was so tired, and I probably could have allowed myself to fall asleep against him in the tub, but with his venturing hands, it was a little difficult to accomplish.

His hands continued to lightly rub back and forth until he was massaging the juncture of my legs. Like some goddamn fucked-up weed, I felt my core begin to bloom, and it made me cringe inside that my body would want any further touch from him down there.

His hands veered closer and closer to my outer lips, and when he finally grazed it, I couldn't take it anymore. Both my hands went for his wrists, stopping him in his tracks.

"Please," I pleaded.

"Jaden," he prompted, that dangerous warning in his voice again that twisted my stomach.

"It still hurts so much," I nearly whimpered. I hated how pathetic I sounded, but I needed to know if he was capable of granting mercy if I milked him for it.

I felt him sigh heavily behind me. For a moment, I thought he was going to lecture me about obedience, but instead, his arms gently snaked behind my legs and pulled me closer to him. With his chin resting on the top of my head, I became a ball in his arms, pressed tightly against his chest.

And then the unthinkable happened, something I didn't think I would ever do in front of him. I started to cry. My shoulders quaked and my body shook as tears began to spill from my eyes. I buried my face into my knees in an attempt to hide my weakness from Darren since he only valued strength, but my crying was beyond obvious. I wasn't even sure why I was crying, but the realization of losing to him and living with it was too much for my pride to handle. I was embarrassed. Shameful. Weak. At this rate, Darren would eat me alive.

But instead of scolding me or lashing out, Darren remained silent, clutching me tightly to him as his hands rubbed against my skin as a means of comfort. He planted little kisses on my head as he tried to shush me, lulling me into a passive trance, and I could feel myself giving in. My cries were silent as hot tears poured down my face and dripped into the bathwater, mixing my sorrow with survival.

I wanted to ask him so many questions; I needed to know so many answers. How did he get this way? What horrible thing had happened to him to make him the monster he was today? And the mystery he was now. He could have left me there, could have told me to grow a pair, but instead, he held me close and let me cry. It was confusing, but I was too tired to solve Darren's riddles. I just wanted to go to sleep and pretend this day never happened.

Eventually, I picked my head up, rubbed my face, and took a deep breath, releasing whatever grief I had left and deciding to move on with my life. I had lost but one lowly battle; I had not yet lost the war.

"Better?" Darren asked me as if he knew allowing me to cry would make me feel better. I found it strange that he cared at all.

"Yes." I sniffled.

"Good," he said, kissing my temple.

He then took the pitcher, refilled it and dumped it over my head once more. He not only washed away the tears from my face, but he also washed away my fire. The flame that had burned so hot with vengeance was now reduced to nothing but glowing embers. I decided to let it go and live to fight another day.

Once he'd fully rinsed me, the conditioner gone from my hair and my face tear and make-up free, Darren pulled the plug from the tub and stepped out. I kept my eyes on the water as it slowly swirled down the drain, taking my fight with it.

"Come on," Darren urged.

I turned my head to find him with one towel wrapped around his waist while he held another one sprawled out in his hands. God, he had an amazing body, and it looked even better when it was wet, even with all the obvious battle scars. I slowly stood from the draining water and stepped out of the giant tub, allowing Darren to wrap me in the massive towel that fell to my ankles.

I snuggled into the towel, drying my face when Darren turned me to continue drying my body himself.

"Lean forward," he said, grabbing another smaller towel from the rack against the wall. I did as he said, clutching my towel to my body to hide from him while he began to dry my hair. When he was done, I pushed my hair back with my fingers, trying to get it out of my face and even out some knots.

Darren then came toward me, his muscled chest glistening with a few drops of water that fell from his hair, and for whatever reason I suddenly wanted to connect the dots.

“Not a word of protest, you understand me?” He pointed at me, an intense glare shooting from his dark hooded eyes.

Confused, I became lost for words. Darren took that as a sign of my compliance, bent down, and lifted me to his chest.

I gasped in shock and slight protest. I fucking hated being carried, especially when Darren did it because he made me feel like some tiny-ass doll. He carried me through the bedroom, up the stairs, through the hallway, back up the main stairway, and finally stopped in front of my bedroom door, all the while wearing nothing but a towel. His breathing pattern hadn’t even changed from how obviously fit he was. Darren somehow managed to open the door and carry me inside. He set me down on the floor by the bed, pulled back my covers, and ushered me in, but not before taking my wet towel from me.

I slid my naked body under the covers and he pulled them up to my chin like some kind of gentleman. There was then a knock at my door. Darren was already at the doorway by the time I looked over to see that it was a short older man with a thick white mustache, white hair, and round belly, wearing a dirty white apron and holding a silver tray. Darren took the tray, nodded at the man, and then shut the door with his foot. He must have been Pascal.

Darren walked over to my bedside and set the tray down on the nightstand.

“You missed your dinner,” he said plainly. “Eat this and I’ll let you go to bed.”

I looked over at the tray that contained a small bowl of soup and a very large glass of water. I wasn’t in the mood to eat, but the soup smelled like chicken noodle and I was kind of hungry. I could handle some soup.

I sat up, tucking the covers under my arms so that the sheet would remain in place to cover my breasts and took the bowl from the tray. Darren sat at the end of the bed, watching me intently as I scooped up the soup in what I could only describe as an actual ladle and gave it a small blow to cool it down before taking a sip. I almost moaned aloud; it was that fucking good. A smirk of approval began to form on Darren’s face as he watched me

finish the entire bowl and set it back down on the tray. I then completely downed the entire glass of water and set it next to the bowl.

Darren stood and examined my bowl.

“Holy shit, you actually finished something?” he said amused.

“They’ll write about it in history books.” I yawned as I laid myself down onto the pillows.

His smile was genuine when he bent down and placed his hand against my cheek. It was warm and took up the entire right side of my face. I stared up at him with big doe eyes, losing myself in the deep blue of his own. Somehow, his gaze had grown softer, and suddenly, I didn’t feel so scared. He then broke the connection and kissed my forehead.

“Go to sleep, princess. I’ll see you in the morning ... with a whole new attitude,” he said, the final part a warning.

I nodded slightly before sinking further into my pillows and burying myself under the sheets. I heard Darren collect my tray and walk out of the room, gently shutting the door behind him. I rolled over and looked at the clock. It was only 8:30 p.m. A little early for me to go to bed, but I was exhausted and had had enough of the day already. I closed my eyes and burrowed deep into the bed for some quiet solitude.

Chapter Twelve

Negotiate

Smack ... smack, smack ... SMACK. Sounds. Wooden sounds clashing against each other. Strikes—bo strikes. Pain. Screaming. Grunting. Blood. And then Darren's stormy gaze as he took my body from me. Over and over again.

I jolted from my bed, my breath coming in and out in heavy gusts, sweat covering my face and mixing with my hair while my hands flew out in front of me at the ready. Adrenaline and fear spiked through my veins as I tried to calm my heartbeat from the throes of the nightmare. I looked around the room, frantically searching for intruders. Thankfully, I found none, only noticing the soft light that peered through the windows. It must still be early morning. Glancing over at the clock, my thoughts were correct as it read 7:32 in the morning.

I took a single deep breath and sat up, resting my elbows on my raised knees, and placed my head in my hands. I needed to calm down. I closed my eyes and tried to breathe slowly through my nose, but all I could see was the fight I had with Darren in his training room—the fight that I lost. All I could hear were the sounds of our bos crashing against each other; the sound echoed in my ears, reminding me of my failure. I should have won that fight, should have been able to end him right then and there, but he was just too fucking good. He was better than I was.

What the fuck were the odds of being bought by someone who trained harder than I did? Who was obviously a better fighter than I was? I really hit the motherfucking jackpot of Murphy's Law.

I furiously tossed the sheets off my naked body, threw on a white silk robe, and walked out onto my balcony, deciding on some fresh air to clear my head. I stepped out onto the cement in my bare feet, the cold stone waking me with every step. The sun was beginning to rise, and it was already painting the sky with beautiful pale pinks, purples, and yellows. Of all the rooms in the house, I really did love the view from my room. I would

have a perfect show of the sunset and sunrise every day ... but the thought of that only made my heart grow heavy.

I sat down on the cushioned bench and continued to gaze out at the water. The birds were chirping away to their morning song while the seagulls sang their own tune above the water. It was peaceful, serene ... and a total fucking lie. This was not a place of tranquility. This was a prison—my prison—and nothing more. With Darren as my warden, I didn't know exactly how my future would play out here, but now that I knew what he expected of me, I could learn to evolve.

I thought about the family he wanted to have with me. The fact he wanted me as his wife had me all sorts of confused, but I quickly realized it didn't matter what Darren thought or wanted because none of that was happening. This situation was only temporary.

Eventually, I would find a way out. I was determined and fierce, but the one thing I needed to learn most was patience. I wasn't going to escape him overnight. I probably wasn't going to escape him this month ... or even this year. Escape might not even be a one-time thing; it might come down to a few attempts here and there before I finally figured it out. But I feared Darren's retribution. I was afraid of what he might do to my family. If I wanted my compliance, then that was certainly how I would do it. Hell, that was how he'd gotten to me back at the warehouse with Kayla, but she wasn't a part of the equation anymore. My family was my Kryptonite now, and Darren had already threatened one of the most important members of that family. I had so much to lose, and he only had everything to gain.

I would have to remove my family from the equation. Thankfully, my family was small so hiding them might not be terribly difficult. I just didn't know how in the hell I'd be able to reach them without giving away their location. If I reached out to Jason, I was afraid he wouldn't listen to me and just try to find me instead. My mother would be too hysterical to contemplate anything I said, and Jason would be pissed if I called Jordan over him. I would have to figure something out eventually, but I had plenty of time to plot and prepare.

Until then, I needed to focus on gaining Darren's trust. I could give it to him that he had won only one of the many battles ahead of us and I was fine with that. As long as he didn't win the war, I would be okay. I could survive him. I would survive him.

When the sun had risen fully, I decided it was probably best to get ready for breakfast with Darren. I took a quick shower, did my hair and makeup, and selected a burgundy sundress and black flats for today's slave uniform. I really hated wearing dresses, especially with only a barely-there thong to cover my ass. I felt so vulnerable and exposed. With my manicured nails and attire, it almost seemed like my wardrobe was designed to discourage me from fighting, but Darren should know better than that. It didn't matter if I was wearing six-inch stilettos or if I was bare-ass naked. I would fight no matter what I was or wasn't wearing. I could kick anyone's ass in a dress; I just preferred to do it in pants.

Around 8:55 a.m., I made my way down to the dining room and found Darren sitting at the head of the table, his phone in hand.

"There you are." He smiled at me. He was dressed in a raspberry red dress shirt and black tie, his black jacket hanging off the back of his chair with his hair gelled into sleek perfection. Clean-shaven and with the scent of a god. Fucking A, he was gorgeous, and it only made me hate him more.

"Good morning," I said blankly and sat down at his right.

"Good morning," he said politely, his eyes glancing over my body as I sat down.

I began to make myself a cup of tea from the set up on the table when he spoke again.

"Enjoy the sunrise this morning?"

I could feel his eyes on me as I paused for only a second. He wanted me to know he was watching me, as if I was surprised.

"I did," I said, pausing to take a sip of my tea. "Did you?"

"Oh, I was watching something far more beautiful." He smirked.

Creeper ...

"Well, I hope you enjoyed the view," I replied.

"Oh, I did. Did you not sleep well last night?" he asked.

"Not really ... but I'm sure you already knew that, as well," I said almost sweetly. I stared at him for his reaction. Perfect poker face.

"I'm sorry to hear you're not sleeping well. Perhaps these will help," he said, nudging a small silver container toward me that I hadn't noticed earlier.

"What's this?" I asked, taking the small container and twisting it open. Inside were a bunch of large, white oval-shaped pills. I looked at him incredulously.

“They’re multivitamins,” Darren said now returning his gaze to his phone. “I reviewed the results of your blood tests from the warehouse the other night and noticed you were deficient in vitamins A, B-12, and calcium. Those should correct the deficiency.” He nodded over at the container.

“Probably thanks to the lovely treatment I endured in that warehouse,” I sneered.

I didn’t know why I said that or why I was starting shit so early, but I still didn’t know how to use my mouth filter yet.

“Probably,” he said plainly, not taking his eyes off his phone.

Wow, what an admission. I examined the pills carefully, more suspicion clouding my mind.

“How do I know these are vitamins and not some line of bullshit?” I glared at him. Like I could trust his ass with medication for me.

The glare he returned to me was far more intense and scarier than I thought mine could ever be, and I suddenly felt it softening.

“I’m going to give you three seconds to check your attitude before you regret it. I may be a lot of things, Jaden, but a liar is not one of them.”

I continued to stare at him for a moment, my hands balling in to fists before I turned my eyes to the wall in front of me.

“Now, take your goddamn vitamins before I shove them down your throat,” he threatened and turned his attention back to his phone.

I turned my eyes to the glass of water that was sitting next to my plate. He did say he would always keep his word and that he would never lie to me. If they were just vitamins, then it wouldn’t be so bad. Maybe they would benefit me in the end if I really did have some deficiencies. I took a single pill, popped it in my mouth, and washed it down with a sip of water.

“Good girl,” Darren said, his eyes still on his phone.

Fuck you.

I made myself a cup of tea and sipped on it until David came out with my breakfast. He placed a bowl of oatmeal and a cup of sliced fruit in front of me and turned back toward the kitchen without a word. I caught Darren’s eyes shift in my peripherals checking to see if I looked at David, but I kept my eyes on my plate.

I pushed the oatmeal around with my giant spoon, not really hungry as per usual. Darren sipped on his coffee quietly, but I could feel his energy start to spike when I continued not to eat. Finally, I released a small breath

from my nose and took a bite of the oatmeal. From the corner of my eye, I noticed Darren relax a little. It was strange knowing I could affect him in certain ways. That would be something to experiment with.

When I was halfway through my breakfast, Darren finally stood.

"I'll see you in a couple of hours," he said, putting on his suit jacket.

"Do I have to stay in my room until you come back?" I asked, keeping my eyes on the table.

"Every day until I say otherwise," he replied, buttoning his jacket.

"How am I supposed to work out then?" I asked, turning my gaze up to him. I was jonesing for a heavy bag and some gloves.

"I think you'll manage until I figure out a proper routine for you."

"Proper routine? I don't need a routine. I can formulate my own daily activities."

"Are you trying to argue with me again?" he almost growled.

Okay, yeah, I was pushing him a little bit, but it was hard to back down when he was trying to exert control.

"No, Darren, I'm not trying to argue, merely trying to negotiate."

"There are no negotiations. When I leave the house, you will remain in your room until I feel I can trust you to roam around the house. That's final," he said and turned to leave.

"But what am I supposed to do all day?" I said, standing from my chair now.

God, did I sound like a whiny ass child or what?

Darren stopped in his tracks and turned to look at me, an intense glare emanating from his eyes. I just had to keep pushing. Why the fuck would he care if I was bored all day?

He practically stormed back toward me, and my hands came up to my chest in my defense, but he just grabbed my face with both hands and kissed me hard. By the time he was done, I was breathless and confused.

"I don't care what you do, as long as you follow my rules and do what you're told. Your freedoms in this house are privileges you must earn. Remember that, Jaden, and stop arguing," he said, kissed me one final time and then walked out the door.

I stood there with my hands balled into fists until my nails bit into my palms and my knuckles turned white. Taking a deep breath, I tried to calm myself down enough to return to my seat and finish my breakfast. I was too

pissed to finish the oatmeal so I polished off the fruit and quickly headed back to my room to do nothing for the next several hours.

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Chapter Thirteen

System

She was really starting to piss me off. I didn't have time for this shit; I had too much I needed to do. I got in the backseat of the custom, armor-plated BMW while my temporary driver, Bernard, drove us out of the estate. Normally, Scott traveled with me everywhere I went, but I needed him to keep an eye on Jaden until I found her a permanent bodyguard I could trust.

I had a meeting with my accountant/assistant in half an hour. Ronald Lessner was a measly fuck of a man, but he was damn good at his job and had plenty of noteworthy connections, which was the only reason I kept him alive. Outside of my brothers, he was a ghost. Not even my closest business partners knew about him. I made sure he had protection 24/7 because if someone ever got to him, I was pretty sure his loyalty to me would be sliced right out of him. But in this line of work, everything was a risk; the risk just had to be worth it, and Ron definitely was, especially since he was also one hell of an attorney.

Bernard drove us to the warehouse and I checked in on the new shipment of girls through the two-way glass wall by the door. There were five of them so far, and as usual, they all looked the same to me. Half the time, I didn't even bother to learn who they were or where they came from. I had others to make those decisions for me.

We had scouts set up all over the country, prowling in the poverty-stricken cities for optimal targets. The weak, the vulnerable, the naïve—they were so easy to find it was ridiculous. A lot of them ended up being runaways living on the street. They were the easiest to obtain. They hardly even needed to be taken; we just had to convince them with an easy white lie. And with that, my supply was endless. Some stupid rebellious teenage girl was always on the street somewhere, just waiting to be found.

It helped that I owned a small private aviation company with dozens of small planes that carried our shipments from all over the country to the warehouse or wherever else we needed them to go. It was the perfect setup,

and with all the business dealings and connections I had, no one suspected a thing. With the right amount of money, you could buy anything and everything ... including silence. Once the girls were in custody, they were drugged and shipped away in cargo boxes with padding inside to prevent bruising during the transport. Once delivered to the warehouse, it was just buy and sell from there. And business was booming.

The girls who didn't sell at the auction were usually the ones who liked to act up during their captivity. If the girls had too many bruises on them, they wouldn't sell the same way as the others who had behaved. They usually were sold at a discounted price to the brothels in Mexico where they were smuggled across by the Coyotes and never seen or heard from again. Everyone receives the same warning at orientation, but of course, not everyone listens.

We had a good business relationship with the brothel chains in Mexico, receiving a nice percentage from their profits while supporting their supply of the heavily requested blond American girl. Everyone in Mexico had dark hair and tan skin. The johns down there liked to change things up every now and then. Though I couldn't understand why they would want to fuck a drugged out American idiot anyway. They weren't nearly as responsive and were a bore to play with. But that was how some of the brothels liked to work. Keeping their slaves as drug addicts ensured their obedience; otherwise, they were denied their next fix until they did their job. Another reason why many of them died after a few months. If the johns didn't accidentally kill them, the drugs certainly would. But that's what keeps the demand so high and the revenue never-ending.

The higher ups were usually pretty good to their slaves, as far as good can be described. We used to train the girls in sexual obedience, but most of my clients preferred to train their slaves themselves anyway, so we stopped bothering. As far as what their training methods were, from what I had been told by them, some were worse than others were, some more sadistic and some more compassionate. The only rule we all had was that the only way a slave could be released from their captivity was through death. I couldn't have freed slaves running around, trying to undermine my business. So far, no one had broken the rules ... yet.

I headed down to give the girls their orientation, all of them staring up at me from their cages, covering themselves as they shivered with fear. Most of them screamed and cried, begging to be released, but I felt nothing.

Even the looks in their eyes barely exhilarated me; it just wasn't the same anymore. I realized I hadn't even analyzed for the feisty one in the group. Now that I had Jaden in my life, the thought of breaking another slave just didn't appeal to me anymore. She was the only one whose fire I wanted to taste.

Our next auction would be in two weeks, and I needed someone to handle this shit. I didn't have the time to keep coming back here to ensure the job was done properly. That was why I needed Ron. He was helping me find my replacement, plus we had numbers to review.

I was walking away from the holding room when my phone started to ring, my youngest brother on the other line.

"Dom," I said into the phone as I walked down the hall.

"Hey, bro, what's going on?" he asked.

"About to meet with Ron," I replied.

"Good. I need to talk to him about the accounts from Willis. Hopefully, he has an update. Anyway, rumor has it that you finally bought yourself some nice permanent tail, huh? How come I have to hear about it from someone else?"

I stopped in my tracks.

"Who told you this?" I asked, trying to keep my voice even. Our auctions were meant to be extremely confidential.

"Boris. That old, fat fuck said you bought some hot little redhead who kicked the shit out of the guards in front of the clients!"

My jaw clenched as my chest seethed with rage.

"Remind me to pay Boris a visit in the very near future," I said, trying to keep the venom in my voice at bay. I didn't like people talking about my business and just about every person I dealt with knew this.

"Yeah, yeah. So what's the story? Who is this chick? When do I get to meet her?"

"She's no one you need to be concerned with," I said, picking up my pace again.

"Oh, come on, man. You've never taken a slave before. Something must be special about this girl if you're actually looking to keep her."

Dominic was one to talk. He'd taken plenty of slaves before, but they were never "special" to him. Whenever a girl didn't sell in the auction but had more potential than Mexico, we sent them to the clubs in Vegas, where Dominic liked to "break" them in for himself.

“Come on, Dare. You gotta give me something,” he continued.

I released an irritated sigh into the phone, no longer interested in the conversation.

As I walked down the hall, I noticed Jared walking in my direction, and I found myself staring him down with menace in my eyes. I was still furious about how he had handled Jaden back when she was still at the warehouse. She’d nearly killed him when she finally fought him in the shower room. It took him two weeks before he was fully recovered and the fact that he allowed himself to take a beat down from her had me wondering if I should have just killed him right there.

Jaden had been training all her life, while most of the guards at the warehouse had maybe a few years under their belts, including Jared. The guards here only had to deal with women, and since most didn’t put up the kind of fight Jaden did, they had no need for special training. They weren’t soldiers. Only the best of my men were allowed to uphold that title.

“Don’t worry about it, Dominic. You’ll meet her eventually.”

As Jared passed me, he glanced at me briefly, only meeting my eyes for a second while I glared back at him. He quickened his pace and hurried on his way. He knew he was on thin ice with me, and everyone knew what would happen should that ice finally give way.

“Just as soon as I’m finished training her,” I finished, turning my attention back to Dominic.

“Oh, shit.” He laughed. “Good luck. From what I heard, she’s quite the fighter.”

“Nothing I can’t handle,” I said in stride. “Now, keep it under wraps. I’ve got to see Ron. I’ll talk to you later.”

I hung up the phone and headed up to the small conference room where I knew Ron was waiting. I found him sitting at the table, a laptop in front of him with a pad of paper and several folders. As I approached, Ron looked up and gave me a weak smile.

“Darren, good to see you, as always,” Ron said with his dry monotone voice.

“Ron,” I replied, with a curt nod as I pulled out the chair across the table from him, unbuttoned my jacket, and sat down.

Ron was a short and stocky little fucker—thin brown hair, rounded belly, and black framed glasses. You would never have suspected he was smart as a fucking whip.

“I’ll get right to it,” he said, looking down at his notes. “I have three candidates for the position you’re looking for. Paul Kelling, who’s been head of security at the resort in Vegas, Steve Deller, who’s been working in finance with us for years, and Raymond Ross, who’s been working security here since we first started this. Here are their credentials,” Ron said handing me a folder of paperwork. “Just take a look, let me know what you think,” he said, shrugging, moving on to the next topic of business.

We discussed the revenues from the latest auction, totaling about six million, half of which came from myself, thanks to Jaden’s pricey ass, but she was worth every dollar and then some.

We discussed new investments, the status of all my finances, as well as the measures to ensure all of my men remained clean and out of the legal system. We also discussed my casino, Audeāmus, and the resorts I owned through my private corporation, Triguard Holdings, Inc.

I wasn’t there often, far too busy to stay in one place, and I preferred to handle things personally rather than hide behind a desk. Another reason I hated managing the warehouse, but the simple fact was I didn’t trust very many to handle it. Ron was my jack-of-all-trades, his usefulness never wavering for a second. Anything I needed outside of the realm of brutality, Ron would make it happen without failure.

Once we were done with our meeting, we headed out as I had three more people to meet with that day. Fuck, it was going to be a long day, and now that I had Jaden in my life, she felt like more of a distraction when I was away from her. All I wanted to do at the moment was crawl into bed with her and fuck her until I couldn’t feel my dick. But I had shit to do. That was what happened when you had a criminal empire to run. No rest for the wicked. Not even when we’re dead.

~*~

I was sitting in the dining room, waiting for Darren to come home so we could have dinner together. Apparently, he was running late; at least, that’s what Scott told me when he escorted me downstairs. He stood off to the corner of the room in silence, his arms folded across his chest as we waited. It was kind of awkward, really. I wanted to talk to him, get to know him better, hoping he might reveal something I could use in this situation, but he

never said a word to me unless absolutely necessary. So naturally, I decided to test him.

I abruptly stood from my chair and his relaxed stance transformed into something intense and prepared.

“I have to pee,” I said, striding toward the doorway where he stood.

“No, you don’t,” he said, gripping my arm and preventing me from walking past him. “Sit back down.”

“No, I really do, I swear,” I argued, eyeing him intensely. I only had to pee a little bit; I could have held it, but I wanted to see how far I could get with him.

He gazed at me with a warning glare as his hand swallowed up my arm.

“I don’t think Darren would be too happy if he came home to find I had peed myself because you refused to let me use the bathroom,” I said cautiously.

“Only one way to find out,” he sneered.

I pursed my lips and gave him a no-nonsense look.

“Come on, what am I going to do from the bathroom?” I continued innocently.

He stared at me for another second before releasing a harsh breath through his nose.

“Fine,” he said, and practically dragged me down the hall to the nearest bathroom. “You have thirty seconds,” he practically growled, pointing his finger in my face before he slammed the bathroom door behind him.

Jaden – 1, Scott – 0. It was a stupid win, but I had managed to get something I wanted through manipulation. I could start out small like that, and eventually, work my way up to higher requests once I had gained more trust.

I used the bathroom and washed my hands, checking my reflection in the mirror for any imperfections. When I was done, Scott escorted me back to the table, and I continued to sit and wait. Darren finally walked in five minutes later.

My stomach immediately tightened into knots as I heard his voice speaking into his phone. He didn’t seem very happy.

“I don’t give a shit. You figure it out or I’ll find someone who will,” he bellowed into the phone before hanging it up and placing it in his jacket pocket. He nodded at Scott as he strode into the dining room, relieving Scott of his post, and sat down at the head of the table.

I sat there with my hands in my lap, glancing at him every so often as he poured himself a glass of scotch. I wanted to ask him if everything was okay but didn't feel like being snapped at, so I just sipped on my water until David brought out our food.

After a few seconds of eating our dinner and me fumbling with the silverware, he finally seemed to calm down a bit and addressed me.

"So how was your day?" he suddenly asked me before taking a bite of his steak.

I turned my head to him and furrowed my brows.

"I spent the whole day in my room. How do you think it went?" I replied.

"Well," he said, taking a sip of his scotch, "maybe if you'd stop testing my patience on a daily basis, perhaps your day could be a little more fulfilling when I'm gone," he finished, turning his gaze to me.

I stared back at him hard, anger beginning to fill my stomach at his arrogance.

"You know how hard this is for me," I stated.

"Yes, I do, but for some reason, you seem to think I care," he said, cutting into his steak again.

I felt my grip on my knife tighten.

Don't stab him. Don't stab him. Don't stab him ... not yet.

"Maybe if you did," I said through clenched teeth, "I might actually *care* a little bit about my new role in life."

That was bullshit, but to be honest, if he were a little nicer to me, I would have just killed him quickly, rather than drag it out painfully, but he was an asshole so ...

He gave me a small short chuckle and looked my way.

"It doesn't matter how I treat you, Jaden. Even if I were the perfect gentleman, which I can be, you would still try to run from me. So I might as well do what I want."

Again with my grip on my knife.

"Now, finish your dinner before I take your knife away," he said, nodding at my now white knuckles before returning to his plate.

I was so pissed; I ran out of cuss words to scream in my head. I wasn't hungry anymore, but I had only finished half of my dinner. I tried to take a few more bites and sip on some water.

As I sat there, I started to look at all the chairs around us and randomly thought about the family he was planning on building with me. Would they all be sitting here, happily eating dinner while I remained a prisoner? Would they know of all the atrocities their mother had been subjected to before they were born? Would I still be a prisoner by then? I had a feeling Darren would never allow me to leave him even after I had given him everything he wanted. Assuming I did give him everything he wanted. I wouldn't be here long enough for that to happen.

"What's going on in that pretty little head of yours now?" Darren suddenly asked me.

"Nothing," was on the tip of my tongue. But there was no use in lying to him, especially when he wanted honesty.

"I was just thinking about the family you mentioned yesterday and wondered how they would feel knowing how they were brought into this world ... by force," I said turning to him for the last part.

I studied his reaction, but he had one hell of a poker face as he considered my words.

"By the time that happens," he began, "it will be of no concern to you."

What the fuck was that supposed to mean?

"Why would it be of no concern of mine?" I continued the conversation after swallowing. "The children you expect me to have will want to know how their mommy and daddy met."

"And I will tell them the truth," he said taking a bite from his dinner.

I was completely unprepared for that response; that he would actually tell his children that he had kidnapped their mother, had intended to sell her to an unsuspecting buyer, purchased her himself, raped, beat, and trained her to his liking and then forced her to marry him and give birth to them. Yeah, that sounded like a real happily fucking ever after.

"What? You can't subject a child to that kind of knowledge. They won't be able to handle it."

"I can and I will, Jaden," he said very seriously, glaring at me with his piercing eyes. "Who do you think will be taking over the family business when I retire? They will need to know these things so they can understand and respect it."

My eyes widened in disbelief. He wanted sons so they could be monsters just like him. I couldn't believe what I was hearing. The fact he

was even considering his line of work something worth being called the “family business” made me sick to my stomach. I was quickly losing my appetite.

“And what if we have daughters?” I asked, perplexed.

“I don’t expect to have any, but if we do, they are not to be concerned with it. They don’t belong in that line of work. If we do have a daughter, I plan to marry her off as soon as possible.”

My face revolted in disgust. What the hell was this, the 1800s?

“That’s it? Just marry her off as if she’s incapable of deciding her own life? What if she wants to go to college or travel the world?”

“She’ll do what her father tells her and that will be the end of it. Just like you will.”

“And what if all we ever have are daughters, huh?”

“Then I will keep breeding you until you give me what I want.” He stared at me very seriously.

And that was what broke the final straw of this conversation. I shot up from my chair and leaned over toward him, slamming my hands on the table.

“I am not some fucking steed you can just breed at your goddamn disposal!” I shouted at him.

Dangerously calm as ever, Darren slowly rose from his seat, a vicious glare in his eye as he rose to his full height and towered over me.

“Sit. Down. Now,” he ordered, his voice smooth and deadly, and it made me want to tremble. I glared back hard, wanting to retaliate and thinking of all the ways I could, but I didn’t want to end up back in my cage again. With the look Darren was currently giving me, it was definitely on the table if I didn’t shut up.

“You’re a fucking monster,” I retorted and sat down before shit got any worse than it already had.

I couldn’t hold it back; my anger was seething through my veins as he spoke about the future family I would never give him.

“That may be, Jaden,” he said still standing over me, “But I am the fucking monster you will respect and obey if you ever want to enjoy the rest of your miserable fucking life with me.” He was seething now, just as I was.

I wanted to cry at that moment, thinking of all the horrible things he would inevitably put our would-be family through. I couldn’t let that happen.

“Now, keep your stubborn mouth shut and finish your dinner,” he said and that was the end of the conversation.

We ate in silence until both of our plates were clean, but the fierce tension that surrounded us refused to cease.

“Come on,” he said calmly, rising from his chair. “Let’s go for a walk.”

“I’m really not in the mood.”

“Excuse me?” he said, another warning emanating from his glare.

Oh, right, I forgot I don’t have a choice in my daily activities anymore.

I stared at him hard, crossing my arms over my chest and glaring so strongly until I felt like my bitch face had cemented permanently into my features. I hated him so much, and I wanted nothing more than for him to feel just as shitty as I did. I wanted blood and lots of it.

Darren shifted, raising his eyebrows in surprise at my sudden rebellious manner, but they could touch the ceiling and I wouldn’t give a fuck. Unsatisfied with my defiance, he grabbed my chair and roughly turned it toward him. My heart skipped a beat, but I kept my cool as he wrapped both hands around the armrests and lowered his face only inches in front of mine. Dark eyes stared me down like a lion ready to pounce, but I just met them head-on.

“You wanna spend the rest of your night back in that cage?” he asked me.

Did I? At least then, I’d be away from him.

I glanced away from him, sighing heavily as I considered giving in to his demands. I really didn’t want to spend another second in that freezing cold, tiny-ass cage. A walk with him couldn’t be that bad. I hoped.

“No, I don’t,” I finally admitted, turning back to him.

“Then get your little ass out of that chair. Now,” he said menacingly and stood back.

Bitch, call me little one more time ...

On wobbly legs, I rose from the chair and took a step forward before ultimately being met with a backhand across my face. My natural reflexes attempted to block the attack as I brought my arm up in defense, but he was fast and still managed to strike me. Red-hot pain seared in my cheek as Darren then grabbed my throat and pulled me to his chest. I clenched his wrists with my hands while he robbed me of my air supply. Tears blurred

my vision from the strain on my neck as I struggled against him, ready to fight further, but for some reason, I feared upsetting him more.

“When are you going to learn,” he drawled in a deep threatening voice, “that your obedience is non-negotiable. You will do as I tell you or I *will* hurt you. Is that what you want? To feel pain all the time?”

I wasn’t a bitch or anything when it came to pain, but I definitely didn’t care too much for it, especially when he delivered it. It wasn’t as if he had purchased a masochist, for fuck’s sake.

“Answer me,” Darren seethed, squeezing harder.

“No,” I choked out, practically gasping for breath now. If he didn’t let go in the next two seconds, I was punching him in the dick. I didn’t want the reprimand that would occur afterward, but I certainly couldn’t stand here while he choked me nearly half to death.

He then finally released my throat but pulled me against his chest, wrapping his arms securely around my body and holding me tightly to him. He sighed heavily above me, releasing whatever tension he was holding on to, and rested his chin on the top of my head. He practically cocooned himself around me as my face and hands burrowed into his chest. I could hear his heart beat as it pounded rather quickly. Had he received a bit of excitement from my defiance? Had he enjoyed squeezing the breath from my lungs while I struggled against him? Probably, and the thought put me on edge. This man enjoyed hurting me, which put me in serious danger, and I wondered if he knew that.

As I listened to the beat of his heart, his chest rose up and down and I noticed the calm that eventually began to surround us. His heart rate started to slow as he held me and I closed my eyes to concentrate on continuing whatever was happening to him. A calm Darren appeared to be a safer Darren.

After a few more seconds when I noticed his heart rate had remained steady, he finally spoke. “Why do you always have to push me?” he whispered softly above me.

“You said you anticipated this,” I countered.

“Yes, I did, but there is a time and a place for push and play, and eventually, you will learn to recognize those times. However, what I hadn’t anticipated is how dangerous the consequences could be for the both of us when you are unable to establish the difference.”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“You have no idea ...” he began, “how easy it would be for me to go too far with you.” He pulled me back and placed his hand on the side of my face, tilting it up to meet his gaze. The heat in his hand warmed my still stinging cheek, and somehow, I found myself leaning into it, my body naturally seeking out warmth in the midst of the frigid darkness it had been subject to for so long. I had almost forgotten he had even spoken to me. “I know you don’t want to admit this,” he said, “but you are more fragile than you think, especially to me. And when you deliberately disobey me just to piss me off, it enrages me to the point where I could lose control and hurt you too much. I don’t want that to happen, but you make it so easy for me to forget. That is why control is so important, Jaden. It’s safer, not just for you, but for the both of us. Do you understand now?”

In other words, do what he says because he might accidentally beat you to death. Got it.

I bowed my head, lowering my eyes to the floor for only a second and released a slow, deliberate breath before returning my gaze back to him. I hated these power struggles with him, hated the logical reasoning he had behind it all, and hated the fact that he was right. I didn’t know how much restraint he was capable of, but I did have a very good idea of what would happen should that restraint ever snap.

“Yes, Darren, I understand,” I said, glowering up into his eyes.

“Good girl,” he smiled and kissed me on the forehead. He then took my hand and headed toward the back door.

Chapter Fourteen

Listen

We walked outside and went down to the beach. The sun was beginning to set and we stopped so I could remove my shoes and walk freely in the sand. The perfectly white sand was so soft under my feet, and I relished in its enveloping warmth. As we headed to the water, Darren kept a firm grip on my hand, never letting me falter and making sure I stayed at his side.

I decided I should try to leave what had just happened back at the house and attempt to enjoy something for once. I didn't want my attitude to ruin things for me again.

Reaching the shore, I couldn't help but feel compelled to put my feet in the crystal blue water, and I was a little surprised when Darren let go of my hand to let me. The water felt cool and refreshing as it splashed over my bare feet. I suddenly had the urge to go swimming, but I didn't think Darren would allow it.

I turned back around to face him, unable to contain my smile, and found him staring down at me, his hands in his pockets and a slight smirk on his face. The look he displayed made me uncomfortable as it softened with what I thought might have been something like adoration.

"What?" I asked.

"Nothing." He grinned, shrugging his shoulders. "You're just so cute when you're not pissing me off."

I scoffed at that. "Cute? Me? I don't think so."

Cute? Pfft. My ass.

"Baby tiger cute," he said with that shark grin.

"More like full grown tiger cute," I countered.

"You'd have to be full grown for that." He laughed.

"I am full grown!" I defended myself.

"Are you sure? I think you may have gotten the short end of the stick." He winked at me.

My jaw nearly hit the sand. Was he calling me short?!

“Well, maybe someone else cheated and double dipped,” I shot back and walked off down the shore.

I could hear him laughing behind me as he caught up to my pace.

“Calm down, killer.” He chuckled. “I didn’t say it was a bad thing that you’re short.”

“I am not short,” I corrected. “I’m just an inch or two below average female height.”

“Relax. I like that you’re short. It just makes you cuter.”

I scowled at him in disgust, releasing an agitated grown. Why were we even having this irrelevant conversation?

“I am not cute,” I said quietly under my breath.

He chuckled, taking my hand again, and we continued down the beach toward the sunset while I kept my feet in reach of the water. And then I wondered with his new sense of calm if now would be a good time for a little family history.

“Can I ask you something?” I asked him softly, hoping he would sense the innocence in my voice.

“Of course,” he replied cautiously. “But I can’t guarantee I’ll answer it.”

I paused for a moment, hoping he would notice my trepidation.

“What was your childhood like?”

He was silent for a minute, surprised by my question, and I was sure he was calculating his answer. He said he would never lie to me, so I waited patiently for his impending truth.

“Let’s just say there wasn’t much time for me to be a child,” he said plainly.

“Why?”

“Because my father didn’t have time for children, and with my mother gone, he decided it was time to raise a man, not a boy.”

“What happened to your mother?”

“She died when I was eleven.”

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“From what I can remember of her, she was a lot like you. Tough, but she still knew her place when it came to my father,” Darren said giving me a side glare.

“Do you know how they met?”

“The same way I met you.”

“That's unfortunate,” I said before realizing I had actually said it out loud.

“How so?” he asked sharply.

“Because ... don't you think you'd feel better about your existence if you knew your mother had wanted to be there with your father in the first place?”

Fuck, I was bringing up an old argument now.

“She did,” he said, a little turned off by my audacity.

“What do you mean?”

“She was the one who begged my father to buy her.”

“Why would she want that?”

“Because the life she came from was broken and miserable and she saw my father as her escape from something that could be potentially worse.”

Now, I was disgusted. His mother was nothing like me. She was weak.

“And that is where she and I are different,” I said turning to him, now piecing his puzzle together. “My life before you was not broken or miserable. It was happy and fulfilling, so if you're trying to justify your acquisition of me by thinking you're providing me with a better life, then you are mistaken.”

“Don't you remember what I said to you before? I could provide you with a life worth living, and that's exactly what I'm going to do. You might not like it now, but eventually, you will get over it. Besides, you should be happy you don't have to work some boring desk job or go to school anymore.”

“But I *want* to work and I *want* to go to school. I have dreams and goals I want to accomplish on my own and you are preventing me from doing that.”

“Jaden, I told you already, your only goal in life now is to please me and that should be enough for you. If you have a goal or a hobby you'd like to indulge in, I'll do everything I can to make that happen. I may be a monster, but I still want you to be happy. Our children deserve to grow up in a happy household.”

“You're out of your mind if think I'll ever give you children,” I snarled, ripping my hand from his and storming back toward the house.

I didn't know why I thought it was a good idea to turn my back to him, but I was obviously too pissed to think otherwise. His hand shot into my hair and he yanked me back toward his chest while his large hand wrapped around the front of my throat, squeezing tightly but not fully cutting off my oxygen supply.

"You'll do what I tell you, and that will be the end of it," he barked above me. "Unless you'd rather spend your defiance back in your cage?"

"No," I gasped. "You're right. I'm sorry." I winced, pain now influencing my answers as I waited for my hair to rip from my scalp.

"That's what I thought," he growled, loosening his grip on my throat and then turning me around to grip my hand. Fucking asshole.

We were silent as we continued our walk along the beach heading back toward the house. I just focused on the scene of the sky and water ahead of me. The breeze of the ocean blew through my hair and as the sun finally went down, a chill began to creep over my skin. Being a natural redhead, I had read somewhere that we don't adapt well to changes in temperature, and I found it so true as I was always cold when others were warm, and on days I did find myself too hot, I was a cranky little bitch about it.

"What day is it?" I asked, innocently, suddenly feeling brave again. I was hoping for some sense of time to finally come back into my life. I couldn't even remember what day I had been taken.

"Friday," he replied. Fuck, it must have been well over a week since I went missing.

"Will you be going into work tomorrow?"

"No. I'll be working from my home office, but I'll be around here and there," he said with a hint of enthusiasm I found unsettling.

"Oh, goody," I replied excitedly, but he sensed my sarcasm. He chuckled at me.

"There's my little hellcat." He smiled, tucking me into his side, shielding the chilling wind with his arm. "I thought I scared her away."

"Fat chance," I replied. "You don't scare me."

Ah, fuck, that was stupid.

"What the fuck did you just say?" he snarled, gripping my arm and wrenching me from his side.

God, this hot and cold shit was getting old. Would I ever learn? He gazed down at me with a fierce intensity I had not been prepared to meet. I

peered up at him like a deer caught in headlights, unsure of what to do as I was quickly reminded of our earlier issues back in the house.

“Nothing,” I replied quietly.

“Nothing?” he said, raising his eyebrows. “You see? Even now, you’re terrified of me. I know you are and you should be. I can see it in your eyes, so why bother to lie? There’s no hiding anything from me, Jaden. When will you learn this?”

I tried to pull away from his grip, pissed off at his revelation, but this time, he refused to let me go.

“You just don’t get it, do you?” I suddenly yelled at him, breaking free of the headlights. “I’m not supposed to be here! Shit like this doesn’t happen to people like me! I’m a fighter—always have been, always will be—so you asking me to just give all that up and surrender my life to you doesn’t quite register! I don’t know how to give you what you want because it’s not in my nature and no amount of pain you threaten will change that!”

Darren cocked his head to the side as he stared down at me with that consuming wild ocean in his eyes. “That sounds like a challenge to me, Miss Wilder,” he said dangerously.

“No! Goddamn it! You’re not listening to m-”

“No, princess,” he cut me off sharply, “you’re not listening to me, and that’s the problem we keep running into. I understand your frustration. You had a life you worked hard to achieve, and now, it’s gone. Get over it. The life you will have with me will be far greater than any life you could ever have given yourself. You just have to surrender to it.”

“I can’t do that,” I said bitterly, a single tear of frustration slipping free of its confines, as I continued to push away from him. I wiped it away quickly before it became too noticeable.

“Yes, you can, Jaden, and you will. I’m not giving you any other choice.”

I felt my heart slam into my chest as though someone had just punched it with an iron glove. I felt hopeless and lost, drowning in an ocean I could never learn to swim in. The tide would always be far too strong for me to escape its pull.

Darren didn’t care about my internal struggle; he didn’t care that my pride and independence weren’t used to being chained away and thought it should be so easy for me to let go. But it wasn’t. And it never would be.

“Can’t you see how unfair this is?” I said softly. “How wrong this all is?”

“Jaden,” Darren said as he gently but firmly gripped each of my shoulders. “I’m the kind of man who takes what he wants, when he wants, and without regret, simply because he can. Where you may see something as unfair or wrong, all I see are endless possibilities. I don’t believe in limits and, therefore, do not subject myself to them. You may hate it now, but I think you will come to enjoy your role in my life sooner than you think. Once you finally stop fighting me and give in, you’ll wonder why you ever fought me in the first place.”

“And what about my family? Am I supposed to just forget about them? Pretend they never existed?”

“As far as I’m concerned, I’m your family now. It’ll be easier for you to just let them go.”

I slowly shook my head back and forth. “How can you be so cruel when you have a family?” I shot back. He started to speak, but I cut him off before he could. “You say you want me to be happy, yet you force so much unnecessary pain on me.”

“You think me cruel?” he asked softly as he stepped up to me. His eyes bore down, drinking me up and swallowing me back. “You haven’t seen the depravity I could subject you to should you continue this argument, so stop pushing. The pain you feel is solely from your own inability to let go of what is no longer in your control. If you would just surrender yourself to me, I promise you will be free of that pain.”

“You’re practically asking me to walk on water.”

“I’m not asking, Jaden,” he said, cocking his head to the side. “This conversation is over and no longer up for debate. You will do what is expected of you and that will be the end of it.”

He then took my arm and tugged me back along the shore.

It’s not over, I said to myself. Not until you’re six feet under.

Chapter Fifteen

Compromise

I didn't even realize it when we got back to the house. I felt numb inside, unable to cope with the depths of my reality. When we reached my room, Darren opened the door and ushered me inside then closed it behind him. I stood blankly in the room, clenching my fists at my side, unsure of what to do with myself when I felt the sudden slap of Darren's hand make contact with my face. It wasn't as hard as the other had been, but it was enough to distract me from the internal debate I was having with myself.

I looked up at him with a confused scowl on my face. "The fuck was that for?" I asked, rubbing my hand against the heat of my cheek.

"Stop cussing," he ordered, pointing at me. "And I was just bringing you back to reality." He placed his hands in his pockets, a tiny hint of a smirk in the corner of his lips.

I gave him a hard look. "Because reality is so much better than what's going on in my head."

"Don't insult me, Jaden," he warned, taking a step toward me. I instinctively put my left foot back, slowly turning my body to the side. "You will adjust eventually and realize the gift I am giving you."

I actually laughed out loud a little.

"Yes, the gift of imprisonment for the rest of my life. How did I become so lucky?" I chuckled, waving my arms around for emphasis.

Darren then grabbed me and shoved me down onto the bed, his hands holding my upper arms in a vise grip as he stared at me.

"Sarcasm will get you nowhere with me," he growled.

"Fuck you, Darren," I retorted.

I didn't know what the fuck it would take for me to just give it up and let him own me, but it just wasn't in my blood. I did not have a submissive bone in my body, and I had a feeling that no matter what he did to me, I would just pop back up like the weed he couldn't kill. Maybe, in the end, he

would come to respect and appreciate that. He did buy me for my strength, after all.

“If you insist,” he snarled with a snake-like grin.

Fuck.

He then pulled me forward, grabbing my wrists and wrenching my arms up to the headboard. I fought against him, fighting with everything I had, but he was too heavy for me to move. He straddled me and held my wrists with one hand above my head while he took out his phone. Pressing a button, my wrists were forced together through the bars of the metal headboard, effectively keeping my wrists in place above my head. My feet remained unrestrained and I wasn't sure why. He had to know I would mess up his face with my foot the second I got the chance. But he stayed where he was, now straddling my legs, and pulled his shirt up over his head.

God, that body of his. So strong and toned under perfectly smooth skin. Even with all the scars and tattoos, to the naked eye, he was a beautiful sight to see. He had to work out like a maniac to retain his physique, and I couldn't help but appreciate the results.

“You know what I think would be the most perfect tattoo on you?” he suddenly said as he gazed down at me, a smug smile on his face.

“I'm breathless to hear it,” I said sarcastically.

“My name,” he said darkly.

“What?”

“You heard me. I think it would be so sexy to see my name bolded permanently on to this perfect, beautiful skin of yours so that everyone who sees you will know right away that you're mine.”

“I'd really rather you didn't,” I said seriously.

“And remind me of what choice it is that you have again?”

“Darren, please,” I pleaded, sounding more annoyed than I should.

“You don't need to tattoo me to claim me.”

“You're right, I don't ... but it doesn't mean I don't want to.”

I was silent now, hoping he wasn't serious. “They would be so perfect,” he said reaching up and rubbing the underside of my wrists with his thumbs, “right here.”

I shuddered at the thought of having to face his permanent mark on my skin every day for the rest of my life. As if I needed another reminder that he owned me. I would have to find a good specialist for laser therapy if he followed through on his little fantasy.

“I think I deserve a place on your body, don’t you think?”

“Wouldn’t you prefer me to want your name on my body, rather than you forcing it and me hating it?”

“Or you could accept it graciously as it would please me for you to do so.” He narrowed his eyes at me. My reluctance was irritating him now.

I kept my mouth shut then; no matter how much I protested, he would still do what he wanted. I was essentially wasting my breath and pissing him off.

Eventually, his thumbs ceased their pressure, and his hands slowly started to trail down my arms, causing my skin to break out in goosebumps. Following down my shoulders, his palms covered down my sides and my heart started to flutter in my chest. The way he looked at me, so intensely, so possessively, sent shivers down my spine.

And then he gripped the bottom of my dress and completely ripped it open as if it were paper. My body tensed under the surprise of his attack on my clothes, my muscles fully flexed as Darren gazed down at me with a slight smirk of satisfaction on his face.

My body was fully bared to him, the only thing covering me from him being my yellow thong and lacy barely-there bra. I closed my eyes tight and pursed my lips, fighting back the rage that threatened to escape.

“God, you have the most incredible body,” he said, rubbing his palms up and down my rib cage, his thumbs padding over my abs and sending a wave of sensation through my skin.

Lowering himself to me, he pressed his lips to mine so gently, I wasn’t sure it was real. It was a whisper of a kiss, soft and sensual, something I wasn’t sure he was capable of. Some time later, he started kissing down my jawline and softly at my neck, nipping at my skin with his teeth here and there. My breathing became heavy as he turned my skin on with his sensual touches ... but all I wanted to do was bolt from the room.

My body was reacting to his touch in ways I didn’t want to admit, and I wished my brain would tell it to wake the fuck up. But I had been subjected to so much violence and anguish that there was no way my body was going to reject something that wasn’t pain.

His kisses continued down my chest, passing through the valley of my breasts and down my stomach. His hands caressed over my body, capturing my hips while the warmth of his skin on mine awakened my senses, setting me on fire. I hated it, but I loved it at the same time, his

gentleness and desire overwhelming me. I could feel his erection pressing against my leg as he continued to leave a breadcrumb trail of kisses down my abdomen.

And then his fingers lightly brushed the underside of my breast and I took in a sharp breath at the contact, not really wanting him to touch me, but somehow needing it. But then one lingering thought drenched the rising fire in a waterfall of pain and betrayal. Jason's face suddenly entered my mind, and I thought of how he would feel if I gave in to this man. I knew I didn't have a choice and he would understand that, but the fact my body was starting to enjoy it was where my honest betrayal was. Even though one man owned me, it didn't break my loyalty to another.

I was driving myself crazy with my internal debate. How could I enjoy the touch of a monster? Of the touch of the man who had taken me from my life and subjected me to the horrors of his? What was I now, some slave he could just turn into his whore? What the fuck was wrong with me? I couldn't do this.

"Stop," I whispered, a tear slipping down my cheek.

Darren raised his face from my stomach, his fingers still grazing my breasts, and looked at me confused.

"What did you just say?"

"Stop. Please." I couldn't look at him, just stared at the ceiling hoping he would take pity on me.

"You were enjoying this a second ago, and don't try to tell me you weren't. Your body can't lie to me no matter how much you want it to. What changed, Jaden? What happened?"

"I just can't. I don't want this.

"Yes, you can and you do. You need to stop thinking and just let your body enjoy it," he said, kissing just above my pubic bone

"I can't."

"Would you prefer I just hurt you so that it's painful? Is that what you want?" he seethed, obviously insulted by my rejection.

"Yes," I choked. At least, then I wouldn't feel bad about enjoying it because I knew this way I wouldn't. He got up and smacked me. Again. God, I was good at that.

"What the fuck's the matter with you?!"

"What difference does it make?! You've already raped me several times! Why should now be any different for you?"

“Because you’re deliberately choosing pain over pleasure because you can’t let yourself enjoy what I so clearly want to give you. I have more pleasure to give than pain, Jaden, if you’d only just give in to it. Stop being so goddamn stubborn.”

“Why? Why do you have to make me enjoy it? It’s just cruel.”

“Jaden,” he said now softening his voice and placing his hand gently against my face. “You’re doing this to yourself. You need to let go. Stop holding on to something that has no meaning for you anymore. Your focus needs to be on me now, and what I want to do to this beautiful body of yours,” he said, brushing his fingers over my skin.

“But ...”

“No buts,” he said continuing his kisses.

His hands trailed up the inside of my thighs, making me quiver, but all I could think about was the other man I had been longing for since I had been taken. I had to make him hurt me—had to make him want to hurt me so I wouldn’t have to live with the guilt of enjoying this if my body was stupid enough to like it.

“I’m sorry. I just don’t have the heart for this,” I uttered in anger. “Because it belongs to someone else, along with my loyalty.”

I was terrified to provoke his jealousy, but I couldn’t take this. I knew of only one way to stop it.

“What. Did you. Just. Say?” Darren asked very sharply, bringing his eyes back up to mine.

I stared at him with absolute hatred. I wanted him to know that my body might belong to him, but that was it. My heart and soul belonged to someone else and that would never change no matter what he did.

When I didn’t answer, his hand shot out for my throat and gripped it like a vise. I groaned and gasped for air, terror rising in my blood as I started to regret my decision. What if this was one of those moments when he might snap and accidentally kill me? Maybe I hadn’t really thought this through.

“I swear to God, Jaden, if you make me repeat myself today one more time ...” he growled, his grip getting tighter and tighter.

The muscles in my arms strained as I fought for oxygen, tears involuntarily springing from my eyes and falling down my cheeks. Shit, he was furious now and fear filled my belly as if I had consumed too much of it.

“I’m sorry,” I croaked out. It was all I could manage to say.

“You’re sorry?” Darren almost laughed, wide-eyed and angry, until he got real low to my face. “Not fucking yet, you aren’t.”

And then he kissed me so roughly, he actually bit my lip and drew blood. I squirmed and shrieked, trying to buck him off me until he finally released my mouth. Fear coursed through my body. I was bound to the headboard and his heavy body trapped my legs under him. There was no way for me to defend myself. I was completely at his mercy, and it looked like he was really running low on that at the moment. God, I was fucking stupid.

This was worse than the last time he showed how jealous he could be, especially since I now had no way to protect myself. Panic surged through my veins, intoxicating my rationality and bringing me to the point of begging for mercy and forgiveness, but I wasn’t that gone yet.

“I’m over here giving you all the pleasure your body desires and you have the nerve to tell me where you think your loyalty lies? Are you fucking kidding me?!”

He gave me another hard squeeze for good measure and released my throat. Darren then wrenched my thighs apart and placed himself between them. Unzipping his jeans, he unleashed his straining erection and plowed into me. I gasped loudly as his dick filled me up, stretching my core past the breaking point.

“You want pain, baby doll, you got it.”

In and out, he drilled into me, whatever gentleness he had exhibited before completely absent. He unleashed all his fury into my body, biting me, bruising my skin with his grip, but it seemed pretty obvious he was enjoying himself as he punished me with his cock. I finally looked away from him, unable to stand the expression on his face as he took what he wanted over and over again.

“Look at me,” he growled, gripping my face roughly in his hand. “Don’t you dare take your eyes off mine.” And then he laced his fingers through my hair and pulled it taut so that I had no choice but to keep my eyes locked on his.

“I hate you,” I hissed at him, looking him right in the eyes like he wanted me to.

“Good,” he shot back, slamming into me even harder.

God, I couldn't emphasize the word hate enough. He wanted me to watch him while he enjoyed taking my body however he wanted. It took everything I had not to let another tear slide out, but I was losing control and he loved it. He loved showing me how easy it was for him to dominate me, even though I thought I was so much better than this. Maybe that was what made it worse.

He then suddenly grabbed my throat again and squeezed. He just loved to put his hands there. It wasn't just a way of hurting me; it was a way of possessing me. "You're mine, Jaden," he growled, still plowing into me. "And nothing will ever change that."

I felt sick to my stomach as I tried to come to terms with his words.

Nothing will ever change that ...

Bullshit. I would change that. One way or another, with one of us dead, it would change.

I cried out as he came close to finishing and sped up his pace, thrusting harder and deeper. Finally, he came; he collapsed on top of me but still held up most of his weight while keeping himself buried inside me.

"You know what, Jaden?" Darren finally said, rising up on his elbows. "I have half a mind to go find that piece of shit you once called a boyfriend, bring him back here, and make you watch me kill him. Would you like that? Because I know I would."

My heart sank into my stomach, shriveling into tiny knots at the thought of what he just said. With Kayla gone, he had effectively discovered my true Kryptonite. I couldn't let him hurt Jason. I would kill him first.

It seemed stupid for him to go after my family—too much of a risk—but after a while, the heat would die down and they could become easy targets. Jason was strong, though, and just as tough as I was, maybe even tougher. That was why he was so perfect for me. We had always complemented each other so well, having many of the same interests, and always taking any challenge head-on when it came our way. We were an unstoppable force together and everyone knew it. He would want me to survive this so that when I eventually escaped, he would help me take my vengeance. I had to give in now. If he killed Jason, I would have nothing left to live for and I would probably just off myself at that point, and then there would be no one to stop this sadistic motherfucker.

“Please,” I whispered, trying to ignore the pulsing ache between my legs. “Please, don’t. You’re right. I shouldn’t have been thinking about him. It’s just ...”

“It’s just what?” he snarled.

“It’s just hard for me to let go. You have to understand, it’s only been a couple of days. I... I just need some time to adjust.”

He considered my words for a bit and sat back on my hips, studying me. I hoped he was capable of being reasonable. He had to have known how hard this was for me.

“Maybe you’re right. Maybe I have been a little hard on you. This is only your third night here ... but it’s how my father was. Tough love was always his thing and old habits are hard to break.”

“Yes, old habits *are* hard to break,” I emphasized. “I just need a little more time.”

He stared at me harshly for several seconds. My core was throbbing in pain and it was difficult for me to hold back my cries as he studied me, but I somehow managed to keep it in. I was going to be sore as fuck tomorrow.

“Fine,” he finally said. “I will give you one week to get your shit together. You can consider it a practice run. But once that week is over, and you still haven’t figured out your place, we’re gonna do it my way.”

I honestly didn’t like the sound of that but hadn’t we been doing it his way since the start? It was obviously so effective.

“Thank you,” I breathed.

At least that saved me from some harsher punishments and would give me time to figure him out. He thought I just needed some time to come to terms with my new role in life, and fine, he could think that, but I had successfully gotten him to lighten up on me for a while. I was becoming quite the negotiator.

“You should know ... this is very unlike me. I don’t compromise ... ever, but I’m willing to make an exception if it saves me a little aggravation in the long run. I hope your way is effective because if it isn’t, you’re seriously going to regret it.”

“I appreciate the opportunity,” I replied. “And it will be.”

He stared down at me for a little while, his expression suddenly becoming hard as his hand slowly made its way up to caress my jaw. His

eyes bore into me like a drill, piercing into my greatest fears as he gently eased his mouth to my ear.

“I’m only going to say this once more,” he drawled smoothly but deadly into my ear. “If I ever catch you even *thinking* about another man ... I’ll kill ’em. Do you understand me?”

I could feel my heart bleeding out into my chest as his words punctured deep holes that could never be repaired. If I wanted Jason to live, I’d have to give him up. I knew Darren was all about keeping his word, and I didn’t need to put the love of my life at any further risk than he probably already was. It broke my heart into pieces, but I had to let him go.

“Yes, Darren,” I whispered back. “I understand.”

“Good,” he said and got off me. He headed into my bathroom, apparently to wash up, and then went to the door.

“Wait,” I said, turning my head to him. “You’re just gonna leave me like this?”

He let out a low dark chuckle. “Good night, Jaden.” And closed the door.

Motherfucker.

Chapter Sixteen

Whiplash

I woke up the next morning to find myself curled up on the bed with my hands tucked into my chest. Darren must have released me sometime in the middle of the night while I had been sleeping. I looked up at the clock to find it was eight in the morning. I still had plenty of time to get ready.

Raising up, my muscles protested my movement as my body was stiff and sore from last night's altercation. But the pain I was feeling didn't compare to anything when I tried to stand. A sharp ache that rattled my insides near my cervix came full throttle and I gasped in pain and laid back down. Holy fuck, I wasn't sure if I could stand to walk. And then I remembered I didn't have much of a choice.

I decided to revert to my days as a baby and crawled my sore ass to the bathroom. I tried to pee, but the pain was too sharp for it to be comfortable. I decided the warm water of the shower might make it easier.

As soon as the steam started to fog up the mirrors, I crawled into the shower stall and sat on the floor, letting the hot sprays drench my broken body. It felt good and the warmth of the water did help me release my bladder.

I remained in my seated position, leaning against the tile wall as I washed my hair, body, and face, before crawling back out. If I had it my way, I would soak myself in that tempting Jacuzzi tub all day, but I didn't think I would ever have anything my way so long as I was stuck here.

My body felt slightly better, but with so much pain lacing each step, I wasn't sure how much of it I would be willing to stand. Trying my best to ignore it, I combed and styled my wet hair, applied some light makeup, and limped all the way to the closet.

I grabbed the first thing closest to the door and it turned out to be a bright pink tank top dress, one I was sure Darren would appreciate. I put on another white thong and bra, slipped on the dress, and took the smallest,

lightest steps I could as I made my way downstairs in the pair of nude sandals.

When I finally reached the dining room, Darren wasn't there and there were no place settings as usual. Was I too early? I looked at the clock as it read 8:57 a.m. and wondered where the hell he was. Angry that I had to do more walking than I wanted, I slowly made my way into the living room and saw Darren through the wall of windows, sitting out on the patio, talking on his phone.

I walked out to meet him, wincing with every step, unable to hide my pain. He was dressed pretty casual today, wearing a pair of jeans and a dark blue button-down with the sleeves rolled to his elbows so I could see his tattoos. He ended his call quickly and looked me up and down, smiling.

"Good morning, princess," he beamed at me. "Sleep well?"

I scoffed at being called a princess. I hated being called that when I was a kid, and I hated it even more so as an adult. At that very moment, I compared myself to Princess Peach being captured by Bowser for the umpteenth time and laughed in my head at the idea of waiting for Mario to come rescue me. Except there was no Mario and this wasn't a game. The only person who would be rescuing me would be me. Benching my nerd side, I took a seat at the table, slowly setting myself on the cushioning of the chair.

"Not exactly," I answered his question, trying to find a comfortable position.

"Something wrong?" he asked, turning his head to study me. He actually looked like he might be concerned. I didn't want to admit to him what he had done to me, but there was no sense in lying.

"I think you bruised my cervix," I winced.

"And whose fault is that?" he asked me with a warning glare.

Yours, you ass fuck.

"I know ... mine," I answered.

"That's right. I imagine that will take a while to heal and will serve as a good reminder for your week of reflection."

"Yes, I imagine it will," I agreed begrudgingly.

As I turned to make myself a cup of coffee, Darren reached over his shoulder and pulled a long strand of red hair from his jacket, irritation clear on his face and I smirked a little at that.

“Goddamn, Jaden, you’ve been here a mere couple of days and your hair is already fucking everywhere,” he said, agitated as he dropped the single strand on the ground.

“Oh, sorry,” I said innocently, clutching my coffee mug. “Did you not read the fine print when you acquired me? I shed like a dog.”

That earned me quite the look from Darren and I felt my stomach drop.

“That’s strike one,” Darren said, holding up his index finger. “You don’t want me to get to strike three,” he warned.

Don’t roll your eyes. Don’t roll your eyes.

“Since we’re trying a new method for the next week, you’ll be given a limit of three strikes a day. If I make it to strike three, you’ll have exceeded my tolerance and you will not like what happens next. Are we clear on this?”

“Yes, Darren.” I nodded.

“Good.”

We were silent for a while as I turned to take in the view of the ocean, attempting to ignore the ache between my legs as Darren began to read his newspaper. I sipped on my coffee for a while and continued my appreciation of the view.

“Jaden, I suggest you eat something.” Darren finally spoke, not bothering to lift his eyes from the paper.

I really wasn’t hungry; the ache between my legs successfully suppressed my appetite, but arguing with him was futile. I looked at the array of foods laid out on the silver platters. French toast, pancakes, bacon, scrambled eggs, sliced fruit, muffins, and bagels had been set out on the table, but none of it appealed to me.

Deciding on the easiest thing for me to digest, I placed a small helping of scrambled eggs on my plate and one slice of bacon. After finishing my plate and my coffee, I looked over at Darren, hoping he was satisfied with my attempt. He didn’t say anything, but he still didn’t look happy. I exhaled a slight sigh of annoyance and went for a small helping of sliced fruit, picking at it and sipping my coffee until it was gone. He seemed satisfied with that.

“So,” he said, putting down his paper and turning to me. “I have a couple of things to take care of today, but I’ll be working from my home office so you can roam the house if you’d like.”

How nice of him to extend my cage.

"Thanks, but I think I'll just relax today ... if that's okay with you," I added.

"I suppose, so long as it's productive for you."

"Meaning?"

"You know what I mean," he said, lowering his gaze.

I nodded. I needed to reflect and show him I was willing to submit to him, but all I really wanted to do was soak for hours in that dream bathtub.

"Honestly, all I want to do right now is soak in the bathtub until the sun sets."

I looked at him, almost pleading with my eyes that he wouldn't object. The bath would soothe the pain between my legs, and it was something that could take up hours of the day. He nodded and smiled.

"I think that's the girliest thing you've ever said." He almost laughed.

I shrugged. "Believe it or not, I do have my girly moments from time to time. They're just rare."

He gave me a small smug smile. "I can't wait to experience them."

I gave him a confused look. Why would he want to experience that?

"I'll tell you what. Go upstairs and take your bath. When I'm ready, which will be well before sunset," he said with a slight smirk, "I'll come and get you and we'll have a picnic on the beach. How does that sound?"

Him? A picnic? Really? This man, who was dripping power and masculinity, wanted to have a picnic with me on the beach?

"Sure. That actually sounds really nice," I replied, completely shocked.

"Good, but it comes with a small price," he said, his eyes glittering with a kind of playfulness I didn't recognize.

I turned my head to the side, my stomach churning with anticipation. What cruel thing would he subject me to now?

"And what is it going to cost me?" I asked, narrowing my eyes at him.

"I just want my good morning kiss." He smiled brightly, but his smugness was not far behind.

I gave him a look to let him know I didn't trust him. His impression of a good morning kiss might be very different compared to my impression of a good morning kiss. But whatever, a kiss was a kiss, and he was going to get what he wanted anyway.

“Fine,” I said, narrowing my eyes at him as I began to rise uncomfortably from my chair. I could handle one fucking kiss. It wouldn’t kill me.

Instead, Darren got up and reached for my hand, helping me into his embrace. I looked up into his ocean eyes with slight fear growing in my belly. But what I found when I looked up was not what I expected. I saw something—something I didn’t recognize. It wasn’t excitement, or rage, or lust. It was soft and warm like he was really looking at me with something other than possessiveness. He was looking at me as if he adored me, as if I was something more than just his prisoner. Like a treasure, a precious treasure he wanted to keep hidden away from the world lest someone steal me away from him.

I felt the fear in my stomach boil to a simmering warmth as his fingers traced along my hairline, tucking my stray strands behind my ear. His hand then lingered against my cheek, and I found my hand curling over his wrist, letting him know I was there.

“God, you’re beautiful,” he whispered to me and gently placed his lips on mine.

His kiss was soft and sensual, unlike anything I had ever experienced with him. He was gentle in his touch, but firm enough for me to really feel him. Heat flared in my tummy as he cradled the back of my neck in his other hand, our lips moving as one as we deepened our kiss. When he finally released me, I felt dazed and confused, but I immediately shook it off as he stared down at me, a bright smile on his lips.

I gave him a small, timid smile back, not wanting to like what he just did, but I appreciated his tenderness. He then kissed me on my forehead and gently scooped me up into his arms. I gasped at his abrasiveness but had to force myself not to fight him.

“Allow me.” He grinned and carried me back into the house, up the stairs, and to my bathroom. By the time we got to the tub, he wasn’t even winded and that was a long way to carry me.

God, I envied his strength. All my life I wished I could be strong, and I was, but it would never compare to the strength of a man, especially this one. I hated my body for its stupid limitations, but I reminded myself that speed or strength had nothing on the power of a semi-automatic.

Setting me down on the edge of the tub, he ran the water and then pulled out some Epsom salt from one of my cabinets and poured it into the

filling tub. Holy shit? Who was this man? Certainly not the same man who had beat the shit out of my cervix last night with his dick because he had severe jealousy issues. He seemed like he actually cared.

After pouring in the salt, the tub was full, and he pushed a button to start the jets. My excitement was hard to contain. He even lit the surrounding candles by the bay window next to the tub and the air immediately bloomed with the scent of lavender. Wow.

“Do you need anything else?” he turned and asked me.

I could feel myself getting whiplash at his sudden acts of kindness.

“I should be fine. Thank you.”

“Good. I’ll see you in a few hours.”

He then leaned down, kissed my forehead, and left the bathroom, actually closing the door behind him. What in the fuck just happened? I had gone from violent rape to soothing bubble bath? I was really going to have to learn to anticipate his shit. It was just so hot and cold.

I didn’t wait another second as I stripped down, clipped my hair up, and slowly plunged myself into the soothing warmth of the bath. The jets felt amazing on my sore muscles as they massaged the tension right out of them, so it didn’t take long for my body to slip into a coma of ultimate comfort.

After about a half an hour, I felt the magic of the Epsom salt working as the throbbing in my cervix finally subsided. It wasn’t gone, but it was much more bearable. This bathtub was my new best friend. As I soaked, I tried not to think about anything; I forced myself into a state of numbness so I wouldn’t have to dwell on the pain I was trying to bury. I needed to curb my anger, shelf my pride, and focus on reflection.

I was a captive now, and there was no changing that. Not yet, at least. I needed to let it all go and replace it with the will to please a monster. I hoped that if I could make Darren happy, he’d return the favor. But I would also have to let him.

I stared out the bay window beside the tub overlooking the beautiful ocean blue. I remembered a time not so long ago when I’d find my happy place on a beach with clear blue water and seagulls in the sky. And here it was right in front of me, except it wasn’t my happy place. It was my own personal Hell.

As I soaked, thoughts of Darren’s random change in attitude refused to leave me. Yes, he would hurt me when I stepped out of line, that much

was clear. He was not above hitting me, so I needed to be mindful of that if I wanted my face to remain unscathed. But when I was deserving, when I gave in to him, he would reward me ... and I was experiencing that reward right now. The kiss this morning gave me a glimpse of how he could be as long as I obeyed him. Somehow, he was capable of showing me tenderness, but only if I earned it. He was just so demanding; his expectations of my obedience too high for me to ever possibly reach, and I had a feeling he knew this.

I had an underlying feeling that the monster in Darren wouldn't always slumber. It would want out of its cage; it would want to take its fury out on me, and Darren needed me to be strong enough to take it. That was the point in all this. I could see that now. He wanted my obedience, but he still wanted my defiance so he could punish me and feed the beast until it was good and full. I would have to figure out a strategy to keep his beast at bay all the while giving him exactly what he needed to keep myself from harm's way. If he felt he could lose control and really hurt me, I would have to learn to predict and manage his urges before they consumed us both.

About an hour later, I could feel the water starting to cool down and I realized my fingertips now looked like raisins. Rising from the bath, my body felt ten times better as I reached for the towel and dried myself off.

Wrapping the towel around my body, I opened the bathroom door to find Darren sitting on my bed. His elbows rested on his knees as he looked up at me from his seated position and smiled.

"Feeling better?" he asked me.

"Yes, thank you," I replied a little surprised to find him waiting for me in my room as I walked out to him.

I noticed he had changed into black swimming trunks and a white t-shirt. A Barbie pink bikini laid next to him on the bed. Ew. He must have noticed my disgust at the color of the bathing suit because he turned to look at it confused.

"You really hate pink that much, huh?" he said turning back to me.

"What gave it away?" I asked sarcastically.

"The fact that you look like someone just told you you're short."

Now, I scowled, twisting my lips into a grimace as I glared at him.

"I thought I had fulfilled my pink requirements with this morning's ensemble."

Darren chuckled. "No such thing."

“You have to know by now that I am not a girly girl. I like to ride motorcycles and shoot guns, get tattoos, climb trees, and play sports, and I really don’t mind getting a little dirt under my usually short-clipped fingernails. That’s just who I am, and no amount of clothing, manicures, or an obscene amount of pink is going to change that.”

Wow, I really hoped I hadn’t overstepped a boundary there. But again, he wanted honesty. He turned his head and pursed his lips, considering his words as well as mine.

“Jaden,” he said softly, “if I were to take a pistol and put a pretty pink bow on it, does that make it any less of a pistol?”

“Depends on where you wrapped the bow,” I replied, narrowing my eyes.

He gave me a dangerous look. I knew that wasn’t the answer he wanted, but tough shit.

“Let’s say it’s on the grip,” he answered, though clearly not happy with me.

“Then no, I suppose not,” I said.

“Exactly. I know you’re not a girly girl, however, that doesn’t mean I don’t like to see you dress like one. Whether you like it or not, you’re a young lady, and as such, you need to meet specific standards to successfully please me. Just think of yourself as the pistol with the pretty pink bow on it.”

“Pistols with bows around the grip are still dangerous.” I smirked.

“Only when they’re loaded, which is why your bow is tied firmly around the trigger.” He winked.

How right he was. Give me any kind of ammunition and he was dead in a heartbeat, but take it away, and I was nothing more than a blunt object.

“Touché,” I finally admitted.

“Mmhm.” He nodded slightly. “Now, put this on so we can go out and enjoy our picnic.”

I took the two-piece bikini and headed for the closet to change.

“Jaden, where do you think you’re going?”

Fuck, I was hoping he would let me get away with this one, but I knew it was a long shot. I really didn’t want to change in front of him, but it really wasn’t worth the fight. Begrudgingly, I went over to the table, put the two-piece down, and dropped my towel while pretending he wasn’t there. I

quickly slipped the top and bottoms on as fast as I could and laid the towel over the chair.

Satisfied, he got up from the bed and reached out his hand, waiting for me to take it. When I did, he headed for the door, but then I stopped, remembering something extremely important.

“Wait, I’m going to need sunscreen. Otherwise, I’ll burn up in about five minutes.”

It was no secret that fair-skinned people needed to douse themselves in sunscreen if they wanted to escape the strong rays of the sun unscathed. There was never a single summer I didn’t get the worst sunburn of my life.

“That sounds like an excellent idea.” He grinned.

Oh joy, I just gave him the perfect reason to put his hands all over me. Good job, Jaden.

We headed out into the hall, me still wincing the entire time, and he grabbed a bottle of sunscreen from a nearby locked closet. We then made our way down to the beach. My steps still held a slight discomfort, but nothing I couldn’t deal with. The pain would be gone by tomorrow. Hopefully.

As we got down to the white sandy beach, I could see the rather large blanket that had been spread out just a few feet from the shore. A beach umbrella was sticking out from the sand and laying at an angle, providing plenty of shade for my wimpy-ass skin. There was also a basket on the corner of the blanket that I was sure contained our lunch.

We sat down and I tucked myself under the shade of the umbrella and asked Darren for the sunscreen. Even though the sun could be a cruel bitch when it came to my skin, I still loved basking in it.

“Lay on your stomach,” Darren ordered me.

Damn it.

I rolled over onto my stomach, finding the sand to be pretty comfortable as I sank into it on top of the blanket. Darren moved my hair out of the way, and slowly pulled the string of my bikini top open. Fucking asshole.

Straddling my hips, he squeezed some sunscreen onto his hands and started rubbing it on my back. It was cold at first, but the warmth of his hands shadowed that within seconds. He made good work of the lotion as he practically massaged my back, getting in deep and making sure he didn’t leave a single square inch uncovered. It actually felt really nice, and I

moaned a little in response. I could practically hear him smile as his skilled hands continued to ease the tension that had taken residence in the muscles of my back and shoulders. Hot baths and Jacuzzi jets were nice, but they never compared to the hands of a man.

When Darren was done, he pushed himself down to my legs and very gently spread them, as if he was afraid of startling me. But he had, and I immediately turned my head to see what he was doing.

“Relax,” he said. “I just don’t want to leave a single square inch of you unprotected.”

Protected. Pfft. What the fuck does he know about protection?

If he wanted me protected, he should let me go, but I suppose it was a good sign that he had some concern for my well-being.

I relaxed a little and let him finish rubbing the sunscreen into my skin. When he was done, to my surprise, he retied the back of my bikini and nudged me with his hands to turn me on to my back. He finished what was left of my legs, going extra slow, and he actually looked like he was enjoying himself.

When he got to v of my thighs, I grew nervous again, worried he might take advantage of his position, but he didn’t. Squeezing more lotion into his hands, he rubbed it over the slight bulges of my abs, up the sides of my rib cage, and finally ended at my hips. His hands ran under the ties of the bathing suit and I couldn’t help but hold my breath. Again, he bypassed my anxiety and went back up to my ribs. And then he went for my chest; though I had to give him props for trying to be as respectful as possible, it was still strange to see. Once he had my chest and arms done, he moved away from me so I could sit up.

“There, all done,” he said, smiling with satisfaction as if he had done a good job.

Maybe he was having a reflection week of his own?

“Thank you,” I said, wiping some of the contents of the leftover lotion onto my face.

“Thirsty?” he asked me.

“Yes,” I said, hoping he had some whiskey in that basket. I doubted it, though.

What he pulled out instead were two champagne glasses and a bottle of champagne. He popped the cork and poured us both a glass, handing me one.

“Cheers,” he said, holding his glass out to me. I clinked my glass to his and brought it to my lips. The taste was sweet and crisp as it trickled down into my belly. I was more of a hard liquor kind of girl, but this was actually pretty good.

I laid back on my elbows, crossed my ankles, and looked out at the water. I wanted to run into it and swim as far away from here as I could. But I still didn’t know where here was and I was fairly certain I would die a horrible painful death when the collar would surely activate and send my lifeless body to the bottom of the ocean where no one would find me.

“So you’ve really lived here all your life?” I asked, honestly curious.

“Yes. Like I said, this was my family’s home,” he replied.

I nodded in acknowledgment. He was no stranger to this area then.

“It’s an awfully big house for just one person. Have you ever thought about moving anywhere else?”

“Well, I have an apartment in upstate New York, a cabin in Aspen, Colorado, and a private island in the Caribbean to name a few, so I guess that should answer your question.”

“Wow, that’s a lot,” I replied a little shocked and envious.

“Why do you ask?”

“Just curious.” I shrugged.

“Do you know what I’m curious about?” he said deviously, his body leaning toward me as he eyed me up and down.

I turned to him, suddenly very cautious about his sudden curiosity. “What?”

“What your childhood was like.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. He was trying to get me to open up to him, but I suppose it was fair since I had asked him the very same question.

I shrugged. “It was good. I was a very active kid. My parents let me join gymnastics when I was little. When I got bored of that and my dad had nothing left to teach me about fighting, I went into martial arts. I’m sure you can already tell I was a bit of a tomboy.”

“Yes, I can see that.” He almost chuckled. “And what about your parents? What were they like?”

And now I’d had enough.

“Why are you bothering to ask me this? I thought you didn’t want me thinking about my past life.”

Darren responded with a no nonsense glare and I felt myself grow agitated.

Oh God, how dare I question him?

“Your childhood is different, and besides, I’m trying to learn as much as I can about you.”

“Why? So you can attempt to manipulate me some more?”

“Jaden, just answer the goddamn question. Don’t ruin the nice time we’re having.”

Yes, because we were having such a grand ole time.

I released my sigh through my nose and glared at him.

“My mom is a hairdresser and my dad died when I was twenty-one. There, happy?”

I looked away from him now, pissed off I had given him that little bit of information, even though I was sure he was already aware of it. It was hard for me to talk about my dad, since the wound was still fresh. Even after four years, I had never really gotten over his death, and I wasn’t sure I ever would.

“I know,” Darren said softly. “And I’m sorry. That must have been hard for you.”

Yeah, he knew. Of course, he knew. He knew everything about me that was on paper. But the paper didn’t give away shit when it came to the real deal. My fingers fidgeted with the glass and I kept my eyes from his. I needed to change the subject.

“What about your dad?” I asked a little more angrily than I had meant.

“He’s gone, too,” he replied casually, shrugging his shoulders like it was no big deal. “Died last year.”

Good, I thought. But instead of saying that, I just nodded slowly.

“So where did you develop your love for motorcycles?” he asked, thankfully changing the subject.

I couldn’t help but smile at that. God, I missed riding. There was so much freedom involved and the feel of the throttle in my hand amped me right up. He must have noticed the brightness in my face as the thought of my bike brought back happy memories of my dad and me.

“From my dad,” I said. “He taught me to ride dirt bikes when I was young and then we moved on to the street when I was old enough and got

comfortable. He was a Harley lover, but I'm more of a Ducati fan. What about you?" I asked.

"I had always been into them, but my mom thought they were too dangerous. That didn't stop me, though. My brothers and I all taught ourselves to ride, and I now own several bikes."

"Will I ever get to see them?" I asked. I really wanted to know what he had. It actually excited me a little.

"Maybe." He shrugged. "If you're good." His eyes flicked up to mine as a slight smirk crept into the corners of his mouth.

I nodded.

We talked more about our love of riding and all the fun experiences we'd had over the years. I was surprised at how easy I found it to be talking to him when we had something in common. I suppose we did have a lot of common ground; I just didn't want to admit it.

During our conversations, we snacked on some fruit and crackers and shared a salad while enjoying the breeze from the water. Darren then got up and took off his shirt, throwing it to the side of the blanket. Damn, he looked good from this angle. In this light, he looked a little too muscular for my taste, but he was impressive nonetheless.

"Come on, let's go for a swim," he said, holding his hand out to me.

I thought about secretly breaking off the handle of the champagne glass, sneaking it into the water, shanking the shit out of his neck, and letting him bleed out until the current took him away while some sharks finished him off.

God, I'm so murderous!

It was pretty far-fetched anyway, so I set the glass down, took his hand, and let him pull me to my feet. We walked hand in hand, as we made our way to the shore, my hand engulfed by his giant one while he tugged me along.

When the water of the shore splashed over my feet, my skin tingled at the temperature, which was a little bit chillier than yesterday, but it still felt nice. I stopped for a second, wondering about my collar, but trusted that Darren wouldn't lead me to certain death if he had anything to say about it. . I was pretty sure he'd die along with me anyway.

Darren started pulling me into the water faster than I would have liked; the water was now at my knees and much colder than I was ready for.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa!” I screeched, pulling him back. “Can’t I have some time to adjust?!”

“Sure.” He smiled, and then picked me up and tossed my body into the water, fully submerging me. How in the hell had I not seen that coming? I emerged from the water, splashing around while trying to regain my composure.

“That’s not what I meant, asshole!” I yelled, splashing at him. His laugh was genuine and light as he walked toward me through the water.

“I bet you’re used to the water now.” He grinned.

I scowled at him, turned, and dove into the water. I only got a few feet before Darren caught up to me and wrapped his arms around my torso, pulling me from the ocean.

“Where do you think you’re going?” he asked, grinning.

“I *was* going for a swim. That’s why we came out here, wasn’t it?” I asked as he pulled me to his chest.

“Well, yeah, but you took off without me.” He almost sounded sad.

“Not my fault you can’t keep up.” I shrugged.

“I’m pretty sure I caught up to you fairly quickly,” he said, tightening his grip on me for emphasis.

“What do you want, a medal?” I asked, sarcastically.

Damn, I was hilarious.

“Nope, having you as a prize is just fine,” he said as he lowered us deeper into the water. He just seemed so playful and carefree today. I wondered what had gotten him in the mood.

He pulled us out past the sandbar until it was up to his shoulders and well past my head. He let me go, and I had to kick my feet to stay afloat while all he had to do was stand. We swam around for a while, and I floated on my back here and there, just enjoying the warmth of the sun while the taste of salt water lingered in my mouth. When I opened my eyes some time later, Darren was nowhere to be found.

I turned around in the water frantically as I looked for him, but he was nowhere in sight. Hopefully, he drowned? Yeah, right, as if a man like him would go down like that. But I still secretly hoped as I continued to scan the water for him. Maybe I could head back to the shore, grab his phone, and unlock the shit around my limbs; maybe get the fuck out of here. But before I had a chance to move, I felt a presence rising behind me from the water.

Darren pulled me from behind to his chest and sank us both under the waves. Instinctively, I fought against his arms, but they acted like chains around my waist and there was no use escaping them. He twisted us under the water and then finally pulled us back up for air. He kept a strong hold of me as I gasped for air and splashed around. He chuckled heavily behind me.

“Surprise.” He laughed.

Oh, he thought he was being funny, did he? Well, I had something funny for him. I took some water and splashed it up right into his face, but then he just whipped me around and dunked me into the water again.

When he pulled me back up, he turned me around to face him, my legs now straddling his hips as he lowered himself into the water.

“Are you done splashing?” he asked me, smiling.

“Probably not,” I replied.

“So feisty,” he said.

He took my wrists and placed them back over his shoulders so my arms linked around his neck. I hated being this close to him; it was uncomfortable, but I knew I would eventually have to fake the comfort.

He kept his hands on my hips as he circled us in the water, and I decided I didn’t want to look at his face anymore, so I rested my chin on his shoulder, hoping he would take it as me just cuddling up to him. He did, and he relaxed against my body as his arms curled around my sides and his hands rested on my back.

“So tell me about your tattoos,” he said against the back of my head.

“The feathers are for me, and the anchor is for my dad.”

“I get the anchor being for your dad, but why are the feathers for you?”

I had to laugh a little because it was a huge contradiction to my current status in life.

“They’re there to remind me to be myself and to always take the good with the bad.”

“How fitting.” I heard him chuckle. Glad to see he saw the irony in that.

“What about yours?” I asked, still keeping my chin on his shoulder.

“The golden eagle on my forearm is also for my dad, and the shield is the symbol of my organization. The Latin is a family motto.”

“How fitting.” I had to chuckle, and I was pretty damn sure a smile cracked across his face.

“The sleeve is for my family lineage. I’m German and Scottish.”

“How nice,” I said.

“Yeah. Like I said, there’s more coming, just been a bit preoccupied lately,” he said giving me a slight squeeze.

“What would you get?”

“Maybe something for you.”

I took my chin off his shoulder and looked him in the face, raising my eyebrows in total shock.

“Why would you do that? You don’t even know me,” I asked.

“Because ...” He chuckled. “Contrary to popular belief, you mean a great deal to me, Jaden, regardless of time spent. Though I don’t show it, I’ve never been more excited to have you in my life. You’re going to be the best investment I’ve ever made. You’re everything I’ve ever wanted in a woman and soon, once I have you trained, you can begin to enjoy everything I have to offer you.”

“The only thing you’re offering me is a set of chains and a massive headache,” I replied bluntly.

“You say that now.” He smirked. “But eventually, when you’ve come to accept your place, you won’t see the chains anymore.”

“Oh, I’ll be that brainwashed by then?” I mocked, heading straight for dangerous territory.

“If that’s what you want to call it,” he said dismissively.

“Then what would *you* call it?”

His arrogance was starting to piss me off.

“I’d call it love,” he said seriously, staring straight into my eyes.

I was silent for a moment, shocked he even knew what the word was, but obviously, he had no idea what it even meant.

“Wait, are you really ... expecting me ... to fall in love with you? Because Stockholm Syndrome really isn’t my thing.”

“You really underestimate my methods of persuasion, don’t you?” he said with danger gleaming from his eyes.

“And you underestimate my inner strength,” I said confidently.

His face grew into a menacing gaze, and though it terrified me, I refused to back down.

“I told you I was going to enjoy breaking you, Jaden. By the time I’m through with you, I’ll be so deep in your mind, you won’t know which way is up anymore. All you’ll be able to think about is pleasing me because it’s

the only thing that will protect you from my rage should you ever disobey me. And finally, when I have you twisted so nicely around my fingers, everything will become second nature and you won't have to think about it anymore. You'll be able to anticipate my will and then you can live the happy life I want for you."

God, I was so disgusted by his words. All I wanted to do was shove his stupid fucking delirious head under the water until the bubbles stopped breaching.

"What you want is a goddamn robot with tits and a vagina. Now, let me go. You've officially ruined my mood ... again," I said trying to pull myself from his hips. He laughed at me again and then pulled me tighter to him, bringing me inches from his face.

"I'll let you go when I damn well please, which will be never, by the way," he growled at me.

The lightning strike of the thunderstorm approaching over the horizon and the thunder rolling along with it caught my attention.

"Darren," I said, nodding my head over his shoulder.

"What?" he snarled turning to look behind him. A disappointed sigh slipped from his nose as he turned back around. "Time to go."

He kept a strong hold on me as he walked us back to shore until my feet could finally touch the ground without the water being over my head. He continued to keep a firm grip on my hip, ushering me through the water until we reached our blanket.

The wind was picking up as we put the contents from our picnic back into the basket. Darren picked up the blanket, shook the sand from it, and then draped it over his shoulder. I picked up the basket, and he grabbed the umbrella, folding it back up and leaning it against his shoulder as well. He took my hand in his, and we walked back up to the house.

Tension remained around us from our argument, or maybe it was just me since I knew I was the one not getting their way. When we got to the back patio, Darren leaned the umbrella and blanket over the side railing of the patio and ushered me inside the house just as the rain began to fall.

We were still soaking wet from our swim, and I felt a little awkward standing in his living room while I dripped water on his hardwood floor. Why hadn't we brought towels?

The air conditioning was starting to chill my skin as Darren took the basket from my hands and set it on a nearby table. He then looked over at

me and noticed I was starting to shiver.

“Hmm ...” he said, rubbing his chin. “I’ll give you three choices—hot tub, sauna, or shower.”

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Chapter Seventeen

Admission

I raised my eyebrows in surprise at the vast amount of choices now laid out at my feet, and I didn't hesitate in case he decided to take them away.

"Shower," I said immediately. I needed to get this salt water off my skin before I became too itchy.

"Good choice," he said. And then he stopped and looked at me for a second. A grin slid across his face. "Wait here just one second."

My brows furrowed as he took off into the parlor. He was gone for only a few seconds but as I continued to shiver, my irritation grew. I wrapped my wet arms around my torso in a failed attempt to keep myself warm until Darren finally came back, holding two large shot glasses and a bottle of Jack Daniel's.

"How about a shot of Jack to warm you up?" He grinned.

I lifted one eyebrow at him, surprised he was offering me one of my favorite brands of whiskey, but then grew angry at the lack of towels I expected him to bring back.

"I thought you were bringing us some towels," I said with a grimace.

"You won't need a towel in a minute," he replied as he poured the whiskey into the glasses and handed me one.

I took the shot glass from him, and he set the bottle down on the glass coffee table next to us. I didn't even wait for him before I slugged the shot back, its strong liquid burning down my throat and warming me from the inside out. God, I needed that. I had wanted a drink since before I had been kidnapped.

Normally, I would never allow myself to get drunk around him. I needed to keep my guard up and always be ready; plus, I didn't want to reveal something that would potentially get me in trouble. But I could handle one shot. Or two.

Darren raised an eyebrow at me, surprised I wasn't so shy when it came to drinking.

“Sorry,” I said. “I really needed that.”

“I can see that,” he said, and then threw his head back and drank his shot down. “Want another?”

“Sure,” I said, eyeing him now. One more couldn’t hurt. We both did another at the same time, and I set the glass down on the table, finished with my fit of drinking while the harsh liquor burned inside my stomach with the first shot. I was feeling better already.

“How about one more,” he said taking my glass and filling it up a little more than he had the other two.

I gave him a suspicious look but threw my head back and emptied the contents down my throat. After three shots in a row, my throat and stomach were really starting to burn. That was enough for me.

“Last one,” he said, pouring another.

“What are trying to do here, get me drunk?”

“What? You can’t handle four shots of whiskey?” he challenged me.

“I know my limits, and I prefer to have a clear mind around you.”

“So you can’t then,” he said, holding the glass out to me, waiting to see if I would take him up on his challenge. Motherfucking reverse psychology.

“Fine. As long as this is the last one,” I said angrily and threw the shot back. It stung harshly on its way down this time. He smiled and finished his glass.

Leaving the glasses and bottle on the table, he took my hand and led me upstairs. I swear it was as if the man couldn’t bear to let me walk anywhere without him tugging me along. His arm was my own personal leash.

As we got to the top of the stairs, Darren pulled me to the right instead of the left and we continued down the west wing of the house. I had assumed he would take us to my room, but it seemed he had something else in mind. I had a feeling he was taking us to his room.

When we finally came to the third door on the left, I realized Darren hadn’t shown me his room during yesterday’s tour. It never occurred to me to ask because I simply wasn’t interested. He stopped and stared down at me.

“This is my room,” he said seriously. “And you are welcome to come here anytime you want as long as the door is open.”

“Okay,” I replied. As if I’d ever dream of wanting to be in his room.

He stepped in front of me blocking the way as he unlocked the door with another fingerprint scanner by the side of the wall. I listened as the lock to the door unhitched.

As we stepped inside, the essence of man immediately greeted me as I entered the most masculine room I had ever seen. Everything was different shades of dark gray and navy blue, with black wooden dressers and a black steel bed frame canopy with dark blue blankets and pillows. Even a sleek black leather couch rested up against the large window opening out to the sea. A set of double doors that led to his patio balcony was a couple of feet away from the couch. The wall opposite the bed had a huge flat-screen TV mounted on the wall over a grand fireplace.

He actually let go of my hand and walked down to the far end of the room to another door that I assumed led into the bathroom. I lingered behind for a few seconds and looked around the room, hoping something would give Darren away, but there wasn't much of anything. I heard him turn on the water and I headed over to the window, keeping my hands over my arms as I attempted to warm myself. And then I felt my head start to spin as the floor shifted beneath me and I reached out for the wall to stop myself. Shit, those shots were kicking in.

"Shower's ready," Darren said as he came toward me.

"Do you have conditioner in there?" I asked stalling. I really didn't want to take a shower with him, knowing he was probably going to wash me and put his big fucking hands all over my body. Again.

"Jaden, get the fuck in the shower." He pointed toward the bathroom.

"Fine. Jesus," I said walking past him.

He followed me in, irritated, and closed the door behind us. I looked around, noticing his bathroom was all dark marble and dark wooden cabinets with a big black bathtub in the corner and a huge shower next to it. If I thought my bathroom was luxurious, his was far beyond that.

Darren started rummaging through the cabinets until he finally found what he was looking for. He slammed a small travel-size bottle of conditioner on the counter. "Here," he said.

"Thank you," I said politely.

I could feel my head starting to buzz, and I tried to shake it away before it got to me. Darren then stripped out of his shorts and it was the first time I had ever seen him fully naked. If I thought he was impressive before, he certainly was now. He had long, powerful legs, perfectly trimmed calf

muscles, and just the right amount of hair to cover them. But the lack of hair surrounding his groin was what surprised me the most, and then my eyes finally locked on the large erection that bobbed just under his belly button. I tried not to stare too long, for fear he might try to engage something. What the fuck was I thinking? He was probably planning something all along.

“See something you like?” he asked with a dark smirk.

“Nope,” I said, turning my back to him and picking up the bottle of conditioner. Steam started to fill the air, and I didn’t even wait for him to get in the shower. My skin was starting to itch.

“Jaden,” he said, laughing a little. “What are you doing?”

“Getting in the shower?” I said, pointing at the glass door with my thumb.

“Not with your bathing suit on.”

I smiled a devious smile and stepped into the shower anyway. I knew he would be pissed, so I quickly took my suit off as fast as I could and by the time his thundering footsteps reached the door, I had my bathing suit in my hand and held it out for him. Wrenching the door open, his eyes fell on the bikini top and bottom in my hand and a smart-ass smile on my face. Damn, the whiskey was making me brave.

“Smartass,” he said, grabbing my bathing suit and tossing it over his shoulder. I gave him an innocent smile and kept myself under the hot spray of the water. He stepped in behind me, standing under the spray of the showerhead on the opposite wall of the stall. He had a third one that was directly above the both of us as well.

“Come here,” he said, pulling my hips toward him and away from the jets of the water. He then reached behind him, squeezed some shampoo in his hands, and started washing my hair. The fuck?

“Umm ... I’m perfectly capable of washing my own hair,” I said, swaying just a bit but catching myself.

“I know you are, princess, but I want to.”

“Don’t call me that. I hate it when you call me that,” I muttered, pushing at his shoulder.

“Why?” He laughed.

“’Cuz I ain’t no weak-ass bitch,” I slurred, and then I immediately covered my mouth with my hands and hunched my shoulders in. I couldn’t believe I just said that.

Goddamn, the liquor was really hitting me now. He chuckled at me and placed me under the spray to rinse the shampoo from my hair.

“I know you’re not, but you’re my princess now, so get used to it.”

“Ew,” I whined under the spray, swatting at him.

Darren gave me a dark look, but my drunk bravery just made me smile innocently at him. He shook his head and then brought me out of the spray to condition my hair.

As he left me to rinse off under the spray, he shampooed his hair and soaped up his perfect body. I quickly closed my eyes and focused on rinsing my hair. And then I felt myself falling backward.

“Whoa, hey!” Darren said, reaching for me and pulling me forward. “Jesus, you really can’t handle your liquor, can you.”

“Fuck you,” I whined. “I told you I didn’t want to take that last shot.”

Darren then swiftly turned me to my side and smacked me on the ass hard, and I gasped at the contact.

“That’s strike two. I don’t care if you’re drunk or not. You don’t talk to me like that.” He pointed his finger in my face, a menacing glare emanating from his eyes.

I pouted but stayed quiet after that, afraid my mouth would get me into more trouble. Coach Jack had officially benched my fighting skills, so there was no sense in egging him on.

“Now, come here and stand still,” he ordered.

Darren poured some soap on a loofah and lathered it up. He started with my arms, rubbing the suds into my skin and working down to my wrists. He came back up and started rubbing my shoulders, and I somehow felt myself becoming lax. And then I felt the loofah scrub over my breasts, and I moved away slightly.

“Don’t start, Jaden. Just relax,” he said continuing to rub slowly.

I moaned in protest but did my best just to forget what was happening. I let him finish scrubbing me down all the way to my legs, and as the liquor clouded my mind more and more, I began to relax and not give a shit anymore. I just let it go. It was pointless to fight him anymore. He would still take what he wanted no matter how I felt about it. It would just make things so much easier, which was probably exactly what Darren was aiming for. That son of a bitch.

Once he finished soaping me up, he moved me back under the water and rinsed my body off, helping to remove the suds with his hands as he brushed them gently over my skin. I was sinking deeper and deeper into the buzz, and I was beginning to find it quite difficult to even stand properly. I was not wasted, but I was definitely drunk. Fuck.

When we were both finally clean, Darren stepped out for just a second and brought back some towels. He wrapped one around my body, and I noticed immediately how big it was, just a little bit larger than a beach towel. It went down to my ankles as he stood me up and helped my sluggish drunk ass out of the shower. Turning me around, he picked me up and plopped me down on the counter, and I couldn't help but lean back against the mirror. He toweled himself off quickly and then turned to me.

"Lean forward," he said, holding another towel in his hands.

I did, and he started toweling my hair dry until it was nothing but a bunch of damp strings. Tossing the towel aside, he finished drying the rest of my body with the towel still wrapped around me and then pulled me to my feet. I clung to the towel, keeping it tight against my body as he led me back into the bedroom.

I was getting dizzy now that I was walking, and the room was spinning as I tried to keep my footing stable. It didn't work, and I fell right into Darren's side, but he just chuckled and kept me tucked into him.

"Why did you have to get me drunk?" I asked annoyed and tried to push away from him.

"Several reasons," he said, refusing to let me leave his side. "First, I wanted to warm you up. Second, I wanted to test your tolerance, which is for shit, by the way, and third, I wanted you to be able to relax."

"First of all, I work full time and go to school full time," I slurred. "I don't have time to drink. Second of all, my uncle is an alcoholic, so I try to avoid that little family trait if I can."

"You mean you *used to* ..." He snarled. "But I'm not surprised about your tolerance. You are tiny as fuck."

I stared up at him and gave him my glare of death. "What the fuck did you just call me?" I seethed.

If looks could kill, I would have been dead in the blink of an eye. Before I could gain any sense of what was happening, Darren had me pinned against the wall, his palms planted firmly on the wall on either side of my head caging me in.

“Just who the fuck do you think you’re talking to, huh? Who the fuck do you think you are?” he roared. “Your first day of reflection doesn’t seem to be working really well for you.”

“That was a low blow!” I shouted at him, my heart pumping so loud I could hear it.

“That’s not what I fucking asked you,” he growled in my ear.

I felt pathetic now—drunk out of my wits, vulnerable, and small. I hated that he could make me feel like that; I hated the power it gave him, and I refused to allow myself to wallow in it any longer.

I stared up at him confidently, pushing through the liquor to find my bearings, my fear burning into anger as the fire in my voice torched his ears with a sharp ferocity I had never known.

“Who do I think I am? I know *exactly* who I am and I know *exactly* who you are. I’m the fighter you will never break, the one person you can never beat. And you’re the piece of shit I’m going to kill one day. No matter what you throw my way, no matter what you put me through or what you make me say, I will always get back up and take it all over again because I can. Because I was born to breathe fire. I’m unbreakable, so fuck you.”

I knew it was a façade, and I knew I would eventually have to submit to him if I ever wanted him to trust me enough to plot my escape, but I couldn’t do so without him knowing who I really was, what I really was. At least then, when the time finally came for me to remove the mask I knew I would have to wear, I could bring him back to this moment and enjoy it so much more when he realized he failed.

As Darren brought himself even closer than before, my confidence was now melting through my fingers like butter as a low growl came from his throat. I was terrified now because I realized what I had just done. I had challenged him.

“Challenge accepted,” he sneered with the darkest and most devious voice I had ever heard from him, and I couldn’t help but shrink into myself a little. I refused to let my eyes leave his. I had to show him a part of me wasn’t afraid, even though most of me was.

And then he grabbed the back of my neck and threw me away from him to the floor near the bed. “I am so going to enjoy this,” he snarled with a smile.

As I hit the ground, I could feel Darren close on my heels and I didn’t waste my momentum as I rolled off the carpet and swung into a reverse

hook kick, landing my foot square across his face. He was stunned momentarily, surprised I was still able to fight in my drunken state, and he wasn't the only one. As he came at me again, I rolled across the bed to the other side. He nearly caught me mid-roll, but I was quicker than he thought.

"You're only making this worse for yourself, Jaden, by running from me. You know what happens when you run." I was silent as I watched his every move like a hawk. "I catch you," he seethed.

I wavered only for a second as Darren slowly walked over to the dresser on his side of the bed and started rummaging through the drawers. I didn't bother waiting around anymore and bolted for the door. I didn't even care that I was naked as I threw the door open and pounded my legs down the hallway. I didn't know where I was going; I just wanted to get away from him.

I didn't get very far before I felt the force of my cuffs link my wrists and ankles together and I tumbled down to the floor in a drunken heap. Pain flooded my entire body as the room spun around me. I laid there for a hot second thinking this was so fucking stupid. I was being so irrational, letting my emotions and pride get in the way of what I knew was inevitable. Jack was so good at clouding my judgment.

I pushed myself off the carpet and leaned back against the wall, my knees to my chest and my head in my hands as I waited for Darren to come and get me. There was no point in running anymore, I wasn't going anywhere like this. And fighting? I wouldn't even make a dent in him in this condition. Yeah, I had royally fucked myself.

It wasn't long before I heard his slow pounding footsteps coming down the hall for me, and my body started to tremble. I knew I was in for it now. Maybe I could somehow reason with him. I was drunk, after all.

He stopped right in front of me, and I could tell he was crossing his arms over his chest with some kind of victory smile plastered across his stupid face. I only raised my eyes from his bare feet to notice he had put on a pair of dark blue gym shorts.

"Strike three," he said with a disapproving tone.

"I'm sorry," I finally said, still keeping my head in my hands, "that was stupid."

"Yes, it was," he agreed. And then he reached down and picked me up from under my arms, throwing me over his bare shoulder and headed back for his bedroom.

I didn't even bother fighting him, as I felt too heavy even to lift myself from his shoulder as he carried me back to his bedroom and slammed me down on the bed. I attempted to roll away from him, but he just grabbed me and threw me over his lap as he sat down.

"Do not move," he commanded, his hand drifting over the back of my legs and causing my muscles to tense. The room was still spinning, and my equilibrium felt off as I laid facedown across his legs—naked, drunk, and vulnerable as fuck. I laid still as he had ordered, letting him run his hands over my legs, gripping my ass. When he nearly lulled me to sleep, he smacked my ass hard. I felt myself jolt, but only slightly, my numbed senses delaying my reaction time.

"What have I repeatedly told you about running?" he asked me harshly.

"Pointless," I slurred.

"Why is it pointless?"

I cringed. "Because you'll catch me."

"Count," he ordered sternly and then smacked my ass again.

"One." I winced.

Again, his hand came down even harder, and I yelped in response.

"Two."

Smack. Each one harder than the last and the sting of his palm on my skin caused a fierce fire in my belly. And I had to lay there and let him. Had I been sober, that would have been a hell of a lot harder, but because I had no desire to even move, I had less motivation to get away.

"Three."

By the time we got to five, I could feel Darren's rock hard erection against my stomach as he slammed his hand down onto my flesh. He was enjoying this. But then he changed something. I felt his other hand slowly reach down between my legs and slide his fingers along my folds. To my despair, they were slick with wetness, and I secretly cringed to myself.

"Oh, fuck yes." He chuckled. I was glad I couldn't see his face at that moment. It probably would have made me sick.

Another smack came as his fingers traced along my heat, and I almost forgot my count.

"Seven," I whimpered, and I hated the sound of my voice.

When his fingers were nice and coated, he slipped one into my core, and I felt myself gasp quietly, keeping the sexual tremors at bay. Another

smack and my body nudged against his finger as he penetrated me, grazing right over my g-spot, the pain and the pleasure blending to create one extraordinary sensation.

“Jaden,” Darren warned me, squeezing my ass and heightening the blazing pain.

“Eight,” I corrected quickly.

Two more smacks came, as he slowly pumped his finger in and out of my core, bringing me close to the edge. My body trembled, my skin was on fire, and I was only a few strokes away from an orgasm that would rock me to the bone.

“Ten,” I practically moaned.

God, I was pathetic, but at that moment, I didn’t care. All I wanted was the impending release that was surely on its way. But then he pulled his hand away from my core, and I immediately released a disappointed groan.

“No,” I nearly whispered sadly. I wanted my release. Needed it now.

“Did you want to come, Jaden?” Darren asked me, knowingly.

I pursed my lips and shook my head. I wouldn’t give him the satisfaction.

“Don’t lie to me,” he growled and smacked my ass so hard I cried out and tried to jolt away, but he wouldn’t let me. “Tell me the truth, even though I already know it.”

When I didn’t reply and panted instead, he smacked me again right in the same spot.

“Ah! Okay, yes!” I admitted, wincing.

“Yes, what?” he asked sternly.

“Yes, Darren, I wanted to come,” I said back angrily.

After unlocking my cuffs with his phone, Darren then roughly pulled me up, slammed me on my back against the bed, pulled his shorts down and plunged into me with full-on force. My back arched into him, and I cried out, pain and pleasure blending all over again. Somehow, my cervix was able to withstand him again so soon.

“Admit to me that you’re mine and maybe I *will* let you come,” he growled, slowly pumping into me and hitting me right where I needed him to. I moaned in satisfaction. He took that as an invitation to suck one of my nipples into his mouth, making it hard and wet and causing me to arch myself into him even more. I gasped as his other hand found my neglected

breast and massaged it, tweaking the nipple into a hard peak between his fingertips.

And then he began pumping harder, faster, and somewhere in between, his mouth found my neck. His teeth bared down on my sensitized skin, sending my blood rushing through my veins. My heart beat faster to keep up with the oxygen level that was heaving through my lungs, making me dizzy, or maybe it was the alcohol still coursing through my blood. I was getting closer to the orgasm I desperately needed, and it was becoming difficult for me to hide as my hands clasped around Darren's arms, clinging him to me.

Feeling my desperation, he pulled back, lifted my scorching ass with one hand, while the other pinched and played with my clit.

"Oh, God," I whimpered.

"Tell me what I want to hear, Jaden. You won't come until you tell me you're mine."

I tried to fight him, tried to concentrate on the feeling alone so I could mentally make it happen, but he slowed his pace, and it was suddenly no longer enough of what I needed.

"Ah!" I cried in frustration, my body bucking and twitching under him, demanding my release, but it wouldn't come until I said the words meant to destroy. I never realized how effective sexual control could be. It was like nothing else in the world mattered while you were on the very cusp of sexual detonation, and if something threatened to deny you that, it was the worst form of torture—another thing outside of my control.

I was so close, but I needed more, and somewhere along the lines, my pride had been muzzled and I was dangerously close to giving in.

"Say it, Jaden," he said pinching my clit again. "Say it and you can come for as long as you want."

Fine, fuck it all.

And that was it—I broke.

"I'm yours," I moaned, and just like flipping a switch, Darren gave me exactly what I needed; he pounded into me right where I wanted him, and I came within seconds. The orgasm ripped through me like a tidal wave, and I gripped the sheets screaming while my back arched and my legs clung around Darren's waist. He continued to drill away inside me, his own orgasm taking him over the edge.

When it was over, he fell on top of me, our noses almost touching as our chests heaved from exertion.

“Good girl,” he practically beamed at me and kissed me good and hard on the mouth. He then rolled off me and pulled me to his side, my back against his bare chest with his arm possessively around my waist, while his face rested against my hair.

I could feel the alcohol slowly deplete from my system as soberness began to wake me from my dazed and confused state. What had I just done? What had I just allowed him to do? Had I allowed him at all? My ass stung like a bitch, there was a throbbing pain between my legs, my limbs and muscles were sore from strain, and I was terrified out of my wits, yet I still came like it was my fucking job or something.

Guilt consumed my mind while my heart pounded away inside me like a drum announcing an execution. My body felt drained yet exquisitely satisfied. Had I actually liked what he just did to me? Yeah, I had no control over my body’s responses to a certain stimulus, but I could certainly control how I felt about it.

I lay there on my side, the heat from Darren’s chest against my back somehow calming my nerves. I could hear his slow, heavy breathing in my ear and could feel the rise of his chest behind me. God, this felt so normal, so easy ... but it was all an illusion. This man didn’t care about me; this man wanted to own and control me. I couldn’t give in to this—couldn’t give in to him ... but I could certainly make it seem like I had.

I tried to push away my lingering depression and burrow myself deeper into the pillows and sheets, letting the warmth of Darren’s body lull me to sleep.

Chapter Eighteen

Winner, Winner

~*~

I win. Holy fuck, do I so fucking win. Apparently, I had the right idea when it came to Jaden and booze. She was a lot of talk but four shots deep and she was done for around me. She was always done for around me, but the alcohol just made it easier for her to submit. I wouldn't rely on this method in the future, but it sure was fun to see how she handled her liquor.

Yeah, she fought me for a little bit, but once I had her laid over my lap, she practically went limp, her pussy so nice and wet for me. By the time I was done spanking and teasing her, she was soaking. And then, when I had her under me, buried deep inside, she finally said those two little words, and I nearly detonated right then and there. The sound of screaming and coming at the same time was music to my ears, an absolute symphony. I wanted more of it. I wanted that to be the goddamn soundtrack of my life.

When I pulled her against me, I knew she felt conflicted. I knew she felt guilty for the pleasure she had found, but it didn't matter. Soon, her sexual need would overpower any thoughts of guilt, and I would gladly satisfy those needs. I wanted her to need me so bad, it would cause her physical pain until she had me inside her. I was going to ruin this girl, and I couldn't wait for the final result.

God, she felt so warm against me, her small chest rising and falling as her breathing pattern had finally relaxed into a slow deep rhythm. I knew the moment she fell asleep, and I felt at ease knowing she was safe tucked beside me.

That was a new concept for me—the need to protect something as precious as she was. Yes, I felt protective of my younger brothers, but they were different. I knew they could handle themselves, and I didn't have this possessive need over them. Sure, Jaden was a black belt who could probably take on any random Joe on the street, but the people I dealt with

on a daily basis were not random Joe's; they were dangerous men – men who lacked compassion for the vulnerability of women. Men like me, I suppose. But Jaden's vulnerability wasn't subject to danger anymore because it belonged to me and only me, and anyone who challenged that would regret the day they were born. Jaden was now a precious treasure worth protecting, and I would see to that every second of every day for the rest of her life.

Slowly, so as not to wake her, I rubbed my fingers along the soft and smooth skin of her arm and leg, feeling her toned body under creamy white perfection. She had a few dozen freckles along her arms and I smiled finding them to be absolutely adorable for some reason. Her red hair was still damp from the shower, but the setting sun that shone through the window cast the perfect lighting to highlight some of the vibrant colors. I loved it. I loved every inch of her.

I wanted to cocoon myself around her, consume her into me somehow, but I couldn't trust her in my sleep yet. I knew she would use the opportunity to try to kill me, and she would fail. Light sleeping was a habit of mine; one I had mastered at a very young age and it served me well. But if Jaden tried to pull something, I'd have to put her back down in her cage again, and I didn't want to do that. I'd rather have her up here with me. And then I had a fantastic idea.

I slipped from the bed as easily as I could so as not to wake her and walked into my closet. Heading to the back of the walk-in, I went for the good-sized black chest I had set against the wall. Opening the top, I rummaged through all the fun little sex toys I planned to use on Jaden one day, but right now, I had only one thing in mind.

Pulling the smooth, thin long link of chain I had at the bottom of the chest, I wrapped it around my hand and grabbed the two small padlocks that were in the shapes of little golden hearts. They didn't look like much, but they were a lot stronger than I thought, much like Jaden.

Quietly, I walked back into the bedroom, Jaden still in the same position I had left her, and pulled one end of the chain through the metal bars of my headboard. I then locked each end of the chain link to the cuffs on Jaden's wrists with the little heart padlocks and stepped away to admire my work. Jaden hadn't even stirred as I stared down at the beauty of her chained to my bed. It did all sorts of things inside me, excitement brewing

in my heart and need boiling in my cock. Not yet, though. She needed a break. But only for a short while.

The ringing of my phone in my pants pocket stopped the wheels in my head from turning as I rushed for my pants to avoid waking Jaden up. I pulled the phone out and answered.

“What?” I whispered angrily, stepping away inside the bathroom, still keeping my eye on Jaden.

“I’ve got Dan down here,” Scott said on the other line.

Fuck. “I’ll be right there.”

I quickly stepped into my closet, threw on some black track pants and a black t-shirt, and headed for the door. I looked back at Jaden, who was still fast asleep, naked and chained to my bed. I instantly decided I wanted to come back to this image more often.

Gently closing the door behind me, I left Jaden to sleep off her exhaustion and jogged over to the security room. I walked in to find Scott holding one of our disposable flip phones in his hand.

“Here he is,” he said and handed me the phone.

I walked over to the desk and took the phone from Scott, putting it on speakerphone. Daniel was only twenty-eight, but I knew he could handle something like this. It wasn’t his first rodeo, after all. He had only been down in Panama a week trying to get this deal together. Shit better not be falling through.

“What’s the problem?” I asked.

“They want to renegotiate the terms. Said they feel like they’re getting fucked over,” Dan said.

I furrowed my brows. The fuck?

“Yeah, I don’t have time for this shit. Tell those cock-sucking fucks the deal stands. Maybe they should have been better at negotiating before they struck a deal with me.”

“And if they back out?” he asked.

“Then that’ll be their mistake,” I replied sternly.

“You want me to keep the shipment here if they do?”

“Yeah, just keep it in the warehouse for now. We’ll figure out what to do with it later.”

“All right,” he said.

“And, Dan, you make sure you and your men are armed to the T when the exchange goes down.”

“Yeah, yeah, fuck off, Darren, this is isn’t my first rodeo. I’ve got this.” He shrugged me off. I couldn’t help the older brother shit coming out.

I scowled but let it go. I knew Dan knew what he was doing, but that didn’t make this shit any less shady than it already was.

“Good. Check in tomorrow when it’s done.”

“Yeah, later,” he said and hung up.

“Cocky little shit.” Scott laughed.

“He’ll be a dead little shit if he isn’t careful,” I said, getting up and heading out of the security room. I had somewhere far better to be. “Let me know when you hear back from him.”

“Yep,” Scott replied, and then I was gone. I was suddenly anxious to wake someone up.

~*~

I felt cold; my body suddenly huddled into itself for warmth as I slowly came to realize I was alone. I could no longer feel Darren’s chest against my back, nor did I feel a presence behind me. I didn’t hear breathing or stirring anywhere else in the room. Fuck, I was cold and my head was pounding. Great, I probably had a hangover now.

I reached down for the sheets but realized my hand couldn’t reach passed my shoulders. I opened my eyes and focused on a small chain link perfectly fastened to my cuffs by two small gold heart-shaped padlocks. I sprang myself awake, ignoring the grogginess I felt and sitting up on my knees as I examined the chain that effectively restrained me to Darren’s bed. I pulled against my restraints as hard as I could, testing their strength, but they would not break. Panic surged through me as I pulled and pulled, realizing I was now trapped and even more vulnerable than before.

And then I heard the door close. “Going somewhere?”

I turned to find Darren standing in front of the door, dressed in track pants and a t-shirt, staring at me wickedly.

“Darren, what the fuck?” I almost yelled, holding up my chained limbs for him to see.

“Now, is that any way to speak to me, Jaden?” He narrowed his eyes at me.

I let a slow breath out through my nose in an attempt to calm myself. “I’m sorry,” I said calmly. “But could you please tell me why I’m chained

to the bed?”

“Because I wanted you to be. That’s all you need to know.”

I released another annoyed sigh. I wanted to argue so bad, but my still sore and burning ass disagreed with me. My head was still pounding and I felt like total shit. Yep, hangover – check. I sat back against my legs, my ass still stinging, but I ignored it as I watched him walk over to me. He sat down next to me, his eyes never leaving mine as his hand reached up and gently took my chin between his two fingers. I tried not to tense up as he brought his lips to mine, planting a slow and gentle kiss on my mouth. I felt the warmth flare up again as his kiss somehow ignited me. Maybe it was because he was being gentle and I was, therefore, safe somehow.

“Maybe if you’re a good girl,” he said, releasing my lips, but not my chin, “I’ll let you go and we can go downstairs, have dinner, and watch some baseball.” He almost smiled.

I leaned away from him and looked him over peculiarly.

“Baseball?”

“Mmhmm, the Yankee’s are playing the Tiger’s tonight.”

Oh, how carefully he studied me then, watching and waiting for my reaction at the mention of the Detroit Tigers, my state’s home baseball team. I almost let my poker face slip, but a blank stare was surprisingly easy to pull off.

“Unless you’d rather not,” he said, eying me intently.

I shook my head seriously. “No, I’d love to watch the Tiger’s kick the shit out of the Yankees.”

“Language,” he warned, tapping his index finger on the side of my face before pointing it at me. I almost pouted. “And we’ll see,” he said and pulled out a small key from his pants pocket. I turned my wrists over so he had better access to the locks, but he stopped and looked at me with that same possessive look I always hated. “Who do you belong to, Jaden?”

Again with this bullshit? I was getting really tired of the repetitiveness of this question, but I knew he was trying to drill it into my head that he owned me and there was no other way around it.

I leaned toward him, my eyes locking on to his like a target. “You,” I said with absolute conviction. Fuck it; make him believe what he wants. It was dulling me out anyway.

“Good girl.” He smiled smugly and released me from my chains.

I stood from the bed as he did, wrapping my arms around myself as the goosebumps took over. I suddenly realized the only item of clothing I had in this room was the wet bathing suit Darren had tossed somewhere on the bathroom floor. I highly doubted Darren wanted me walking around the house naked with security personnel on the grounds.

“Clothes?” I asked, hopeful he’d let me go to my room to change. “I’d like to clean myself up as well if you don’t mind.”

“You can clean up in my bathroom,” he said. “I’ll get you something to wear.” He had that twinkle in his eye again that I knew meant trouble. Great.

I walked away and headed toward his bathroom, quietly shutting the door behind me hoping he’d give me just a little privacy to take care of business. I used the toilet and ran a warm wet rag between my legs, cleaning off the earlier mess Darren made all over me. I then looked at my hair, which was now a tousled mess thanks to it being damp and being fucked. I flipped my hair over, ran my fingers through my roots, and shook it out. Flipping my locks back over, I teased it with my fingers in places and made it look a hell of a lot better. I could rock that.

Stepping from the bathroom, I found Darren leaning against the doorway of his walk-in closet. He held a shirt out for me.

“Here,” he said, and I took it from him. “That should be sufficient.”

Unraveling the shirt in my hand, it turned out to be one of his dress shirts. Bluish gray with pearly white buttons. As I lifted it up, I almost laughed. I would swim in this. Slipping my arms through the sleeves, which fell eight inches past my fingertips, I buttoned the shirt up to the last two buttons and tugged it down as low as it would go. It went all the way down just above my knees. I wasn’t just swimming—I was drowning in this.

Darren stared down at me as the most satisfied grin I had ever seen on him slid across his face. “That,” he beamed, “is the most adorable thing I’ve ever seen.”

I looked down at the dress shirt and looked back up at him, raising an eyebrow. “Seriously?” I said.

“Hmm ... I may have to make some changes in your wardrobe. I think I like you in my clothes.”

To be honest, I was happy to be wearing something that wasn't a dress even though it practically fit like one. Despite all that, I had sleeves and I was warm.

“I still need underwear. I’ll just go to my room and grab some real quick.”

“Nope,” he said, grabbing my arm as I tried to walk past him. “I think you’re just fine as is.”

“What if someone sees?” I asked, a little shocked.

“Then you’ll have to work extra hard at behaving to avoid that now, won’t you?”

I looked at him in disbelief, but then it suddenly clicked.

“Oooh, I get it, now. It finally all makes sense,” I said, crossing my arms over my chest as I stared him down. He gave me a look of caution, but I could tell he was curious about my sudden revelation. “G-string thongs and barely-there dresses?” I laughed. “Nice try, but if you think the risk of exposing myself down there will deter me from fighting you, then you are very wrong. I couldn’t care less who sees when it comes to my survival.”

Darren stared down at me, that devious sexy shark-like grin of his plastered all over his face, and it quickly made me uncomfortable. I had probably overstepped my boundaries again. Fucking A.

“You might not care now,” he said with a smirk, “but that’s only because I haven’t told you what will happen should anyone ever lay their foolish eyes on what’s mine.” His voice suddenly became low and dangerous as he stepped closer to me, and I couldn’t help but find myself backing right into a wall. Fear crept into my chest as Darren’s eyes gleamed with possessiveness and I suddenly wanted to run again.

Darren brought his hand up to my face, cupping my cheek in an almost too tight grip while those ocean blue eyes blazed down at me. My crossed arms slowly around me until I was unconsciously hugging myself, clutching anything I could.

“I’d kill them, Jaden,” he finally said with absolute certainty. “Any man who is ever stupid enough to touch, speak, or even look at you without my permission will not live another day. And if I find out it was because you broke my rules and allowed it to happen, I will make you watch.”

I gulped back my fear, trying hard to find the ability to make my tongue work again while my stomach twisted into itself.

“You would kill your own men,” I stated. It was meant to be a question, but it came out as a simple fact.

“Yes,” he said seriously, his thumb running across my cheek. “Because if anyone should know better, it’s them.”

I was silent for a moment, taking in everything that he just said. If I wasn't careful, I could very easily be responsible for someone else's death. It obviously wouldn't take very much to set Darren off and I really didn't want to spend a single second of my time watching him torture and kill someone to punish me. Then again, maybe I could just inadvertently get him to kill all of his guards or anyone else I didn't like for that matter, but I doubted that would work.

But then something else came across my mind. He couldn't control the eyes of every man I came into contact with. I couldn't imagine he would keep me on his estate for the rest of my life. If he planned to marry me someday, then surely he would trust me enough to want to take me out in public, right?

"But ... how could you possibly control something like that? Eventually, I'll be seen, especially if you plan to marry me. Unless ... you intend on never letting me off the estate?" I asked with concerned sorrow in my eyes. God, please, no. I couldn't spend the remainder of my life in this house.

Darren's eyes flashed with regret, but it was gone before I could barely register it. He released a slow, even breath through his nose before he finally spoke.

"I don't plan to let you leave the estate for a very long time," he said. "And even longer before I even think about taking you out in public, if ever."

I nodded then, looking away as a small tear dripped down my cheek. I don't know why, but I suddenly felt more grief and hopelessness than I had expected. I shouldn't have been surprised. Even if it was ten years from now and I had given Darren everything he wanted, he still probably wouldn't trust me.

Darren's thumb wiped the tear from my cheek, and I sniffed back the remainders that wanted to fall with it. "Why are you crying?" he asked.

"Because, even after I've given you everything, the marriage you want, the sons you expect, even after I've sacrificed my soul to you, you will still never trust me. And I don't want to spend the rest of my life hidden away from the world because of that."

I looked up at him with torment in my eyes. How could he expect me to live a happy life if I were confined to one singular acre of the world? I would always remain a prisoner, no matter what my status was to him.

“I don’t trust anyone, Jaden,” he replied. “That’s the world I live in. But if you’re afraid I won’t let you out in public because I don’t trust you, then you’re misunderstanding me. I’m more than confident in upholding your compliance in front of a crowd, but that’s not what concerns me.”

I looked back up at him with teary eyes I fought to withhold.

“I want to keep you hidden because outside of these protective walls is a dangerous world I want to shield you from. My world is cruel and ruthless and once it discovers you, you will become a target for my enemies. Unfortunately, your manifestation is unavoidable, especially after you become my wife, but what can be somewhat avoided is the threat that comes with it. Your safety is of the highest priority to me, Jaden, and if that means locking you away from the world for the rest of your life, then so be it.”

Suddenly, I felt small, helpless, and vulnerable, but in my head, I was none of these. I was strong, capable, and a total fucking badass when I wanted to be. But when someone spoke of me as anything but, as the complete opposite, of someone weak and in need of constant protection, I felt like shit. I felt useless, like a child who needed watching to make sure they didn’t accidentally spill the milk or trip over their untied shoes. This wasn’t me. I deserved more respect than that.

I supposed I should appreciate his concern, but it was just an insult. I wasn’t a child. I might just be slightly bigger than one, but I could hold my own and Darren had to acknowledge that. Otherwise, I’d spend the rest of his life, however many years he had left, proving him wrong.

Chapter Nineteen

Wager

I wasn't a huge baseball fan, but the moment we entered the kitchen and I saw the game on the flat-screen TV hanging on the wall, I was suddenly the Detroit Tiger's biggest fan. Opening day was one of the grandest days of the year and Jordan and I would usually skip out of work, go downtown, and get wasted for it. I'd threaten the guys who harassed us, and we'd have a fantastic time. Times like this, I missed Jordan the most. Whenever I needed a laugh, she was there with an endless supply.

Darren and I sat down at the kitchen island where two dinner plates were set. The game was at the beginning of the first inning and I leaned over the counter intently to watch, rubbing my temples to ease a headache that was growing into a migraine. I was acutely aware that if I happened to lean over too far, I would expose my ass, and since I wasn't ready to witness the bloodshed that would occur from my exposure, I decided it was in my best interest to follow Darren's rules. I wasn't a fan of going commando, but I supposed at this point, I didn't have a choice.

"Headache?" Darren suddenly asked me.

"Mmhhh." I nodded, closing my eyes.

"Why didn't you ask for some aspirin?"

I looked at him dumbfounded. It had never occurred to me to ask him for anything because somehow I always thought either the answer would be no or I would be in trouble simply for asking.

"I ... I didn't think ..." I really didn't know how to answer him.

"Would you like some aspirin?" he asked softly.

"Yes, please."

He then stood from his chair and walked over to one of the cabinets in the kitchen. Pulling out a small white bottle, he poured some pills in his hand and came back with two little white pills. I pinched the pills out of his hand and swigged them back with the glass of water by my plate.

"Thank you," I said, setting the glass down and wiping my mouth.

“Jaden,” he said, taking my hands in his as he stood before me. “I don’t want you to remain under the impression that you can’t come to me when you need something. Just as you have an obligation to please me, I have an obligation to take care of you. But it’s more than just an obligation, Jaden. I want to take care of you, but I can’t do that fully unless you’re honest with me. If you need something, tell me, and I will do everything I can to make it happen. Understand?”

“Okay, I understand.” I nodded.

“Good. Now, eat your dinner and watch the game.”

I looked down at my plate, noticing the steak, baked potato, and green beans practically overflowing from my plate, and I was suddenly starving. The steak was fantastic, and I chewed slowly, savoring the taste as I watched Cabrera score a home run.

It was the strangest thing. One minute, Darren was chasing me down and chaining me to his bed, and the next, he was tender and sincere while giving me painkillers for a headache he probably caused. I couldn’t figure him out. He was like a damn Sour Patch Kid. Sour one minute and sweet the next. I had only been here three days, and I could already find myself craving the softer side of him ... because it made me feel safer ... and special ...

How twisted was that?

Around the sixth inning, we had finished our dinner and Darren took our plates and set them in the sink. I was stuffed and my headache was finally gone as I planted my elbows on the counter and rested my chin in my hands, watching the rest of the game. I was finally starting to feel human again as Verlander threw a curveball and struck the batter out.

“Ha!” I smirked at the TV. The score was now tied three to three with the Tigers up to bat.

“I wouldn’t get too excited,” said Darren as he came back around to the island and sat down.

“Pfft,” I scoffed. “I bet the Tigers win in the ninth.”

“I’ll take that bet,” he said, narrowing his eyes at me. I raised an eyebrow at him.

“Huh?”

“Let’s make things interesting, a little deal. If the Tigers win, I’ll show you what’s in my garage. I know you’re dying to see what kind of toys I have in there.” He gave me that knowing smile, the one I trusted the least.

I regarded him closely. I would love to know what he harbored in his garage with the kind of money he had, but I would only find out if fate would let me.

“And if the Tigers lose?”

“You have to talk to me about your father,” he said intently.

I groaned out loud, furrowing my brows and turning my head away from him. He was the last person I wanted to discuss personal and emotional matters with. I angrily stared down at the counter.

“Why would you want that?” I asked softly, still keeping my eyes down.

“Are you questioning my desires, Jaden?”

I wanted to say yes, but I shook my head instead. I just didn't understand why it mattered to him was all.

“Fine,” I finally said. The Tigers had better fucking win.

It was now the bottom of the ninth and the Tigers were batting with two bases loaded.

Home run, home run, home run!

And then Martinez stepped up to the plate and swung.

Strike one.

Fuck.

Swing. Ball one.

Fuck! Come on!

I was leaning forward as I watched the screen like a hawk, praying to God Martinez would save me from some emotional torment.

Please, please, please!

Swing.

Home run!

“FUCK YEAH!” I shouted as I watched the ball fly out of the arena, throwing my fists in the air and rising off my chair. “Ha! You get ‘em, Martinez!”

And then I instantly sat back down and covered my mouth with my hands, peeking over at Darren. I expected fury and rage to come barreling at me, but instead, I found the brightest smile on his face as he beamed at me.

“That was the most genuine happy emotion I have ever seen you display since your time with me.”

A small bit of relief washed over me as I realized he wasn't angry but was rather enjoying my enthusiasm and excitement.

“Well, I don’t take small victories with you lightly,” I said cautiously. He laughed. “I suppose you wouldn’t.”

“Okay, time to pay up.” I narrowed in on him. I was beyond excited I had actually beaten him at something, even though it was all by chance.

He rolled his eyes at me, unable to hold back his grin. “Okay, unlike you, I can admit when I’ve legitimately been beaten, but you do know eventually, I will get you to talk one way or another.”

“Maybe ... but not tonight!” I smirked. I was too excited even to think about that right now.

Darren shook his head at me and took my hand, leading me to a side door by the kitchen. He unlocked the door and total darkness greeted us. Until he turned the light on and my eyes sparkled like it was Christmas morning.

The garage was massive—large enough to fit at least ten cars—but that wasn't what stole my attention. Lined up on the right-hand side in perfect order were six beautiful bikes, and I almost started drooling. My excitement seeped from my skin as I walked tentatively over to the road machines.

“Oh, my God,” I breathed.

He had a blacked out Ducati 1299 Panigale S, (the same fucking model as me!), a bright green Kawasaki Ninja 300, a deep red Honda CBR1100XX T, a royal blue Yamaha YZF-R1, and a gun metal gray Ducati Diavel Strada. He even had a black Harley-Davidson VRSC V-Rod and a bright red Kawasaki KTM 450 SX-F dirt bike. Holy fuck. Someone liked to go fast.

They were all so beautiful. I could just imagine rolling on the throttle of that Panigale and riding the fuck out of here.

I looked over at Darren, who was regarding me closely, the hint of a smile lurking across his lips.

“Impressed yet?”

“Very,” I had to admit. “I see we have similar tastes in bikes,” I said, nodding over to the Panigale.

“Maybe one day, if you’re lucky, I’ll take you for a ride.”

“Pfft,” I said, turning my back to him and crossing my arms. “I don’t ride bitch.” And then I instantly winced, my stomach dropping as I realized what I’d just said. I turned around and quickly backtracked. “I’m sorry.” My hands came out. “Habit.”

His face was not so forgiving, and he crooked a finger at me. Fuck.

I cautiously walked over to him, wrapping my arms around myself as I stopped right in front of him and kept my eyes on his chest, not really wanting to look up at him. I hated looking into his face when I knew I was in trouble, like a dog with its tail between its legs. His hand came down hard on my bare ass that still remained very vulnerable under his shirt, and I winced at the contact, almost yelping as my ass was still super sore from my earlier transgression.

“You’ll ride whatever the fuck I tell you to, understand?”

“Yes, Darren,” I admitted in defeat. I just needed to keep my goddamn mouth shut. He walked ahead of me then, leaving me standing there with a throbbing ass.

“So if I tell you to ride the dirt bike through the woods, you’ll do so.”

I turned and dropped my arms to my side in disbelief. My sore ass forgotten. “Really?”

“Sure.” He shrugged. “After you’re done riding my dick.” He turned to face me with a smart-ass grin plastered all over his face.

I furrowed my brows at him and crossed my arms over my chest.

“And if you ever earn it, of course,” he said.

Right ...

I looked around the rest of the garage, noticing all the other toys, work benches and power tools. I was practically jumping up and down when my eyes landed on the four wheelers and dune buggies until my eyes suddenly caught a glimpse of the twin Jet Skis hiding over in the corner. They were both Kawasaki Ultra 310LX’s, and my mouth dropped to the floor the moment I saw them. They were black and lime green, and they were the most beautiful Jet Skis I had ever seen. Why the hell were they in here instead of out in the water where they belonged?!

“Jet Ski fan too, huh?” Darren said, walking over to me. “Shocker.”

“Oh, yes,” I confirmed. “My cousin has one, and we tear the shit out of it every time.”

Darren chuckled at me and crossed his arms across his chest. “Somehow, I don’t doubt that.”

“Is there a chance in hell I could ever ride one of these?” I asked hopeful.

“We’ll see. I wouldn’t want you falling off and cracking your head open again.”

My heart skipped a beat for a second. How did he know about that? That was five years ago when my cousin was driving. She hit a heavy wave and knocked me off the back where I cracked my skull on the side of the Jet Ski and blacked out.

“How the ...?” I raised an eyebrow at him and gave him a hard look.

“What? You don’t think I’m capable of doing a full background check on you?”

“Why would you do that?” I knew the answer, but I wanted to hear it from him.

“Because ... I intend to know everything about you, Jaden. And I figured I would start with everything that’s on paper,” he said leaning into me.

My brows furrowed in anger at the thought of him digging into my private information and putting his nose in my business. I took a deep breath and tried to keep myself calm.

Don’t get mad. Don’t get mad. Don’t get mad.

“Well, I hope you were satisfied.”

“Oh, I was but only temporarily. You have a very interesting medical history.”

“Thanks,” I said bitterly.

“I may have to keep you on a short leash until I feel confident of your ability to keep yourself out of harm’s way. You were a bit of a klutz when you were a teenager as well.”

“Those accidents were nearly ten years ago. I’m a lot more experienced now.”

“Not with my toys,” he dejected. “There’s a lot of power behind them. Power you’re not used to handling.”

“I can handle you, can’t I?” I smirked. That was a bit ballsy.

“Can you?” he asked me darkly.

“Isn’t that why you chose me?”

“It is, but you still need a lot more training.”

“Yeah, I’ll work on that,” I said, turning back to admire the Jet Ski.

Darren showed me to rest of the garage, and I was in awe at the cars he possessed. He had a dark chrome Ferrari 458, a black Lamborghini

Aventador, a silver McLaren F1, and a big ol' pretty black Ford F-150. I was instantly jealous. He even had a classic 1967 Chevy Impala on a car lift over the top of the Ferrari. How much money did this guy seriously have?

Once we were done ogling the contents of the garage, I found myself yawning from exhaustion, and it was now completely dark outside.

"Come on," Darren said, wrapping his arm around me. "I think it's time for bed." I nodded in agreement. When we got to the top of the stairs, I headed for my room, but Darren kept me at his side and pulled me away. "Nope, you're sleeping in my bed tonight."

My stomach shattered into a million tiny pieces, and my heart started beating frantically. I knew right away that I would not be getting a good night's sleep.

As we entered his room, he pulled the covers down on his bed and gestured for me to get in. I looked up at him nervously. "Do you mind if I use the bathroom first?" I asked.

"Make it quick," he said, and I hurriedly sauntered around him and headed straight for his bathroom, locking myself in. I tried to get my anxiety under wraps as I used the bathroom and washed my face with cool water.

Calm down. Calm down. Calm down.

Once I finally got a grip on myself, I opened the door and walked out to find Darren already lying in bed, his one hand resting behind his head, while he read something on his phone. Of course, he was laying on the side closest to the door. Damn him.

I walked to the opposite side of the bed and slowly crawled under the sheets, trying to maintain as much distance from him as possible. I laid my head on the pillow and turned my back to him completely. Closing my eyes, I hoped I would fall asleep quickly, but it didn't happen. My anxiety was too high.

"Jaden, what are you doing?" He chuckled.

"Sleeping?" I mumbled, keeping my eyes closed and hoping that would be the end of it.

"Come here, sleepyhead. You don't get to wear clothes in my bed," he said, reaching across the king-size bed and pulling me to his side.

He then got on top of me, straddling my hips as he began to pull the buttons of my shirt apart. I let him, not wanting to deal with a fight. His fingers were quick, his movements sure and precise as he made quick work

of the buttons, and I couldn't help but suck in a breath. Once he pulled the shirt off me and tossed it to the floor, he rolled back over and pulled my back against his chest before grabbing his phone.

"Just one little thing," he said and instantly the cuffs around my wrists clasped together. "Don't want you getting any bad ideas that might get you in trouble," he said, returning the phone to his nightstand and shutting off the light.

Ha, he did still see me as a threat. Why the fuck would he restrain me while we slept otherwise? He was afraid I'd get him in his sleep, and he was so fucking right. When he rolled back over his voice became low and dangerous as he breathed into my ear.

"Your perimeter has been reduced to this room, so if you think about sneaking out later, it would not be in your best interests. My phone is password and thumbprint activated, and I'm a very light sleeper. Do not test me tonight."

"I wouldn't dream of it, Darren. I'm too hungover to fight you right now. I just want to go to sleep."

"Smart girl," he said kissing my hair and relaxing against me.

I really wasn't interested in creating any difficulties tonight. I was on high alert as it was, and I just wanted to close my eyes and succumb to the sleep that was calling to me. Darren's arm was tight around my torso; any tighter and I wouldn't be able to breathe. I hoped he at least moved in his sleep so he would release me at some point. After about two minutes, I found myself able to relax and practically jumped into the darkness.

Chapter Twenty

Midnight Snack

I suddenly woke up with a raging pressure in my bladder. I looked up at the clock on the nightstand that read 3:15 a.m. I had to pee something fierce, but Darren still had his arm wrapped tightly around me. His breathing was slow, even, and deep. He was definitely asleep, and for some reason, I was afraid to wake him. I waited another ten minutes hoping I could just fall back asleep, but the pressure just increased and Darren still hadn't moved. Fuck.

Deciding I had only one option, I carefully took Darren's wrist and tried to pry his arm from my side. His body protested against my movement, his arm actually a little heavy, but eventually, I was able to move it and gently laid it down behind me.

Like that of a mouse avoiding the wrath of a cat, I maneuvered quietly through the bed, pulling the sheets silently from my body. The coast was clear as I made it to the edge of the bed, but out of nowhere, Darren's arm came sweeping over my torso and pulled me back, slamming me back onto the bed. My heart practically leaped out of my throat.

"Where the *fuck* do you think you're going?" he growled over top of me.

"I just have to pee!" I shouted in defense, my open palms coming up to protect me. "I swear!"

Darren looked me over, his face full of anger, and I squeezed my legs closed to alleviate the pressure.

"I'll be right back! I promise!" I was practically panting now.

"You have two minutes," he warned and let me go.

I quickly hopped off the bed and practically ran to the bathroom for emphasis. Goddamn, he was a light sleeper.

After finally taking care of business, which was far more difficult to manage with my wrists bound together, I still had a minute left and washed my hands before trotting back toward the bed. I saw Darren sitting up

against the pillows, his hands folded behind his head as he waited for me to return.

“Can’t sleep without me?” I asked him with sticky sweet sarcasm.

“Not when I have another need that requires satisfying.” He smirked.

That stopped me in my tracks. I was really hoping we could just go back to sleep.

“Come here, Jaden,” he commanded as he sensed my hesitation.

A slight wave of anxiety came over me as I picked my feet up and headed back over to him. Cautiously, I crawled on the bed, which was a little difficult with the cuffs around my wrist still activated. I sat back on my heels and waited for his next command.

“Spread those pretty little thighs for me,” he ordered, his smug white smile hard to avoid in the darkness.

I hesitated for only a second, but I slowly parted my thighs. He then reached over and placed two fingers just on the inside of my right thigh. My heart rate spiked at his touch as he slowly moved his fingers up and down the inside of my leg. I rested my hands against my stomach, trying to keep my breathing at a minimum, grateful for the darkness that immersed us.

Back and forth, his fingers glided across my skin and with each stroke, came closer and closer to the impending true desire. I bit my lip, fighting back the urge to smack his hand away as he brought my skin to a burning sensation. His fingers found their way to the juncture of my thighs, brushing against my outer lips, and I couldn’t hide the shudder that was involuntarily pulled from his touch.

It didn’t take long for my body to betray me as it started to react exactly the way Darren was invoking. As his fingers dipped into my slit, a sharp breath left my mouth and I bit down harder on my lip to suppress it. My heart was pounding away inside my chest and my breathing slowly turned into pants. His strokes were smooth and soft as he traced my folds, his fingers becoming slick with my body’s desire. Damn him. My head and my heart were screaming no, but my body was like a thirteen-year-old at a Justin Bieber concert screaming yes, yes!

“That’s my girl,” Darren approved. “So wet and so mine.”

I knew that eventually I would have to fall to the whims of my body and plummet to Hell’s desire if I ever wanted Darren to trust me, even though that seemed impossible now. Eventually, I would have to show him that I wanted him—that I wanted his touch—so he would think he had

conquered another part of me I had refused to surrender. My sexual desires would be the easiest one.

I let my head fall back and pretended it was Jason touching me, enjoying the thought of finally being with him again. If I was going to do this sober, that was the only way I could get through this without ripping my own skin off in disgust.

And then Darren shoved the blankets down, revealing his throbbing erection as it bobbed back and forth ready for action. “Hop on up here, hot stuff. I want to see how well you can ride,” he mused, smacking his hip for emphasis.

Ugh ...

Tentatively and with shaky limbs, I slowly climbed on top of him and straddled his hips. I really didn’t want to do this, but I needed to let go of the things I couldn’t change. The only thing I could control at this point was how I dealt with it.

I rested my entrance on the head of his cock and placed my still cuffed hands on the bulk of his massive bare chest. Slowly and grateful for his patience, I slid myself down his shaft until I sat down as far as I could, leaving out only an inch of him. He filled my core to the brink, almost uncomfortably, but I knew as soon as I relaxed, my body would adjust to his size.

“Oh yeah, baby, that’s good,” he breathed as he placed his hands on my hips. I shuddered from his grip on my skin but tried to relax as he started pulling me up and down along his dick. I slowly pumped my thighs to keep up with his pace, trying to let the pleasure flow from me. He was slow at first, thankfully, allowing me time to adjust to his girth as he slid in and out of me, but it didn’t take long before he started to increase his own speed, and I felt the full force of him.

I let my head roll back, forcing myself to relax into his thrusts, and managed to find some level of enjoyment. I felt his hands trace up the sides of my body and eventually palm my breasts, circling my nipples with his thumbs and sending little jolts of electricity to my clit. My breath came in and out as sharp little gasps while he pounded into me and I leaned back to accommodate more of his dick, resting my still cuffed hands behind my head for support. The heat in my body was rising, my core tightening around his cock, and before I realized what was happening, Darren had me flipped over on my back and had pressed all of himself slowly into me.

“Look at me, Jaden,” he groaned against me.

I was breathing heavy now, but I forced my eyes to meet his only to close them as he dipped low to press his lips to mine. The kiss was hard and all-consuming as our lips moved together, our tongues intertwining with the other as he brought his hands to my neck and face. His kisses trailed from my mouth, along my jawline, and down my neck, all the while still lightly pulling out and slamming back into me. His kisses were soft and gentle, and they made my skin come alive under his lips.

After so much violence, hopelessness, and rage, all I wanted at this very moment was to feel good. I wanted to forget where I was, who I was, and what I was, and all I had to do was allow myself. If I wanted to make it through this, some connections needed severing, even if it was only temporary. No matter the damage, bridges could always be rebuilt.

I could feel my blood rushing through my veins as the promise of release started to rise, and I really needed a release. A moan slipped past my lips as Darren increased his speed and I found my hands itching to hold on to something. He then moved his elbows and rested them just above my shoulders, still locking me in, but now, all I could see was his rippling chest bobbing back and forth.

“Mine,” he growled into my ear as he nipped at my earlobe with his teeth, and it caused my heart to flutter accompanied with slight traces of fear.

Being possessed by someone of his stature was not something to be taken lightly and my pride would have to find someone else to bitch to because there was no way it could compete with him. If I wanted my pride to remain intact, I would have to keep it hidden. Otherwise, Darren would chew it up and spit it out.

Moments later, I could feel the sensation of my impending orgasm building as my core tightened around his cock and another moan of pleasure slipped from my lips. Darren then grabbed my cuffed wrists and pinned them above my head.

“Not yet, Jaden. Don’t you dare come. Not until I tell you to.”

What? He had never made me hold off an orgasm like that before. He was really going to go that deep with his control issues? I wasn’t even sure if I knew how to fight against an orgasm, but I tried my hardest. And then I wondered what he would do if I did come without him telling me. Would he really punish me that badly?

My questions only masked the feeling for a second, and I found my ability to hold back my orgasm diminish.

“Ah! Darren! I can’t!”

Darren’s other hand came around my throat and squeezed, cutting off my air supply and effectively slowing the buildup between my legs.

“I told you to wait,” he growled. “Don’t you dare defy me.”

A twinge of fear came over me as Darren pounded into my core, his thrusts almost becoming painful as the fire between my legs licked at my tender flesh. He released my throat, but my anxious orgasm was relentless, and I couldn’t hold it back any longer. The dam finally burst as the orgasm rippled through my body, and I did my best to stifle the cries of slight pain and pleasure as Darren continued to drill into me. My body blossomed through the rush that fell over me, and seconds later, Darren found his release as he roared into my ear until he was finished.

As my body began to calm after the waves of pleasure left me, I looked up at Darren’s face hoping for mercy for not being able to control my impulses. But as he raised his face to mine, he did not look happy, and I sank into the pillow to bring as much distance from him as I could.

“Oh, Jaden,” he tsked. “I told you to wait, and you didn’t listen.” His voice was a low snarl filled with a devious danger I didn’t want to experience.

“Darren, I’m sorry,” I said between breaths. “I couldn’t hold it ba-”

Before I knew what was happening, Darren, still holding on to my wrists, had me up and strung across his lap, my bare ass front and center ... again. My legs and upper body were still lying on the bed, but Darren kept a firm hand between my shoulder blades as he pressed me down onto the bed.

“I don’t want your fucking excuses, Jaden. I gave you an order and you disobeyed. And now, you’re going to pay for it.”

“Oh, come on, Darren! This is bull-”

Darren’s hand quickly found its way into my hair and yanked hard, effectively shutting me up.

“You want to keep arguing with me and make it worse?” he asked menacingly.

“No,” I breathed.

“Then learn to shut your mouth.”

I sniffed back my angry tears as I sank my teeth into my tongue, biting down until the thought of telling him to eat shit and die diminished. I

didn't think it was possible to hate this man any more than I already did, but apparently, you learn something new every day.

His hand gently began to caress the cheeks of my ass and then without warning came crashing down hard on my already bruised and tender skin. I cried out and tried to scurry away to no avail. Twice within twelve hours? This was bullshit.

"Count," he demanded.

"Darren, come on! This isn't fair!" I pleaded. How the fuck could he expect me to control something like that? There was no way!

He then smacked me harder than he ever had right in the same spot and tears instantly sprang from my eyes as a scream ripped from my throat.

"You wanna disobey me some more?" he bellowed.

I laid there, deliberating over his words while pain seared in the cheeks of my ass. I could fight and try to get away, but I'd probably fail and just make it worse. I was so fucking weak.

"One," I nearly cried as my lower lip trembled, giving in.

And again, his hand came down harder on the other cheek. My body involuntarily pushed upwards, and I cried out, but his hand kept me firmly planted on the mattress.

"Two."

The pain pulsed through my flesh, and I could feel his cum start to seep out of me, spilling between my thighs and down to his, but he didn't seem to care.

Again and again, his palm came down, smacking into my skin, and I could feel more bruises forming. Being strung across his lap like an errant child was beyond demeaning as he punished me for my "misbehavior." I could understand my back talk or my deliberate running, but being unable to control an orgasm? That seemed a bit unfair, and I now felt completely embarrassed for having one in the first place.

Another smack came down and I screamed, not only in pain but also in frustration. My fists slammed into the bed as I tried to control my rage, but my ass hurt so badly my body was beginning to shake.

"No one to hear you scream but me, princess," he said calmly.

By the time he was done, my ass was on fire from twelve solid strikes in a row and hot tears threatened to fall, but I refused to allow them. Several strikes had provoked my screams, but still, he continued.

His palm had to be feeling a little bit of a sting, but he ignored it as he reached around to my throat, turned his body, and pushed me back on the bed, trapping me underneath him. My hands immediately went for his wrist and tugged against him, but he refused to release me.

“When I give you an order, I expect you to immediately follow it, do you understand?”

“Yes, Darren.” I nodded quickly.

“Good, now tell me who you belong to.”

“You,” I said still gripping his wrist.

“Good girl. Now, go clean yourself up.”

He released me, and I rolled off the bed quicker than he could blink. Fuck him. I thought there might be some reason in him, and I could somehow negotiate with him down the line, but apparently not if he thought it was okay to punish me for something I had no control over.

My ass and pussy throbbed in pain as I trudged down on wobbly legs to the bathroom. I couldn’t even sit down on the toilet seat properly until I decided to lightly press my skin to the cold tile of the floor. That felt nice as it cooled down the burn and hopefully brought down some of the swelling. I cleaned myself up as best I could, disgusted that his cum had touched my skin at all.

When I went back out to the bedroom, I crawled onto my side of the bed and threw the sheets up to my chin as I curled into myself.

“Got an attitude now?” he asked with absolute smugness as he sat up in bed.

“No,” I groaned as I cringed back into the sheets, hiding from him. I just wanted to go back to sleep without invoking any more of his wrath.

“Jaden, get over here, now.” His voice was low and dangerous, and it sent a wave of fear over my body.

Begrudgingly, I rolled over and inched myself over to his side, still keeping my head on the pillows and my eyes down. He pushed me over and pulled my back against his chest again, locking his arm around my torso as he had earlier. Burying his face in my hair, Darren took a deep breath as though he was trying to calm himself down. He had the shortest fuse of anyone I had ever known, and I hoped against hope he knew that.

“Go to sleep, Jaden,” he said exhaling deep and kissing my head and finally relaxing against my body. “I have big plans for us in the morning.”

I closed my eyes and fell face first into the haze I had been denied earlier, drifting into the deepest sleep I had ever known.

~*~

At last, I finally felt Jaden's body go limp while her breathing patterns evened to a nice and relaxed rhythm. She felt so small against me as my arm snaked around her body, clutching her to my chest. She was warm and soft, yet strong and solid. Everything I never expected to want or need.

Today had actually been enjoyable and gone almost as planned, but with every step of the day, she challenged me, and I had only been too happy to put her back in her place. She was a slow learner; either that or she didn't know how to shelf her pride like a good little girl. She would learn eventually that silly little emotion had no place in her life anymore.

I had to be patient, though. I had to give her ample time to come around, and I figured a week would be plenty. A week was all I would be able to take before unleashing the storm I had brewing inside. I had so many things I wanted to experience with Jaden, wanted to see her reaction, wanted to provoke her fire so I could stomp it out with the ice in my dead heart. And when she was completely broken and undeniably mine, I would make her my wife, and in return, she would give me the sons I deserved.

Seeing her reaction toward the baseball game, so carefree and unrestrained, lifted my heart a thousand feet. I had never been so happy to see someone smile. The game we had watched down in the kitchen was actually a rerun from the night before that I'd had Scott tape for us. I had watched it earlier while making phone calls and checking in with Dan on the deal in Panama while Jaden soaked away in her tub. I deliberately made that bet knowing I would lose just to test her, see what she'd do, and how she'd react. It was beautiful. I didn't need to make a bet with her to get her to do something I wanted. I expected her to do it anyway, and it seemed like she was beginning to learn this.

Of course, I would keep her sass intact; I liked that too much about her, but she would know exactly who she belonged to and would never dream of leaving me, even if she were presented with the option of freedom. She would choose me because she loved me and I was her only reason for living. I wanted her to be just as obsessed with me as I was with her.

That goal would take the longest to accomplish. I would gain her love eventually, but first, I needed her fear; I needed her to know who was in control in order to keep her in line. I would reward her with gentleness and comfort for her obedience, and when it finally became second nature, I would move on to phase two. I would give her the world. My world.

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Chapter Twenty-One

Business

I woke up entirely too hot, and I felt like I was being crushed into the mattress. I lifted my sweaty head from the pillow to find that Darren had practically rolled over on top of me. Lying face down, I pushed with all my might to roll him off me, but he was too goddamn heavy. Bit by bit, I slowly inched myself away from him, and just as I turned my back to him, both his arms came sweeping over me and pulled me right back in.

“Mmm ...” he said, nuzzling into me. “Where do you think you’re going?”

“You’re smothering me with your overactive body temperature. I don’t feel like dying of heat stroke just yet,” I groaned as he squeezed me tightly.

He mumbled his sleepy chuckle as he kissed my hair and then reached over to the side of the bed. He fiddled with it and then a few seconds later I felt the mattress becoming several degrees cooler.

“Better?” he asked.

“Thermal mattress covers?” I said looking up at him.

“That’s not what I asked you.”

“Yes, better, thank you,” I quickly corrected myself.

“Good, you should always remember to answer my questions first.”

“Okay.” I nodded.

Darren then rolled me over, laid my head on his chest, and draped my right leg over his while he kept a tight arm around my back. He kissed my forehead and began gently rubbing my back, but it just felt so wrong. I wanted to be lying with Jason, not this monster.

For a moment, we just laid there, and I took the time to quietly study his body while he busied himself feeling up mine. He was solid, yet soft enough to lay on. Smooth lightly tanned skin covered layers of thick muscle, and for some odd reason, I wanted to trace my fingers along the edges of those masculine curves. I hadn’t realized it before, but Darren

actually sported an eight pack rather than the typical six, and it made me jealous as fuck. I had to give it to him – his body was impressive, even with all the obvious battle scars.

As my eyes secretly wandered, I realized I had a better view of the eagle tattoo on Darren's forearm. The symbol on the shield hanging from the eagle's talons contained an intricate design of interlocking obtuse triangles, revealing the badge of Darren's life as a criminal leader – the same badge he wore on his right middle finger.

A few short seconds later, Darren's phone went off with an almost urgency to it. He reached over to the nightstand and grabbed it.

"Yeah?" he said, answering it.

"We've got a situation," I heard the male voice on the other line say. I pretended to hear nothing as I kept myself relaxed, but I wondered what the "situation" was.

"Give me five minutes," Darren replied and hung up. "Sorry, princess," he said, scooting out from under me. "I'm going to have to postpone our morning plans until later."

"Am I allowed to ask where you're going?" I said, sitting up and pulling the sheet to my chest.

"I'm not leaving the estate. That's all you need to know," he said as he pulled on a pair of dark gray track pants and a black tank top.

He walked into the bathroom and came back out two minutes later looking fresh and awake. I wish I could get ready that fast. I looked over at the clock and realized it was only 8:35 a.m.

"And what about me?" I asked as innocently as possible. As far as I knew, I was still bound to his room.

"You can go anywhere you want in the house except for the places you already know are off-limits. What would you like for breakfast?" he asked as he laced up his Adidas.

"Do I have to dress up for it if you're not going to be there? I'd kind of like to work out afterward, and it's not good to sweat with makeup on." I gave him little puppy dog eyes hoping he would see my side of things.

"That's fine," he said. I released a sigh of relief and gave him a slight smile.

"Thank you," I said. "And I'll just have a bagel with cream cheese." I was going to need a lot of carbs for the workout I had in mind.

"That's it?" he disapproved, raising an eyebrow at me.

“Yes?” I replied inquisitively.

“No, you need something else to go with that.”

“I won’t be able to fit anything else,” I interjected.

“Jaden,” he warned, turning his head dangerously to the side.

“Fine. How about a small bowl of raspberries? I like those.”

“Better,” he said, still glaring at me. “I’ll let Pascal know. You can have it on the patio.”

“Okay. How long are you going to be?”

“Why? Do you have somewhere you need to be?” he asked sarcastically.

“Maybe.” I leaned into my answer for emphasis, and Darren raised an eyebrow at me. “I mean, I do have a pity party scheduled for 10:00 a.m., you know. I can’t cancel that again.”

Darren gave me a serious look that strongly suggested he didn’t like my jokes, especially when he started striding toward me with an angry pace.

“Kidding!” I said quickly with an uneasy smile and that stopped him as he regarded me closely. “I’m just trying to make sure I have enough time to be ready for when you come back.”

Duh.

He seemed to like my second answer as he crossed the room in two long strides and bent down to kiss my forehead. “Now, that’s a better answer,” he said. “Just go have your breakfast, enjoy your workout, and go get ready. I’ll come find you when I’m done.”

“Okay,” I said.

He took my face in his hands and gave me a good deep kiss, possessing everything I had, and I held on to his wrists to help support myself against his force. He then let go and bumped my nose with his fingertip. “Behave yourself.” He smirked and headed for the door.

“Uh, Darren?” I asked inquisitively.

He turned back around, raising an eyebrow at me. I held up my still bound wrists so he could see, hoping he’d finally release me.

“Oh, yeah.” He laughed and pulled out his phone. Seconds later, my wrists were free. He then winked at me and walked out the door, leaving me alone in his room.

I left Jaden alone in my room, knowing full well there was nothing in there for her to fuck with, extended her perimeter on my phone, and headed over to the security room. Scott was sitting at his desk, staring at the monitors as I walked in and sat down next to him. Daniel was on the flip phone again, waiting for me on speaker.

“He’s here,” Scott said.

“They fucking backed out,” Dan said angrily.

“Motherfucker,” I seethed.

“I know. Said they didn’t trust us and wanted out. I tried to convince them otherwise, but the gunfire was getting ready to go off and I didn’t need the heat.”

“Do those cocksuckers think I do this for shits and giggles?” I said, leaning back and pinching the bridge of my nose. I didn’t need this shit right now. “You don’t back out of a deal with me when I’ve already completed my end of the bargain—not without consequence.”

“What do you want to do?” Dan asked.

“Let me make a phone call and I’ll get back to you,” I said turning off the screen.

I took out my phone and dialed Carlos. He ran drugs in and out of Panama, and he and I had a decent working relationship since he would supply me with the drugs and I’d supply him with weapons. It was perfect. But since he was the motherfucker responsible for this deal, he was gonna fix it. After two rings he answered.

“Hey, amigo! What’s going on?” His fat-ass Latino voice sounded too chipper on the other end.

“Well, Carlos, I’ve run into a little problem with your friends down in Panama,” I said seriously.

“Oh?”

“Yeah, you want to explain to me why the fuck I send my younger brother down there with a large shipment and they back out the day of delivery?”

“They did what? Oh, man, amigo, I am so sorry. Why did they back out?”

“Some shit about not being able to trust my business? You know something about that?”

“No, my friend, I don’t. I didn’t expect this to happen.”

“No shit. I made this deal as a favor to you, but I don’t run my business like this. You know that.”

“Of course. Let me call them and fix this. There must be some kind of misunderstanding,” he spoke quickly.

“Yeah, you do that,” I said and hung up. I turned to address Scott. “What’s that Panama fucker’s name? Juan?” I asked him harshly.

“Yeah,” he replied with a nod.

“Didn’t Carlos mention something earlier about the guy’s brother doing business near the city? That was how he knew of him?”

“Yeah, some deal he’s working on with the locals.”

“Find him. If those Panama fucks still back out, I want a bullet in his head along with every member of that shitty little cartel. You don’t strike a deal with me and back out, especially after I’ve already incurred the costs of delivery.”

“Got it,” Scott replied and picked up his phone to carry out my orders. I texted Dan back on my phone telling him shit was probably about to go down and to be ready to execute.

After ten minutes of pacing the room with Scott making several phone calls, my phone finally rang with Carlos’s number. I answered on the first ring.

“Well? Do we have a deal or do I need to renegotiate the terms myself?” I asked him angrily.

“I’m sorry, amigo. I tried to convince him, but Juan is very hot-headed and stubborn. He doesn’t trust anyone.”

Done deal, then.

“Well, good thing he won’t have to worry about it anymore,” I said and hung up the phone.

Carlos knew better than to call back. He knew what would happen next, and he knew better than to interfere.

I dialed Dan back, and he answered on the first ring. “Yeah?”

“Deal’s off. You know what to do,” I said.

“Got it,” he replied and hung up.

Well, there goes my morning. I knew Dan was more than capable of handling this shit. His accuracy with a gun was beyond precise, almost as good as my own. He never lost his shit in a situation, remaining calm and cool as I’d taught him. He’d become quite the little mercenary since his first kill when he was twelve. Over the years, I had become proud of the man

he'd become, and now that he was about to become a father, it had me rethinking his entire role in this business.

I ran my hands through my hair and rubbed my face, my stubble scratching against my palms as I realized I had forgotten to shave this morning. I was beginning to like the feeling of rubbing my face against Jaden's smooth skin, but my shadow would hinder that. I'd need to shave before I went to find her later.

I replied to some quick emails on my phone before Scott finally addressed me.

"Darren," I heard him say from across the room. I turned to look at him. "They got him. They're bringing him in right now."

"Good. Let's go say hi then, shall we?" I said with enthusiasm, and we both left the security room and headed out to the driveway to meet our new temporary guest.

It was barely even 9:00 a.m., and it was already turning out to be a very bloody morning.

~*~

I looked around as I sat on the bed, almost lost in a foreign country, but I could still feel him there. Even though he was gone, just sitting on his bed was enough to make me feel like he really did own me. It was total foreign territory to be in his room, especially without him.

It wasn't until I got out of bed that I realized how sore my ass was from last night. I walked over to the tall mirror hanging on the wall and examined my ass. There was a fucking outline of a handprint on my left cheek. Son of a bitch! I also noticed an array of little bruises everywhere; discoloration completely consumed my ass. Fuck. I was pissed, and I knew sitting down was going to hurt like hell for a while. I guess I had more motivation to behave if I wanted that shit to heal.

I walked over to the now wrinkled dress shirt in a heap on the floor, pulled my arms through it, wrapping the ends around my body like a robe, and stalked down to my room. Slamming the door behind me, I headed into the bathroom, used the toilet, brushed my hair and teeth, and changed into another skort and plain t-shirt before heading down the stairs to the patio.

When I got to the table, I found a silver covered tray waiting for me with a mug, a thermos of coffee, hot water, bags of tea, and the little

container for my vitamins. I didn't even bother to sit down and lifted the lid to find a perfectly toasted bagel, cream cheese, and a bowl full of perfect red raspberries.

After making my tea, I slathered the cream cheese on my bagel and took my sweet-ass time eating my breakfast, just staring over the stone railing of the patio and admiring the ocean view. The raspberries had the perfect combination of tart and sweet as I relished their flavor. Surprisingly, I finished the entire bowl, but there was still one-half of my bagel left. I was bordering on full, and I did not want to work out with an overly packed stomach. I took three of the biggest bites I could muster and replaced the lid on the tray. Hopefully, Darren would recognize my effort and leave it at that.

Letting myself digest for a few minutes, I relaxed against the railing, sipped on my tea, and slugged back my vitamins hoping they might actually do some good. The sun was out in full blaze and the ocean was roaring just a few yards ahead of me. If I hadn't been a captive, I might have actually wanted to live here. I honestly loved the water.

Growing up in Michigan, you were never far from a lake, and my cousin Mel had a nice little setup on Lake Huron. I missed the nights I would spend out there just drinking and bullshitting with her while we tore the Jet Ski up until the sun set. When I got out of here, I was going to do a lot more of that.

Once I finished my tea, I pulled my hair back into a ponytail and eagerly headed toward the gym.

And then I heard shouting coming from outside the front door. Cautiously, I walked over to the door and peered through the glass to see Darren on the phone, waving his arms and pacing back and forth. Scott was just standing there, watching Darren while he smoked a cigarette. Deciding against getting caught watching them, I turned away from the door and quickly headed to the gym. Thankfully, no one was in there this time.

After doing some quick stretching, I hopped on the treadmill and started with a warm-up run. After a few short minutes, I found myself pumping my legs as hard and as fast as I could as I ran my fucking heart out. Sweat was pouring down my face, and my heart was practically beating out of my chest as I ran as if my life depended on it. Maybe it was something deeper than that. I ran because it was the only time I would ever

be allowed to. I wanted to run far from this place, and even if I ran to the other side of the world, it still wouldn't be far enough.

Five miles later, I finally stepped down from the treadmill and practically collapsed on the floor. I needed to rest, and I needed water. Looking over to the corner of the room, I saw a mini fridge. Wobbling back and forth, I made my way to it and pulled out a bottle of water. Nearly downing the whole thing, I sat back against the wall and started stretching again. I needed to lower my heart rate if I wanted to lift weights. I knew I overdid it with the running, but damn, I needed to stretch my legs, and it felt good to finally unleash them properly.

I looked over to my left to see the door Darren had expressly forbidden me from even standing too close to. Fuck. What I would give to get to train with the weapons he had in there.

Once I was finally able to calm down, I looked around and noticed I had plenty of room to practice some acrobatics. I smiled as I got up, walked to the end of the room, and started into a running pace, dipping down for a cartwheel and then folding back into a back handspring. Damn, that felt good. I did a few more of those, landing perfectly every time as though I had never stopped practicing. It was like riding a bike. I worked on some front flips and front handsprings; even my kip ups and butterfly kicks came back to me easily. It felt so amazing to bring it all back into the light. I hadn't forgotten my skill after all.

I then looked over at the line of punching bags on the opposite wall. Pumping my legs hard, I charged at the bag and jumped high into a flying sidekick. I landed it square against the bag, sending it flying back on its chains. I didn't have any gloves, but I didn't care. I wailed into the bag, bouncing back and forth around it, light on my feet, and kicking it with everything I had. Following through with some open palms and elbows, I tried to keep the thin skin of my knuckles intact. I didn't need Darren bitching at me if I fucked my knuckles up any more than they already were. I'd ask him for a pair of gloves and wraps later.

With every hit I made, my ass pulsed from the bruises on my skin. I ignored it; too busy expressing some love on the bag to bother with that shit. I had a feeling I would have to learn to live with that kind of soreness often until I learned to shut my mouth. I had better get used to the pain then.

After a few minutes of unleashing hell, I felt a sharp snap on my fingernail and instantly pulled my hand back from the bag, pain throbbing

in the tip of my finger. I felt a slight twinge of fear as I looked down at the broken edge of the nail on my middle finger. Fuck, I just had these done!

Realizing I was still probably being watched, I looked away from my hand and pretended nothing had happened, even though I had no idea how I could possibly hide it from Darren. There would probably be a fight later.

Forgetting about it, I continued kicking the bag, throwing some reverse hook and sidekicks, knocking the bag in all sorts of directions until my legs were sore. I then headed over to the weight machines and started lifting. Nothing I could do about the stupid nail now, and I wasn't about to let the little busted thing ruin my workout. I worked my arms and torso hard, and the burn in my muscles felt so good as I pushed myself to the brink. I would push myself harder every day until I became stronger and stronger. Fuck, Darren. If becoming a body builder was what it would take to beat him, then I would do it.

After about a half an hour of lifting, I finally felt exhausted enough to end my workout and head upstairs for a jet bath to relax my muscles. As I headed for the stairs, I decided to peek out the window of the front door, but only Scott stood out there smoking another cigarette. Wait ... was there blood on his hand? It was deep red still, so it was definitely fresh. My stomach twisted into tight little knots as I turned away and headed up the stairs, trying to block the image from my head.

I knew I was dealing with dangerous people, but I didn't want to think about how sadistic they truly were. I wondered if Darren had partaken in the bloodshed or if he just directed it. I decided I didn't want to know.

Once I got to the top of the stairs, I made a beeline for my room. I stormed into the bathroom and turned on the bathtub, taking my sweaty clothes off as I waited for it to fill. I first stepped into a short, cool shower to bring the swelling of my muscles down and then hopped into the warm jets of the tub. The water felt amazing as it massaged my muscles, and I relaxed until they felt like butter under my skin. Afterward, I switched to the removable showerhead at the side of the tub to wash and condition my hair and then washed my face and body. Once I had thoroughly rinsed myself, I stepped out and quickly dried off.

Looking down at my busted nail, I tried to think of a way to fix it, but the only thing I could do was file it down to dull the sharp edges. I searched the entire bathroom until I finally found a nail file and vigorously filed the

shit out of it until it was as smooth and dull. It would have to do until my Russian nail team returned. If they returned.

I did my makeup in the other room, my mood suddenly lifting a bit when I realized I didn't have to put much makeup on my chest anymore to conceal the bruise from Darren's kick to my chest. It was finally nearly gone. I regretfully decided to go for a tighter light pink and dark pink striped tank top dress and selected a simple pair of nude flats. I dried my hair with the diffuser, keeping my natural curls intact and smoothed them out with some hair oil. I then stepped out into the hall and decided to do some more exploring of the house, hoping to prolong Darren's search of me.

I wandered the halls downstairs, passing random guards who remained steady as I walked by them. They never looked at me, but I knew they were carefully watching me and I hated how uncomfortable it made me. Eventually, I came across a set of double doors I had not seen before. Why hadn't Darren shown me this room?

I pushed on the handle, and it actually opened. Stepping inside, I looked up only needing to pick my jaw off the floor. It was a library. A massive, elaborate, old as fuck library. Red and gold tile checkered the floors and the dark brown shelves reached as high as the ceiling, which stretched to the second floor of the house. Numerous large windows let in an abundance of natural sunlight, warming the room while heavy burgundy drapes hung from bronze curtain rods. An old metal spiral staircase led up to the second level while several comfy couches, desks, and tables were scattered about the room. There was even an old school chalkboard and a few computers. I didn't bother turning one on. I knew Darren had already rigged his house to prevent me from having any communication with the outside world.

Well, duh, Jaden, as if he's going to let you wander around the house with the ability to contact anyone.

Defeated, I walked along the bookshelves and studied the books in Darren's possession. I found fiction, history, non-fiction, autobiographies, and even children's books. I was in awe of his collection, but even though everything was as clean as a whistle, it looked like no one had touched a book in ages. I nonchalantly selected a random book from the shelves and looked it over, analyzing the age of the pages and catching the old scent of dust that lingered in the bindings.

"There you are," a deep male voice came from directly behind me.

I instantly dropped the book and nearly jumped out of my own skin.

On instinct, I jolted around, gasping in shock as my hands swiftly flung out to strike whoever it was behind me, but my wrist was stopped dead in its tracks as I came face with face with Darren directly behind me. He was now clutching my wrist and giving me a dangerous look. But my heart rate was already going a mile a minute from shock and panic.

“Jesus Christ, don’t do that!” I yelled at him, fairly relieved now that I knew where he was but now just angry from being caught off guard. “Didn’t anyone ever tell you it’s not smart to sneak up on a black belt?”

Darren chuckled as he beamed down at me in amusement while I snatched my wrist out of his grasp.

“Sorry. Did I scare you?” He laughed.

“No, you just caught me off guard,” I countered, eying him as I bent down to pick up the book I had dropped.

“Maybe you should learn to become more aware of your surroundings then.” He smiled deviously as I placed the book back on the shelf.

As if my situational awareness wasn’t already on par. I just found it hard to believe a man of his size could successfully sneak around unnoticed.

“Or maybe I should just put a bell on you,” I replied crossing my arms. “Problem solved.”

“Well, considering you’re the one with the collar, a bell would seem fitting for you, don’t you think?” he replied slyly.

I narrowed my eyes at him, noticing how he had showered, shaved, and changed. He wore jeans and a black t-shirt with an open gray button-down with the sleeves rolled up to his elbows. Goddamn, he was sexy, especially with those friggin tattoos. I loved a man with ink.

“Nah,” I replied, shrugging my shoulders. “I’m not really the jingly type.”

“I can see that,” he replied with a smirk. I decided it was time to change the subject.

“How come you didn’t show me this during the tour?” I asked him as I looked around.

“I guess I forgot about it.” He shrugged as he looked down at me.

“How could you forget about a place like this? It’s beautiful.”

He shrugged again. “This is where I was tutored as a boy. Once I went to college, I didn’t have much use for it. Books aren’t my thing. The

only person who liked coming in here was my mother. Pretty sure it was her favorite place to be.”

“I can imagine why,” I replied.

“Don't tell me you're a bookworm, too.”

“I might be.” I eyed him with a smirk. I could enjoy a good book every once in a while. He rolled his eyes at me and took my hand in his. Thankfully, not the one with the busted nail I was hiding from him.

“Come on. I have a surprise for you.”

“Oh, joy,” I said as he tugged me along like usual.

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Chapter Twenty-Two

Spill

Darren pulled me outside toward the woods, and we walked onto a path that led us deeper into the trees. I was super excited to get to explore some more of the estate, but as soon as we came to the edge of the trees, I got worried. But again, I relied on the trust I had that Darren would not lead me to a deliberate electrocution.

As we got deeper into the woods, I could hear the sound of a river nearby, and sure enough, it was just a hundred feet ahead of us. As we came to the bank, I noticed there was a rather large hammock hanging between two trees. Darren led us over to the hammock, and he laid down on it before gesturing for me to climb on top of him.

“Are you sure it’ll hold us both?”

Darren sighed and rolled his eyes. “When are you going to learn to stop questioning me?” he asked sternly.

“When you stop bending my trust,” I said without even thinking about it. I kept telling myself he wanted honesty.

“Get over here,” he ordered, pointing at his chest. “Now.”

I sighed in defeat, careful not to roll my eyes, and gently climbed on top of him as he directed me to lay my head down in the middle of his chest. To my surprise, even though he was solid as a rock, he was actually quite comfy. I kept my busted fingernail hidden in my closed fist and curled into my side, away from Darren’s prying eyes.

“You need to stop testing me, little girl. It’s really starting to piss me off, and I am in no mood to be challenged today.”

“I’m sorry,” I said softly, nudging my face to his chest. Maybe he would react better to cuteness rather than aggression. I had some experimenting to do.

He released a big sigh and curled his arms around me, his hands rubbing my shoulders.

“How was your workout?” he asked laxly.

“It was good. Thank you, but ...”

“But what?”

I hesitated a bit, suddenly afraid to ask him for something for some reason.

“I’d really like a pair of gloves and wraps for the heavy bag ... if that’s okay.”

“What do you need those for?” he asked almost too innocently.

“So I can hit the bag without injuring my hands?”

“I’m not so sure I need you focused on trying to hit anything at the moment,” he said. I knew he was messing with me, but he almost sounded too serious.

“Come on, Darren, you don’t want me going soft, now do you?” I played along with his little game.

“Mmm, but I like you soft.” He smirked, his big hands caressing the skin of my arms.

Ugh.

“You know what I mean.”

“I’ll think about it,” he finally replied.

He’d better not think about it for too long. I carried rage that needed an outlet, and I actually preferred something that wouldn’t hit me back.

We were silent for a bit, just enjoying the sound of the rushing water and the birds chirping around us. It was really quite peaceful.

“Jaden,” Darren finally said. “I want you to tell me about your father.”

I groaned and tensed my shoulders.

“Why?” I whined, hiding my face in his chest. “Why do you want to ruin this nice silent peace we’re having?”

This topic could potentially bring me to tears, and I was tired of looking weak in front of him.

“Because I need to know what kind of male authority you had in your life. Plus, I’m curious as to what he was like.”

“I really don’t want to talk about it, and forcing me to talk about it will not end well for either of us,” I said angrily.

“Jaden, so help me God, if you don’t tell me what I want to know right now, I’m going to tie you to this hammock and leave you here all night.”

“Why are you doing this to me?” I practically shouted at him.

“Because I can, princess.”

“Ugh!” I groaned and tried to push off him, but he slammed me back down on top of him, his arms snaking around my back and chaining me to him.

“Don’t you dare fucking move, Jaden. See? You’re already getting upset about the topic, and I haven’t even asked you a single question yet. You clearly need to lay your feelings on the table before they destroy you.”

“You’re what’s destroying me,” I said into his skin.

“Well, thank you.” He chuckled. “I thought I was doing a pretty good job myself.”

“Fuck you,” I mumbled.

And then his hand came down hard on my already sore ass, and I yelped at the contact.

“Watch it, Jaden. That’s strike one.”

I just groaned at him. Fucking strikes.

“I’ll tell you what. Let’s start slow. Just tell me what he was like.”

I was silent now, holding back my sniffles as Darren continued to berate me. After a few thoughtful seconds and attempting to ignore the new sting in my ass, I finally released a breath and answered.

“He was everything to me. He taught me how to ride, how to play football, he was always there when I needed him. He was my rock.” I knew Darren would want more, so I started to tip the edge and spill my heart just enough to make a splash.

“He was kind and gentle, strong and tough, and he never took any shit from anyone and he taught me to do the same. Never show fear, just your war face. That was his thing. Both he and my mother strongly encouraged my independence and to go forth in life with gusto and guts. He taught me the value of hard work and helping others. And he always had my back no matter what. So there, that was the kind of man he was.”

I could feel Darren nod in acknowledgment. “He sounds like he was a good man.”

“The best,” I replied. “And I miss him every day.”

“Was he the one who decided to have you trained so thoroughly in self-defense?”

“Both my parents did. They wanted me to be able to protect myself. The same went for my brothers. They’re currently in Krav Maga.”

“So, I’m guessing he wasn’t exactly the stereotypical dad who sits on the porch with a shotgun while he waited for your first date to arrive?”

I chuckled a little. “No, he didn’t need to. He knew I could handle myself just fine without him.”

“Or so he thought.” Darren smirked. God, fuck him.

“I was taken on by four heavily armed men who had to tranquilize me to get me, and I still managed to inflict some serious damage on them. Even you couldn’t have gotten out of that.”

“Obviously, you still have much to learn about me.”

I rolled my eyes. He was such a narcissist.

“So how did your dad pass?” he continued.

“You already know the answer to that question, so why are you asking.”

“You wanna go to strike two?”

I clenched my fist until it shook.

“No,” I huffed.

“Then answer the fucking question,” he seethed.

“Cancer,” I replied bitterly. Fucking shithead.

He was quiet for a second as his hands tightened on my back.

“Shitty way to go.”

“Yeah, I supposed it was pretty shitty, huh? Just like the rest of my fucking life.”

Then a hard smack came crashing down on my ass, and I cried out in agony as my ass cheek throbbed like a blinking red light.

“That’s enough, Jaden!” he yelled at me.

“Well, what the fuck do you expect?” I shouted. “This is a sore topic for me, and I’m pouring out my fucking heart to you and all you’re doing is hitting me for it!”

“You need to learn to control your emotions. You let them get the better of you and that’s what gets you into trouble with me. Being able to control yourself around me will be a very beneficial trait for you to pick up quickly.”

I was so frustrated with him and the conversation that I just buried my face into his shirt and silently groaned to myself. I hated him so fucking much; I just wanted to choke the life right out of him.

“Do you understand me?” he nearly growled.

“Yes,” I stifled against his shirt.

“Good, now what did your daddy do for a living?”

Daddy ... Pfft. Another word I never used.

I might have loved my dad, but I was never a “daddy’s girl.”

“He was a mechanic,” I replied. “For GM.”

“So he was a grease monkey, too, huh?”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“Did he ever teach you anything?”

“I’m no rookie when it comes to an engine, if that’s what you mean.”

“Why did your dad take so much interest in you doing things that are clearly meant for boys?”

“Well, that’s awfully sexist of you,” I said, not surprised at all. “He taught my brothers and me the same things, and he wanted me to be as resourceful as I possibly could, and I was eager for the knowledge. I would never say no if he wanted to teach me something. Besides, you already knew I was not a girly girl. I preferred trucks to dolls. There’s nothing wrong with a girl learning the same things as boys.”

“Says you.”

“Does it bother you that I enjoy and know so much about interests and skills that are typically dominated by men?”

“I honestly don’t know how I feel about it. I’m used to the innocence and frailty of women, which is why I’m probably so drawn to you. You’re so wildly different from that, and it amuses me.”

“Yes, I am not your average girl, which is why you shouldn’t be so surprised by my lack frailty or femininity. I enjoy a more exhilarating lifestyle than most girls do, but that doesn’t make me less of a woman because of it.”

“It just seems too dangerous. I worry about you getting hurt.”

“Boys get hurt just as much as girls do.”

“Yes, but girls are much more fragile.”

“That’s because you grew up without any sisters to prove to you otherwise. Do I really seem fragile to you?”

“You may not come off as fragile, but you are.”

“I’m not the delicate little flower you make me out to be. I think I’ve proved that more than once. Besides, you certainly don’t treat me like a delicate little flower.”

He chuckled then. “I suppose that’s true.”

"I'm unlike any girl you'll ever meet, Darren. I really am one of a kind. If you'd loosen the reins, you may just get to see it one day."

"We'll see."

We were silent for a bit, and I was grateful that Darren let the topic slide for now, but I knew it would probably come back again in the near future. And just when everything seemed to calm down, Darren reached for my right wrist and laid it down on his chest. I kept my fingers clenched into a tight fist hoping he wouldn't notice.

"Jaden, open your hand," he said darkly.

I groaned, knowing I was in for it now. Slowly, I opened my hand and revealed the filed down nail that I had tried so desperately to hide.

"Goddamn it, girl." He sighed, setting his head back on the hammock and exhaling heavily.

"It was an accident!"

Jesus, I sounded like a fucking child.

"And do you know why it happened? Because you disobeyed me again and trained instead of just working out. Don't think I wasn't watching you in there."

"Goddamn it, Darren, I can't help it! I have a skill set that I have worked hard to achieve, and I don't want to forget it. Why can't you just understand that?"

"Because I don't have to understand shit if I don't want to. That's the beauty of my position over you."

I released an annoyed sigh at him but kept my mouth shut.

"And it's not the fact that you train, Jaden. It's why."

I let out a long slow breath and forced the words out.

"I just don't want to forget myself," I whispered, fighting back tears. "Please ... you've already taken away so much. Please, don't take this from me, too."

He was silent for a long time, his big chest rising up and down as he considered my words. I felt my fingers grip his t-shirt as I hoped like hell he would find it in his heart to let me have something. Just one thing of myself that I could keep.

"I have a feeling if I say no," he began, "that you'll turn into a depressed little mouse and I simply can't have that. I enjoy your fire far too much."

"Is that a yes?" I peaked in excitement.

"It's a conditional yes," he said. "If you want to continue training, I expect a huge improvement in your behavior. Is that clear?"

"Thank you, Darren. I promise you won't regret it."

Actually, he would. Eventually.

"You are still not allowed in my training room. That has not, nor will it ever, change."

"Okay." I nodded against him.

"You realize I'm still going to punish you for breaking that nail, though, right?"

A heavy breath of depression escaped my lungs as I sank into myself. "Do you really have to?" I whined.

"Yes," he said seriously. "Because now I have to schedule those Russians to come back and fix what you broke much earlier than they're supposed to."

"Honestly, you should just let me do my own nails. Contrary to popular belief, I'm not completely helpless when it comes to manicures, you know."

"Really?" he said amused. "And here I thought you didn't have a single girly bone in your body."

"Yeah, well, my mom saw to that."

"Well, that's a relief."

We laid there for a little while longer before I started to get hungry again, and I heard Darren's stomach rumble with mine.

"All right, come on. Let's head back," he said getting up and helping me out of the hammock. "But first," he said pointing at a large tree. "Bend over and put your hands on the tree."

My heart thumped in my throat as I looked back at him and then the tree, confused and scared as I watch him pull his belt from the loops of his jeans.

"Oh, God, Darren, please no. My ass can't take anymore," I pleaded, backing away as I glared at the belt in his hand. I couldn't take any more contact against my ass. I could barely sit as it was.

"You should have thought of that before you broke more of my rules," he stated calmly.

"But it was an accident!" I pleaded further, sounding so pathetic.

"One more word and your five will turn into ten. Now, move." He pointed at the tree.

I almost started to cry. This was fucking humiliating and my stomach boiled with fear and rage as I bent over and hugged the tree as if my life depended on it.

Darren came over to me and pulled my dress up, exposing my bare ass, and grazed his palms over my already bruised skin. "I don't need to tell you to count because it should be routine for you now."

And then he folded his belt and smacked it hard on my ass. I gasped out loud as the pain seared into my tender flesh. There was no fucking way I would be sitting down well into next week.

"One," I gasped.

But instead of another smack, he massaged the globes of my ass first before delivering another slice through the air and landing on my other cheek. I felt my legs buckle and I held on to the stupid tree even harder.

"Two."

Another massage and then another strike, this time landing on the top of my ass. The massaging didn't even help that much, just redistributed the heat through my fucked-up skin. My ass was burning all over again.

"Three." I cringed.

Two more strikes came down, and after each time, he massaged where he made contact, only dulling the pain for a short second before delivering the fifth and final strike.

"Five," I groaned.

But then another one came and I wasn't prepared for it. Completely blindsided by his lie, I screamed in agony as the last one hurt more than any of the other ones had. My ass felt as if I had dipped it in acid, and a single silent tear fell down my cheek as he finally put his belt back through the loops of his jeans and pulled my dress back down over my throbbing ass.

"That last one was for hesitating. Don't ever do it again, understand?"

"Yes, Darren," I said, still keeping myself bent over at the tree.

"Good girl. Now, let's go."

He took my hand and my ass pulsed with pain the whole way as we walked back to the house. Every step brought with it a wince and an uncontrollable urge to cry, and it was the first time I actually found it difficult to keep up with his pace. He eventually took out his phone, texted something, and placed it back in his pocket. If only I could get to that damn thing, I might have a chance at getting the hell out of here.

When we got back to the house, our lunch was already set out for us on the patio and, by the grace of God, there was a rather large pillow resting on one of the chairs with two large bags of frozen peas. Darren sat down and I slowly eased myself into the chair. The frozen bags did wonders for me. It did not numb the pain entirely, but I found it easier to deal with.

As we ate our lunch in silence, Darren fiddled on his phone and I watched the waves of the ocean crash over one another, spreading all over the powdery white sand. I wanted to explore the entire beach, the forest, and everything else that surrounded this beautiful fucking prison of mine, but I doubted I would be allowed the privilege any time soon.

At least I had won my ability to continue training, assuming I was ever afforded the opportunity. If I was going to be stuck in my room all day, I'd have to adapt to a new way of training if I wanted to stay fit and keep my skills sharp.

Once our lunch was finished, Darren stood quickly, a smirk growing across his face. "Come on. I have an idea on how we can spend our afternoon."

Oh, no.

Chapter Twenty-Three

A Little Game

“Let’s play a little game,” Darren said, selecting a pool cue. He had brought us down to the basement and directed me to the pool table. I leaned against the bar while he moved to rack the cue balls. “For every ball we sink, we get to ask the other a question. Any question they want. Sound fun?”

“Sure,” I said, narrowing my eyes at him and walking over to the cues. Luckily for me, I was an ace at pool. “What happens when I win?” I asked confidently.

The smirk on his face was priceless, and he laughed a little out loud. “Well, isn’t that cute,” he said patronizing me as usual. I shrugged it off, not letting him get to me as I stared at him seriously. “How about I let you decide what color you want your nails painted next?” he sneered with a smart-ass smile on his face. I felt mine heat up with rage.

“And if you win, how about I let you decide what color pen I’m going to stab you with?” I said quickly with a smile without even thinking. And then I instantly cringed with regret.

Goddamn it, where was my filter! I was suddenly terrified after what I said, but Darren laughed as if it was the funniest thing he’d ever heard.

“You just love getting your ass beat, don’t you?” He chuckled, shaking his head at me.

My eyes lit up as he gunned it for me and I almost ran for it out of instinct, but he was at my side before I could even turn my body away from him. My insides curled in as he grabbed the back of my neck and bent me over the pool table. I gasped in fear as his hand came down and swiped hard against my ass. I groaned loudly at the contact, digging my nails into the table as I bit back my cries, pain flaring up in my ass all over again.

“You’re a slow learner, Jaden. I thought you would have had this figured out by now,” he said walking away from me and grabbing his cue.

I righted myself and rubbed my ass. “Yeah, well, I’m still installing my mouth filter.”

“Well, you’d better get it taken care of before I install it myself,” he warned.

I nodded, my eyes now finding comfort in the floor.

“Would you like to break?” he then asked me, eying me carefully.

I suddenly paused at the question, almost taking it completely in another direction. I felt my breath catch in my lungs as my heart skipped a single beat. Did I want to break? Fuck, no. Not possible. But I would break this fucking set.

“Sure,” I said, glancing at him only briefly as I walked over to the table.

The only thing I wanted to break right now was his fucking skull open.

I lined the cue ball up and slammed so much force into the thing that it busted every single ball out of its perfect formation. Scattering them all across the table, I managed to get a solid in. As I walked around to line my next shot up, I asked my first question.

“So ... what got *you* started in martial arts?”

Darren chuckled. “I suppose you can thank my father for that. He wanted his sons to be ultimate killing machines since he dealt in such a dangerous business.”

Pfft ... ultimate killing machine, my ass.

“Hmm ...” I said, thrusting the pool cue into the ball and watching as it rolled into the pocket. “So, what makes you the ultimate killing machine, huh? What kind of training have *you* had?” I asked, still keeping my eyes on the table, determining my next shot, which there wasn't shit for now.

Darren eyed me for a few seconds before he finally answered. He did say I could ask whatever I wanted.

“I’ve trained in several different styles with private instructors from Ju Jitsu to Muay Thai to Judo, to name a few. I’ve gone through extensive tactical weapons and combat training as well as achieved an advanced automotive proficiency as a child. And, if you *really* want to know, I also have an expertise in various techniques of torture thanks to my broad study of the human anatomy and a desensitization to blood and gore.”

For a moment, all I could do was blink at him.

“Jesus,” I said, staring at him in shock. “You really didn’t have a childhood, did you?” I asked. He wasn’t kidding when he said there wasn’t

much time for him to be a child. I lined up my next shot but missed the pocket, probably too distracted by his latest answer. Damn it.

“I believe it’ll be my turn to ask the questions now,” Darren replied with a grin.

I leaned up against the bar and watched as Darren prepared his shot. Thrusting his cue, the ball bounced off the side of the table and rolled right into the left corner pocket. Damn, that was a tough shot to make. Apparently, he had some skill in shooting pool, too.

“How old were you when you lost your virginity?” he asked me.

Well, fuck, that was a personal question, and I furrowed my brows at him.

“Seventeen,” I said.

Darren rounded the table and analyzed his next shot before lining it up and sending the ball right into the side pocket.

“Who did you lose it to?”

I raised an eyebrow at him again, but he wasn’t looking at me as he was already making his next move.

“I don’t know, some guy I was dating in high school,” I said, shrugging. I couldn’t even remember the fuck’s name.

Darren landed another shot into the right corner pocket. Shit, he was beating me now.

“Has anyone ever fucked that perfect ass of yours?” he said seriously, turning to look at me.

“No.” I furrowed my brows at him as I stared him down incredulously. What the fuck?

“Good.” He smiled. “That’s very good.”

“Why?” I asked.

“I don’t believe it’s your turn to ask the questions.”

“Fine.”

He lined up his shot but didn’t have anything to go for so he missed. Ha. My turn.

I pushed off the bar and lined up the shot I had been eyeballing and landed that motherfucker perfectly down the table into the right corner pocket.

“Why is it important that I’ve never let anyone fuck me in the ass?” I was wasting my question on this, but I really wanted to know while it was still fresh on the table.

“Because it’s just another part of you that I’m going to claim. Eventually, I’m going to pop that backdoor cherry of yours. I may not be able to claim that pussy’s virginity, but that ass is still up for the taking. And if it wasn’t so much of a serious inconvenience, I’d kill the motherfucker who already stole it from me.”

“He didn’t steal it. I gave it to him. A concept you seem to have a hard time grasping,” I said as I missed my next shot. Fuck. Surprisingly, he laughed at that.

As Darren circled the table, I tried to ignore the fact that he wasn’t just going to enter my back door; he was going to kick it open until there was nothing left but a busted door hinge. God, he was going to ruin me.

“Ever experiment with drugs?” he asked after shooting the ball into the center pocket.

“Yes,” I said.

Darren waited a few seconds then glared at me, obviously dissatisfied with my answer. “These aren’t just yes or no questions, you know.”

“Perhaps you should have specified that while explaining the rules.”

Darren started charging toward me with that look on his face and words started flying out of my mouth.

“Weed! That’s it!” I said, stopping Darren in his tracks.

“Much better,” he growled, turning back around and aligning his shot for the next ball. Missed.

I circled the table and made my next shot quickly, pocketing that bitch like I owned it.

“How about something serious for once. What would you have done had you not gone into the ‘family business’? If it was all your choice and your family played in no illegal activity?”

He stood there for a second, almost confused by the question until he finally started thinking, and shrugged. “I don’t know. I don’t dwell much on what-ifs.”

“You don’t know? Come on. There must be something.”

“No, Jaden. There isn’t. There are no what-ifs in my world. There is only now. There’s no changing the past, so there’s no reason to dwell on it. We keep moving forward because that’s all anyone can ever do. I can’t imagine doing anything else because I know this is all I was ever meant for. I was born for this life, and I don’t regret a single second of it. ”

Well, that was deep, and I didn't really have much of a response to that. So I nodded and lined up my next shot, sinking it in the corner pocket.

"What's the significance of the ring on your finger? I didn't notice you wearing it until a few days ago."

Darren gave me his little shark-like grin.

"It was my father's. He wore it as the head of the family, and now that he's gone, I wear it. It's the symbol of our organization, the same one tattooed on my arm."

"Oh," I replied, not really knowing what else to say. "Interesting."

"And the reason you're just now noticing it is because I was having it cleaned and repaired during our time at the warehouse. So don't worry, your observational skills are still intact and as sharp as ever."

I nodded, not having much to add and attempted my next shot, missing. Damn it.

Darren then got up, lined up his shot for the ball, and sunk it into the corner pocket. Fuck, he was five deep now.

"So what made *you* decide to go to law school?" he asked.

I shrugged. "I'm not sure if you realize this, but I like to argue. Plus, I wanted a career that would allow me to help people and potentially make some decent money."

"Noble." He nodded and went to line up another shot, landing it swiftly in the corner pocket.

"I'll make this one easy. If you could go anywhere in the world, somewhere you've never been before, where would you go?"

I blinked at this one. Where would I go? I hadn't been on vacation in years, too busy with my life to be able to take off anywhere. I stood there and thought about it for a second.

"I don't know. I'd probably want to go somewhere with mountains. I've never seen mountains before." I shrugged.

"Nice answer." He nodded and pocketed his next shot. And now he was down to the eight ball. Fuck!

"Here's an even easier one," he said. "What's your favorite color?"

My favorite color? Really? He could ask me anything and he wanted to know my favorite color?

"Purple," I answered.

"Fitting," he said with a smile. I shook my head at him, trying hard not to roll my eyes.

Luckily the eight ball was wedged right between my last remaining cue balls and I doubted he would get it in. To my relief, he missed and I quickly went around the table, analyzing my new possibilities, and lined up my shot. I could feel Darren's eyes on my ass as I bent over the table, struck the cue into the ball, and sent it flying into the pocket.

"What did you mean when you said you were basically meant to take on the family business?"

"Because it was my job as the firstborn son."

"Your dad couldn't just have someone else do it?"

Darren's eyes narrowed at me then.

"Fine! But I reserve that as my next question when I sink this ball."

I made my shot and fucking missed. How the fuck?

Darren then got up and barely even lined up his shot before sinking the eight ball in the corner pocket like he owned it.

Ah, fuck, I lost.

"You were saying?" He smirked with that shark-like grin. I just glared at him and then smiled.

"I believe that was a question."

"A rhetorical one."

"Oh, semantics." I rolled my eyes.

"Did you just roll your eyes at me?" he sneered.

"Did you just ask me another question?" I shot back at him.

"Oh, that's it," he said and shot around the table at me.

I moved quickly to the other side, never letting my eyes waver from him as he stalked me like an animal ready to pounce on its prey. We were on either side of the table, and he lowered his hands to the rim and leaned in dangerously.

"Running again, princess?"

"Don't act like you don't enjoy it."

His low, devious chuckle echoed in my ears and sent shivers down my spine. He really was enjoying himself.

"You're right. I do love playing with fire."

"You know what they say about playing with fire," I warned.

"We'll see about that," he said and then leaped across the table at me.

I turned to run, but he was so much faster. I felt both his arms snake around my waist and pull me back to the ground, his chest on top of my back, pinning me under his heavy weight.

“Funny. I haven’t burst into flames yet.” He snickered.

“Argh! Get off! You’re crushing me, you fat fuck!”

“Fat?!” He laughed. “On me? Where?”

He just laughed as I struggled for freedom underneath him. His body heat was making me sweat, and I found myself breathing heavily as I fought for air. His erection was rubbing into my ass, igniting more irritation on my sore flesh as if his weight wasn’t already adding to it. Finally, I just gave up and let my head fall forward on the carpeted floor. It was pointless to waste all my energy on a cage I couldn’t break.

“Are you done?”

“Are you?!” I shouted back at him.

“Never.” He chuckled. “I’m having too much fun.”

“Well, I’m glad one of us is.”

“You know,” he said, releasing one of his arms and reaching back to graze my ass. “I could just take this sweet little ass of yours right now if I wanted. And I really want to.”

“Or,” I started. “Or ... you can wait for my ass to heal like a gentleman and then go at it when I’m in proper condition to handle it.”

He was going to fuck me there whether I wanted him to or not, and no amount of protesting would stop him. The least I could do was prolong the inevitable.

“Well, look at your negotiating skills,” he mocked.

Darren then flipped me over, placing my hands behind my back and straddling my hips, keeping enough pressure on my hands so I couldn’t remove them from behind me. Both of his hands came to the top of my dress, and he ripped the fabric apart as if it was paper. The bra I wore underneath was a delicate lace push up, the only kind Darren provided me with, but he didn’t look too happy to see it as he pulled a pocketknife out of his pants and flipped it open. Had he had that with him the whole time?

As he brought the knife closer to me, I panicked a little inside. The damn thing looked sharp enough to cut through my teeth.

“I wouldn’t move if I were you, sweetheart. I might nick your pretty skin and the only scars I’d like to leave are the ones of my name.”

As the knife came closer to my chest, I tensed, my muscles locking in place, refusing to allow any further movement. I closed my eyes and felt the blade cut through the fabric of my bra and my breasts were instantly freed, the cold air of the basement causing my nipples to harden.

Darren dipped low. He moved the cups of my now useless bra out of the way and buried his face in my breasts, kissing, sucking, and palming them with his large warm hands. He was rough and gentle all at the same time, practically worshipping my chest as I felt an electric heat rising between my legs.

I didn't even fight it; I fell right into it, knowing my reaction to his touch needed to become real if I were ever to gain his trust. I needed to train myself to enjoy him if he was ever going to believe that he truly had me under his control.

His hands and mouth were skilled as the sensations he created with his touch flourished under my skin, and I felt my blood race in anticipation. A moan slipped from my lips, and he caught it instantly with his mouth as he brought his lips down to mine. His kiss was ferocious and deep as his tongue possessed my own, and I pushed myself into him, giving him exactly what he wanted. And I somehow found myself almost wanting him to take it.

In the midst of everything that was going on, I was able to free my hands and tried to bring them to his face, but he just pinned them with one hand above my head and bent back down for another kiss. And I knew then he didn't trust me enough to touch him.

His other hand trailed down the rest of my body until he gripped my thong and ripped it from my hips, tossing it away like the useless piece of fabric it was. I could already feel the moisture building between my legs as Darren slowly traced his fingertips around my inner thighs.

"Looks like somebody wants it." He groaned as his fingers lightly brushed my clit and a jolt of electricity shot through my body, making me flinch and gasp.

Looking around, Darren dragged my body over to one of the legs of the pool table, pinned my wrists around it, and then locked them in place with his phone.

"There. Much better," he approved as his hands continued down my body until he stopped at my hips.

As though he was parting the Red Sea, Darren split my thighs apart and left a trail of slow, torturous kisses up and down the inside of each one until he got closer and closer to my wet, aching slit. My heart was pounding in my chest, and I watched with bated breath as he inched closer and closer to my sweetest spot.

“I have been craving this,” he said, his breath dancing lightly across the sensitive flesh of my clit, “since my very first taste.”

And then, when I was on the brink of insanity, his tongue dipped low and licked at my now swollen clit, sending me into overdrive. My back instantly arched as his tongue swirled and stroked, leaving not a single inch of me untouched. I released a gasp of air as I tried to keep myself from bucking against him while he went to work. Hot and wet, his mouth sucked at my clit, rolling his tongue back and forth until I could no longer hold back my moans of absolute ecstasy.

“Just like I remember,” he said against my flesh, tonguing me slow and intricately. “Fucking delicious. I’ll be damned if I don’t have you for dessert every fucking night.”

Back and forth, his tongue caressed my folds while his hands released my legs knowing full well I wasn’t about to close them on him now. His hands made their way up my body until he cupped my breasts in his hands, massaging and pinching my nipples. I was on the brink of coming right there in his perfectly capable mouth as he greedily sucked me down his throat. His moans of approval and satisfaction mixed with my own of pleasure and ignorant bliss.

“Please,” I finally begged. “I’m going to come, and there’s not a chance in hell I can hold it back.”

“Good,” he growled. “Because I’m going to swallow every last drop of you until there’s nothing left. Come for me, baby. I want it right now.”

And like that of a volcano, his command sent an eruption through my body as my orgasm exploded in a wave of heat and ultimate pleasure, crashing over my sweaty body. My lower half jerked like a wild horse as the onslaught of Darren’s expert tongue refused to cease and I cried out until I felt utterly spent. As the storm within me passed and my body started to calm down, Darren’s tongue lapped at my core one last time swallowing up my cum like it was the sweetest cream he had ever tasted.

“Oh, my God,” I whispered to myself.

“I believe that’s me you’re referring to.” Darren smiled smugly up at me from between my legs.

And then I heard him release his belt buckle and pull his jeans down to reveal his throbbing erection. He didn’t wait another second to bury himself inside me and my body welcomed him with open fucking arms.

“Oh, my God, this pussy of yours,” he moaned as he pounded into me. “It’s going to be the death of me.”

He had no fucking idea.

I moaned as his body rocked into mine, not even caring about the stiffness growing in my still trapped arms around the leg of the pool table. I wanted this to be hard and fast. Needed it.

Darren’s hands came down to grasp my breasts and he squeezed and palmed them, awakening more sensations as my core clutched his cock like it would never let go. With each thrust, my seared ass burned against the carpeted floor, but I didn’t care—the heat in my core was far greater than anything else at the moment.

“Oh, fuck, baby, get ready,” he moaned, gripping my hips and lifting my ass off the floor. A mere fifteen seconds later, I felt the blood in my veins rushing as my orgasm began to bloom all over again.

“Fuck, Darren, I’m going to come again,” I breathed. He growled through his thrusts until he finally reached his peak.

“Now, Jaden! Come with me! Fuck!” he roared.

Literally two seconds later, my body erupted all over again, the strength of my orgasm rippling through my veins as I came crashing back into my cloud of ecstasy. Darren then collapsed on top of me, his dick still buried between my legs, and his heavy chest heaving up and down against mine. Talk about intense.

After several minutes of just breathing together, Darren finally rolled off me and unlocked my cuffs. I didn’t get up, just massaged the blood back into my arms. I could feel the mess Darren left behind start to seep out of me and immediately asked Darren if there was a bathroom nearby. He pointed at the door closest to me, and I pushed myself off the floor only to find a wave of dizziness hit me. I grabbed the table for support, but Darren was already on his feet holding me up.

“I’m fine.” I pushed him away. “Just got up a little too fast.”

He let me walk away from him, but I could still feel his eyes on me as I closed the bathroom door behind me. I used the toilet and cleaned myself off with a warm washcloth. Looking myself in the mirror, I looked like I had just been gang raped. My dress was completely torn apart and the cups of my bra hung lifelessly at my sides. My mascara had smeared down my face, and I worked quickly to fix it before tossing the bra in the trash and wrapping my torn dress around myself, folding my arms to keep it in place.

I walked out of the bathroom to find Darren laying down on the couch, one arm resting behind his head while he watched me walk toward him. I sat down on my legs on the floor next to him and tried to relax as a wave of exhaustion came over me.

“Come here,” he said reaching down and pulling me on top of his chest. “I think we could use a nap.”

“That sounds fantastic,” I said as I laid on top of him and closed my eyes. His arm came up around my back and his hand rested between my shoulder blades, rubbing back and forth until I found myself drifting off to the sound of his calming heartbeat.

~*~

I listened to the sound of Jaden’s breathing as it slowed and evened out. I held her small body in my arms and rubbed my thumbs over her soft skin. Knowing she was asleep and safe beside me left me calm and at absolute peace.

It was a strange feeling. I was usually always on edge, guard up, and waiting for the next attack on my life, but I was used to that. It had been natural for me since I was a boy. But with Jaden here, it all felt different. An odd sense of security came from her presence. Just knowing she was here was enough to put me at ease. No one had ever had that effect on me before.

Fuck, she was probably going to ruin me and I couldn’t help but be okay with it. So many times I found myself sitting at my desk just thinking about her. I could watch her on the security feed for hours and never get bored. Just watching her move was breathtaking. She was flawless in every step, every move of her body calculated and effortless. I wanted to test her on every level—challenge her reflexes, her flexibility, and her strength. Jaden simply fascinated me in every possible way.

I ran my fingers through the strands of her bright red hair, loving the softness that caressed my fingers, but a buzz in my pocket interrupted me. I carefully pulled out my phone without waking Jaden to find a text from Daniel.

‘All set. Heading home now,’ he wrote.

‘Good,’ I wrote back.

I was surprised at how easy it was to find Juan’s brother, Miguel. He turned out to be a bloody mess once Scott was done with him. Scott had

demons of his own to exercise and killing was his way of doing it, which I had no qualms about. It was usually very entertaining to watch.

Another buzz went off on my phone when I expected it to be the end of the conversation.

‘What’s this I hear about you getting a girl?’ Dan asked.

Goddamn, Dominic. He never could keep his mouth shut.

‘Later,’ I replied. I didn’t have time to talk to him about Jaden. Eventually, I would probably have to sit down with both of my brothers and address the whole damn thing. After all, they would both become uncles eventually.

‘Expect later to be sooner than you think,’ Dan replied.

I rolled my eyes at his reply. I knew Dan and Dom would both want an update on what was going on. It wasn’t like me to keep a girl. I was usually one and done, but of course, Jaden was different. I would want her for the rest of her life, unlike the others I had frequented.

I never brought anyone back to my house. This place was my safe haven and I trusted very few with its location. I had several other properties scattered around the state and country that I didn’t care about, but this place was my family’s home. It was sacred to me. And now, with the addition of a new guest, my home had suddenly grown in priceless worth, making my estate even more necessary to protect.

Word would get out quickly that I had acquired a slave, but no one knew how precious that slave was to me ... until I made it known and married her. Once that word got out, Jaden would officially become a target and that risk worried me more than anything did. But I refused to allow my enemies control over my life. Jaden would be well protected on and off the estate. I would not allow the fate of my mother to repeat itself with Jaden. I would burn the world first.

~*~

I woke up to the feeling of lips on my face and hair. They were soft and gentle, and I nudged my face into Darren's chest as I tried to escape them. I didn't want to wake up. Waking up meant I was back in my nightmare.

“Wake up, sleepyhead,” he said softly.

I groaned against him, protesting like a little kid who didn't want to get up for school. I was warm and comfy, and I hated it with a passion when someone woke me up. Especially now, when this feeling was hard to come by.

"Come on," he said, sitting up and forcing me to rise up with him. "It's time for dinner."

I stretched my arms and torso only to remember that the only thing I was wearing was a torn to shreds dress, and I immediately closed the ends together in embarrassment.

"Can I change first? Please?" I looked up at him with hopeful eyes.

"Fine, but you'd better make it quick," he said, holding out his hand to help me off the couch.

We left the basement, and Darren headed over to the dining room while I ran upstairs to find some clothes that didn't resemble that of a homeless person. As I looked in the mirror trying to wake myself up, I suddenly thought of Kayla again. She had been popping in and out my mind for days, and I missed her like crazy. She had made our days back at the warehouse bearable, and now, I had no one to cling to. I wondered where she was at this exact moment. Was she in pain? Was she scared? Was she even alive? I had to know. It would drive me crazy until I got my answers, and I hoped Darren would oblige me.

I ran back downstairs in a pale pink sundress and didn't bother with shoes as I made my way to the dining room. I passed a guard who stood just outside the dining room, noticing I had seen him at other posts before.

As I sat down to the small plate of lasagna before me, my appetite was nowhere to be found. Sleepiness did that to me. I took tiny bites with Darren's giant silverware and sipped on water, but I knew it would be a matter of time before Darren got angry. Maybe I could distract him with conversation.

"Darren?" I said, fiddling with my fork.

"Yes?" he said, peering over at me.

"I want to ask you something—something that is very important to me—and I'm really hoping you'll answer, even though I know you don't have to and probably won't. But I really need to know," I said carefully.

"What is it?" he asked as he took a sip of his red wine.

"What happened to Kayla?"

His brows furrowed as he considered my question.

“Who?” he asked, as he set his glass down.

My eyes lit up with disbelief and outrage, my hands falling into my lap as I clutched my fork with an iron grip. But I worked hard to keep it in check.

“Kayla,” I pressed. “The blond I befriended at the warehouse?”

“Oh, right,” he said with obvious indifference. “What about her?”

“I want to know who bought her,” I said

“And what business of that is yours?” Darren said, turning to me with that warning glare in his eyes.

“I just want to know if she’s okay,” I replied quietly.

“Kayla is no longer your concern, Jaden. I’ve told you that already.”

“I can’t just pretend I don’t care about her. I’m not asking for a name, I’m just asking for a type.”

“A type,” Darren repeated, eyeing me.

“Yes. On a scale of one to ten, how sadistic is the person who bought her?”

A dark evil chuckle rolled up Darren’s throat, and it made me sick to my stomach. I didn’t like the sound of that.

“You really want me to answer that question?” he asked with amusement in his eyes.

“Yes,” I prodded.

He laughed again like I was going to regret my decision.

“Let’s just say I know Kayla’s buyer on a very personal level, and she will be spending most of her time on her knees.” Darren flashed a sadistic smile, one that practically begged me to challenge him.

A tight line formed on my lips as I felt both my hands grip my fork and pressed my hands together as hard as I could, the only thing I could do not to bite Darren’s head off.

How. Fucking. Dare. He.

“Oh, come on, Jaden.” He laughed, amused by my anger. “Smile. I’m sure Kayla is having the time of her life.”

I brought the fork back up from my lap, now bent into a perfect curve, and placed it in front of my mouth, imitating a smile. Darren snatched it out of my hand with an agitated grimace, bent it back into place, and banged it down on the table beside my plate.

“As I said,” Darren began, returning to his plate, “Kayla is no longer your concern. Now, finish your dinner and stop bending the silverware.”

I had zero interest in doing either.

After dinner, we retired to Darren's bedroom and watched *Mr. & Mrs. Smith* in his bed. Technically, I watched it while he read some proposals from whatever other illegal business he was probably running. When I called him out on it, I did not expect the reaction he gave.

"Jaden, I'm only going to tell you this once," he said with a very serious tone, eyes glaring at me. I felt my heart quicken. "Don't ever ask me about my business. It doesn't concern you and it never will. Understand?"

I furrowed my brows and gave him a look. Well, someone was secretive.

"I just have one noninvasive question," I said as I glared back at him.

"What," he said with that stupid warning look in his eye.

"Just how exactly do you sleep at night knowing you've destroyed the lives of so many young girls?" I asked angrily. I probably shouldn't have said it like that, but he was being an asshole now.

Leaning toward me, he spoke with more conviction than God and stared directly into my eyes, sending a chill down my spine. "Like a baby."

I shook my head at him, disgusted by his lack of empathy for the misery of others; misery he created for his own selfish desires. Turning back to the TV, I laid on my stomach, resting my head on my arms and just stared at the floor, wallowing in a shadow that threatened to consume not only me but also everyone else who came in contact. Darren was a goddamn disease that needed to be eradicated. Quickly.

How could he be so cruel? To have no regard or consideration for human life and revel in the destruction left behind in your wake. I truly belonged to a monster, and the comprehension of it made me sick to my stomach.

"I'm going to go to bed if you don't mind," I said getting up. "I suddenly don't feel well."

"You're sleeping with me tonight, Jaden," he said, his eyes still on his paperwork.

I turned around and scowled at him. As if I had any interest in sharing a bed with him tonight, especially after what he had just revealed.

"Can I, at least, go change and wash up?"

"Ten minutes," he said. I nodded and headed out of his room. Relief flooded me, but it was only for a brief moment.

In eight minutes, I had washed up and returned in one of my lacy nighties. I was back in his bed before he had even moved.

"I knew I would like those on you," he said smiling at me as I entered the room. "But it hits the floor when those lights go out."

Yeah, yeah ...

I didn't say a word as I walked around to the other side of the bed, pulled back the covers, and climbed in. Settling against the pillows, my back facing Darren, I curled the blankets around me until I was nothing but a ball of warmth and Jaden.

After a few minutes, Darren got up, used the bathroom, took off his shirt and pants, and climbed into bed with me. His arm reached over, pulled me all the way toward his side, and removed my nightgown before tucking me against him. Burying his nose in my hair, he inhaled deeply and relaxed against me, resting his chin on top of my head.

"I'm sorry I upset you, Jaden," he said softly, and his sudden apology surprised me though I doubted he meant it. "But I'm not sorry for the things I do, and one day, you'll learn to accept that. I am who I am and there's no changing it. The best way for you to understand me is to refrain from questioning me."

"But I want to understand you. How am I supposed to accept your will if I can't understand where it comes from?"

"Just rely on my rules and you'll be able to figure it out from there."

I released a sigh and just sank into the mattress while his arm crushed me to his body. I shook my head lightly and closed my eyes, falling heavily into the sleep I had been craving since he'd woke me up from my nap.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Branded

The rest of the week went by in a blur. Thankfully, I only had to sleep in Darren's bed on the weekends since most of the time he'd be away on business, but there were a few times I woke up in the middle of the night to find him between my legs. It was very hard not to fight him on instinct then, as it always scared the shit out of me.

Some days, I wore his clothes, and some days, I wore a dress. I still spent my time in my room while Darren was away at work, but luckily, he would let me bring one book from the library upstairs with me each day. It helped to keep my boredom at bay since I could only practice yoga for so long before it got old. I had managed to beat my forty-two-second handstand now that I had so much more time on my hands. I was now at forty-six seconds.

Eventually, I gathered the courage to ask Darren for an iPod so I could listen to music. I somehow managed to convince him it would keep me sane and calm while he was away. So at the beginning of the week, Darren presented me with gift-wrapped box at breakfast. It contained a silver and pink iPod with headphones and access to an iTunes account. He just loved to torture me with pink.

So long as I behaved, I could download ten songs a week, though he had to approve them first. I was so grateful, I could have cried, but Darren saw to my repayment for his generosity with an under-the-table session while he finished reading his morning paper. I didn't plan to ask him for another thing for the rest of my captivity after that if I could help it.

I fucking hated how he kept me locked up in my room all day while he was gone. It angered me to the point of absolute rage, but I tried to rationalize it from his point of view. He didn't trust me. That was understandable. I wouldn't trust me either. But it didn't mean I couldn't hate it any less. I tried to be good, hoping that when my week of reflection was over, he'd release me from my room since he would then see I could

follow his rules while he was away. I had managed to make it to only two strikes for the entire rest of the week, so that had to count for something.

The iPod did make the boring days in my room easier, though. I could listen to music for hours without even realizing it, especially now as it was the best distraction from my current nightmare. Sometimes, a song would come on that would remind me of someone I missed, but I couldn't linger on my family or Jason. Thinking about them hurt too much, and I needed to stay focused on myself and what I needed to do if I ever wanted to make it back to them.

I only allowed myself to linger on one person, a person I really missed: Kayla. I still wondered where she was, who had bought her, but at least, I knew she was alive. I wanted to bring her up again so many times to get more info from Darren, but I knew he wouldn't disclose anything. I would have to worry about rescuing her later. I had to focus on myself first before I could help anyone else.

The Russian women came back earlier in the week to repair and repaint my nails. This time, they did something fun with the French manicure, leaving a sparkly silver line just below the white tip. They did the same to my toes. Since I lost at pool, I did not get to pick the color, but I didn't really care that much about it. The ladies even removed the unwanted hair that began to grow back since my last waxing treatment. I wasn't too pleased with it but what could I do? The ladies still seemed skittish, and Anya remained quiet as ever, but Irina tried to keep things light with her fake-ass smile. She knew something was wrong with me, but she was too afraid to act on it.

As Thursday approached, I found my isolation from the world to be another mind game of Darren's. He was the only one I talked to, or was allowed to talk to, so when he finally came to collect me when he came home for the day, I was happy just to finally have someone to converse with, even if it was only him. I tried talking to Scott one time when he brought my lunch up, but that didn't last long and a short-lived phone call from Darren removed any thoughts of ever uttering another syllable to anyone other than him.

I tried to keep myself light and positive most of the time to show Darren that he had not broken my spirit. I still sparred with him every now and then, but he was a liar if he said he didn't enjoy it. The tent in his pants always gave him away. It was aggressively playful at best anyway, and if it

stroked his ego then fine, but it usually just ended in me inevitably stroking something else. That was all part of the plan, though. If he could have fun with me, even if it were a form of abuse, then I would take it if it meant he would fall for me. And he was. He just didn't know it yet.

For the most part, Darren had become somewhat tolerable to me during that week. He was almost a perfect gentleman – sweet, attentive, polite, but it only remained as long as I followed his rules. If I stepped out of line by even an inch, he would pounce with that warning glare of his, reminding me that he was only holding back from his usual punishments due to my week of reflection.

I was learning quickly when it came to his triggers and when to pull them or not. Anticipating his demands was coming easier, too, but when he reminded me that my week of reflection was coming to an end, it made me wonder if everything would really change that much. I had managed to remain good all week, and I was hell-bent on staying in Darren's good graces. But little did I know how quickly things were going to escalate when my week of reflection was over.

On Sunday, Darren was late coming home from whatever shit he was doing that day, and I ended up having my dinner alone in my room. He finally came and got me around 7 p.m. I somehow found myself excited to see him, but I told myself it was only because I was lonely and I wanted to get the fuck out of this room.

"I'm sorry I'm late," he said as he entered my room. "Something needed my immediate attention."

"That's okay," I said getting up from my chaise and walking over to him.

He took me into a heavy embrace and kissed me for a long time. If I didn't know any better, I'd say he missed me.

"Come on," he said taking my hand and leading me out to the hallway. "I have a surprise for you."

My stomach immediately twisted into tight little knots as I remembered the last time Darren had a surprise for me. I hoped today would be different, but I was so fucking wrong.

He led me down one of the hallways and we came into an office containing a long medical bed with outstretched arms in the center of the room. A man sat on an ottoman next to a tray of instruments that I was not able to make out. Tattoos covered the man, and he had his back to me as he

fiddled with the instruments. Fear broke out over my entire body as I was hoping to God that the tattoo gun I finally saw wasn't for me.

"Darren, what the fuck," I said, looking up at him, visible trepidation and anxiety spread all across my face.

"Your week of reflection is over, Jaden. It's time to show me what being mine means to you."

And then I heard the buzz of the tattoo gun, and I flinched as the sound penetrated my ears. Fuck. No.

"Darren, p-please. This isn't necessary." My voice shook; I couldn't contain the fear in it if I tried. I knew what he wanted on my body, and the thought of seeing his fucking name permanently scribed on my skin made me want to claw my own flesh off so there was nothing left to tattoo.

"Jaden, this is happening whether you want it or not. Now, get your ass in that chair and don't make me tell you again," he instructed as he pointed at the chair. His voice was cold and sharp, but I couldn't concede yet. I had to reason with him.

"Darren, please!" I pleaded, backing away from him and the chair. "You don't n-need your name on my skin to prove I'm y-yours. I'll do anything! I'll admit it to you every day if that's w-what you want. Just please don't do this. Please!"

Darren sighed with annoyance, pulled out a tiny syringe from his pocket, and held it up to me. I was shaking like a fucking leaf now as I brought my hands up defensively.

"This can happen in one of two ways, princess. You can get in that chair and let this nice young man do what he's here to do, or I can use this and you'll wake up with my name on you anyway and suffer severe punishment. Which is it going to be?"

Tears started coming down my cheeks now as he laid out two choices that did nothing but torture me. I knew it was going to happen, but I honestly didn't think I had the strength to willingly sit in that chair while Darren's name was pierced into my skin.

I took a few steps away from him and wiped my tears from my eyes. I didn't give a damn that my week of reflection was over, I wasn't going to willingly let him do this. I knew I was probably going to lose, but I didn't care; I was going to fight him anyway. I wiped my eyes one last time, squared my shoulders, and turned around with my hands balled into fists.

Darren looked at me expectedly, raising any eyebrow with that warning look on his face.

“No,” I said bitterly.

Darren shook his head at me through hooded eyes, and I knew I was in for a world of hurt. But I had to stand up for myself. He had to know I wasn’t just going to be a pushover for him to order around.

Darren then charged at me like a tank and my stomach instantly dropped with fear. Seeing someone of his size with that look on his face would cause anyone to retreat in terror ... but I was not anyone.

Darren grabbed my arm, but I deflected his hand as it attempted to come down with the syringe. I tried to kick him, but by the time I had lifted my foot, he had already roughly pushed me up against the wall, his forearm pressing against my chest as he held me in place.

“No!” I shouted as Darren stuck me with the syringe.

The dose must have been strong because I instantly felt my knees go weak while my head spun from a wave of dizziness that quickly came over me. Darren then picked me up, threw me over his shoulder, and slammed me down in the chair, strapping my arms in. It only took another fifteen seconds before a blackness surrounded me that would only be the beginning of what was coming next when I woke up. The image of Darren's angry expression would dominate my nightmares for the next six hours.

“Looks like we’ll be doing things my way from now on,” was the last thing I heard him say before completely blacking out.

~*~

I was fucking pissed. My chest heaved up and down in fury as Jaden laid motionless, strapped to the chair. How dare she fight me on this? After the entire week I had given her to get her shit together and accept her future, she was still unwilling to fully submit to me. Well, fine then, we would do things my way.

I stood to the side and watched as Justin, who I had contacted just a few days ago, wiped Jaden’s wrists clean and placed the sticky design I had sent him on her skin. Peeling it off delicately, the design sent a warm rush of pride swelling in my chest. The reality that everyone who came across Jaden would know right away that she belonged to me was beyond satisfying. Not many would ever be privileged to even lay their eyes on her,

but for those lucky few, they would think twice before lingering for too long.

The buzz of the tattoo gun brought me back to the present, and I turned my gaze down to the needle that was now piercing my name into Jaden's beautiful skin. I chose an intricate design, something classical but with taste. I knew Jaden would hate it, but she would learn to love it if she was smart. The tattoo wasn't there just to confirm my ownership of her to the world, but also to serve as a reminder to herself, so she would never forget her place. I had a feeling she would need that little reminder often.

By the time Justin was finished, twenty minutes had passed, and my name shined brilliantly in black scripted letters on Jaden's skin, the outline of the bright pink heart behind my name adding a little femininity to it. I had finally marked her as my own and the feeling was incredible as it bloomed throughout my entire body, warming everything inside me.

Justin wiped some ointment over her freshly tattooed skin and wrapped a layer of plastic wrap around her wrists to protect the ink while it healed. I would have to make sure Jaden attended to the new ink well so it healed correctly. God help her if she damaged it in any way.

"All done," Justin said, turning back to collect his tools.

I took one last look at his work, satisfied with the result, and pulled out the Sig I kept in my jacket.

"Thanks," I said and pulled the trigger without another thought. No loose ends in my world.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Sorry

I woke up on something cold and hard and came to realize I was lying in my cage. Again. Damn, I had been doing so well. My eyes adjusted to the small light that filtered down on me, and it was then I saw the strips of plastic wrap around my wrists with smudgy black ink hiding underneath it. Gingerly, I pulled the plastic away and looked down at the glossy covered words that burned my eyes to tears. There, perfectly squared in the middle of the inside of both my wrists and written in big, black script, was Darren's new trademark.



In a moment of complete and utter defeat, I laid the front of my forehead down on the floor of the cage. Tears began to leak from my eyes, and I immediately slammed my fists down onto the floor of the cage, my rage now overcoming me. It had happened, and knowing Darren's name would always be there to remind me shattered my soul into tiny wretched pieces. Even if I did escape him one day, I would still always belong to him. I was nothing more than an object with a label for all to see.

I hated my existence, hated myself, hated Darren, and hated God, Buddha, or whoever the fuck else was responsible for my fate and putting me through this. I had to have died in that shootout weeks ago, and I was in my own personal Hell. That was the only explanation I had for what had become of my life.

For the longest time, I just laid there, my wrists limp out in front of me as they burned and ached from that bastard needle. Tears drained from

my eyes every now and then as I contemplated how little I meant in this world. My existence was nothing if not dependent on Darren's commands to validate me. I was meant for more than this. I had wanted to do so much more with my life, and I'd make damn sure I did when I got the fuck out of here. Right after I scheduled an appointment for laser tattoo removal.

I pushed myself off the floor of the cage, leaned back against the bars, and waited for Darren to come back. I knew I was in for a world of pain for defying him the way I had, but I didn't care. As far as I was concerned, Darren Davis could eat his own dick.

About another half an hour later, in strolled Darren with his hands in his pockets looking perfectly pleased with himself.

"How's my princess doing?" he teased as he stepped in front of the cage and looked down at me.

"Go fuck yourself, Darren," I spat.

"Still feisty as ever." He smiled. "But not for long."

"Why the fuck are you so hell-bent on breaking me down, huh? You're kidding yourself if you think you'll find any satisfaction in me if I'm nothing but a submissive little bitch."

"You think I don't know how to train you to be exactly what I want?" he asked amused. "That's adorable. The first and most important part of your conditioning is for you know exactly who's in control and whom you belong to. Once you finally get that in your head, we can go from there."

"Well, I fucking get it, okay," I said, flashing the underside of my wrists. "You win."

"Oh, I know I've won. I won the moment you came into my possession, but the problem here is I'm still not sure you believe it." He smirked turning his head to the side and regarding me closely.

"God! What the fuck do you want from me!? I behaved all week for you, and you turn around and do this!" I yelled pointing at my wrist. "What the fuck did I do to have caused you to doubt me so?!"

Darren unlocked the cage, reached in, grabbed me by my throat, and yanked me out of the cage. He slammed me into the wall so hard my head nearly bounced off it.

"If you ever, EVER, raise your voice or speak to me like that again, you won't be formulating words for an entire month, do you understand me?" he roared. The malice in his voice left goosebumps on my skin, and I

couldn't help but shiver as my hands clung to his wrist that held my throat in place. "Do you understand?!" he yelled.

I hated when he raised his voice like that. It terrified the shit out of me because I knew he was serious and dangerously close to hurting me.

"Yes," I managed to get out quickly.

"The reason I had you marked was simply because I wanted it. Not because you misbehaved or because I like torturing you, but because it pleased me to do so. That seems to be the one concept you have trouble grasping. You are here to please me, Jaden, and if I desire my name on your fucking forehead, then you'd better graciously oblige me. I told you there was no point in trying to understand me and that questioning me was an even bigger mistake, yet here you are, trying to make sense of my desires. It's just pissing me off to no end."

All I could do was struggle against him as I fought for air. Darren's grip was so tight, and I found it getting tighter as he spoke.

"And then when I finally bring you in to demonstrate your devotion to me, you immediately turn away and defy me again after I had just granted you an entire WEEK to let go. Extremely disappointing, Jaden. You don't get to make decisions anymore. You don't get choices unless I expressly give them to you. You do as you're told because it pleases me when you do. And today was a huge failure."

I was clawing at his arm now, trying to get him to let me go, but my nails did nothing to penetrate his jacket, and finally, I'd had enough. I jerked my arm up as hard as I could and was able to pull the meat of his thumb a centimeter off my trachea, allowing some air to escape. At least, he could see I was about to pass out from lack of oxygen and loosened his grip. I took in a long deep, sharp breath, but I was so dizzy I couldn't see straight. Thankfully, the only thing I had in front of me to focus on was Darren's chest.

"Now," he said, still keeping his hand in place, "can you be a good girl and do as you're told or do you need further motivation?"

I was still gasping for air, terrified out of my mind to the point where I couldn't even answer him. I couldn't find the words.

"Jaden," he growled, gripping tighter and pulling me to him.

"I'll be good," I quickly gasped out as my hands gripped his wrists even tighter. I was right on the verge of tears.

“Good ... now, there’s just one more matter that needs attending,” he said and pulled me over to one of the weird body shaped couches and forced me down to straddle it, my face pushed against the end that curled upwards. “You even think about moving, and we won’t leave this room for days,” he snarled. And then he reached down, gripped the back of the dress I was wearing and ripped it open, completely exposing my bare back. My body shuddered with fear as I heard the sound of his belt leaving the loops of his pants, and I held on tightly to the edges of the couch.

Without wasting another moment, Darren brought the belt down hard on my skin, and I yelped as the heat of the lash spread over my back. He waited only a second, but he didn’t have to wait long before I started the count.

“One,” I groaned.

The belt came down again, striking lower as it cut through my flesh leaving behind a mark that would ache for days.

“Two.”

As soon as we got to ten, I thought we were done, but Darren just switched the end of the belt with the buckle and started pelting me with that end. The agony was even worse than before, and it didn’t take long for my yelps to turn to screams. I had suffered ten more of those. But we still weren’t done.

Darren then pulled me to the ground on all fours and ripped the rest of my dress completely off and forced my legs apart. Tearing away my thong, he drilled himself into me and as his body rocked into mine, it caused more pain to flare up in my back while his hands held my hips in a vise grip.

When he was finally finished with me, I was so weak I didn’t even have the strength to cover myself up. I just laid there facedown with my arms limp at my side. My back burned and throbbed, yet I continued to lay there, my eyes barely able to remain open while tears stained my face. I wondered for a brief moment if he would just leave me down here.

“I’m sorry,” I barely whispered. I didn’t know why I said it because I wasn’t sorry. Maybe the only thing I felt sorry for was myself, but for some reason, I thought it was something he wanted to hear.

“I bet you are,” Darren said standing over me as he righted himself.

He then walked over to the bathroom and brought back a warm washcloth. After cleaning me up, he gently threw me over his shoulder and took me back upstairs to his room. Tossing my dress into the trash, he laid

my naked body on my stomach in his bed and pulled the covers over my shoulders. Climbing in behind me, he miraculously let me be on my side of the bed, but he kept himself turned toward me for the entire night.

“Who do you belong to, princess?” he asked before turning out the light.

“You,” I whispered and then gave myself to the darkness.

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Chapter Twenty-Six

Routine

The following week slugged on as I spent most of my time lying down on my stomach or sitting up perfectly straight. The pain in my back was so terrible it affected my energy, my strength, and my ability to walk. Darren's sympathy was completely absent as he blamed me since I was the catalyst for it all. He didn't even offer me any painkillers this time.

As often as he could, Darren refused to let me out of his sight. He worried I might regress after his punishment, and he wanted to ensure its effectiveness. And I suppose it was effective because I didn't say a word to him unless he had spoken to me first.

Darren had the usual amount of business to take care of, but worked from home as often as he could. When he was home, I spent my time watching movies in the theater or reading while he took care of business. He was planning some kind of acquisition based on the phone calls I overheard in my presence. He would usually lay my head down in his lap while he stroked my hair and read his documents. That was when I would eventually fall asleep, and he didn't seem to mind, probably because I was quiet for once.

Many times throughout the day, he would tend to my tattoos and examine them with sparkling eyes as he admired the handiwork. He would reapply ointment over my skin on a daily basis, and God help me if I ruined the tattoo in any way, Darren had said to me. I heeded his warning like my life depended on it, and it probably did.

Sunday night could not have come quick enough as I longed to finally be away from him and his overbearing presence. I needed a break from him, badly.

After dinner, Darren gave me a large blanket and told me he'd meet me out on the beach for the sunset in ten minutes. Laying the blanket down by the shore, I sat down and watched the sky as the sun painted it with golds, pinks, and bright oranges; it was nice to finally have a singular

moment to myself. Twenty minutes later, though, Darren still had not come down to meet me, and I was beginning to wonder where he was.

By the time nothing but a sliver was left in the sunset, I was starting to get cold as the ocean breeze began to pick up. I looked back around me and wondered if I should go and look for him. I pulled the ends of the blanket around my shoulders, huddled into it, and continued to wait. Two minutes later, the little hairs on the back of my neck stood up as I felt a hand on my shoulder and flinched up to find Darren standing behind me.

“You missed it,” I said lightly.

“I know. I’m sorry. I got held up,” he said sincerely.

I stood up and kept the blanket over my shoulders as Darren took my hand and led me back to the house. Looking down at the hand that held mine, I noticed his knuckles were slightly bloodied and bruised, and I brought them up to my face to get a closer look.

“Darren, what did you do?” I asked softly, looking up at him. But the glare on his face made me immediately regret it, and I turned my eyes back to the ground. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to question you.”

“Good girl,” he said darkly and continued up to the house.

When we got to the patio, I shook the blanket of the sand it had accumulated and handed it over to Darren as he held out his hand for it. He just tossed it over the railing and held the door of the house open for me. As we entered, I kept my head forward, but my eyes scanned for any possible signs of a struggle, however, there was none to be seen. I couldn’t help but be on high alert.

“Relax, Jaden,” Darren said noticing my old scanning tendencies as he led us to the stairs. “The only danger you need to worry about is me.”

Because that makes me feel so much better.

After washing up and using the bathroom, I climbed into Darren’s bed and laid down on my side. My back still ached slightly from the week before, and I had made damn sure I avoided all mirrors so I wouldn’t be tempted to turn around and witness the damage Darren had done to me.

As Darren got in behind me, his arm reached over and pulled me to his bare chest. Tucking me in tightly, I gasped as the force of him created a sharp pain in my back.

“Please, Darren, not so tight,” I mumbled quickly and softly into the sheets hoping he would take pity on me. There was no way I could sleep like that all night.

By the grace of God, he loosened his arm just enough for comfort and gently pressed his warm chest into my back and I instantly melted against him. The heat soothed my still tender muscles, and I released a sigh of relief as I began to relax and quickly fell asleep.

Another two weeks flew by and my time of reflection was well over. Darren had drained a good portion of my fight out of me after he whipped me for refusing his tattoos, but it didn't take long for the fire in me to rage again. Now, I was just pissed.

Ever since Darren had his name scribed into my skin, I was constantly angry and exhausted. Darren thought the tattoos would help me understand my place, but it only made me rebel more. I didn't give a fuck about building trust anymore. I wanted him to know what he did was wrong and that he would suffer the consequences from me. He wanted me compliant, but for the next two weeks, I was anything but.

I was still confined to my room while Darren went to work; I had no one to talk to, nothing to do, and nowhere to go. I wanted so badly to finally roam the house while he was away, but I knew with my current behavior there was no way that was happening—especially since I was still fighting him every chance I got now that we were officially doing things “his way.”

I wanted to work out, but it seemed I was never afforded the chance since a proper workout required a decent meal before doing so, and I only had ten minutes before I was shunned back to my room until Darren came home and got me. I felt like calling Darren a liar for telling me I could train and then taking away my opportunity to do so. Maybe he was still punishing me.

Most of the time, I would revert to stretching and advanced yoga until I got bored. Then I would read, listen to music, or daydream about killing Darren with a rusty spoon. That thought usually brought me back to my positive side.

I would often communicate with Darren through the songs I chose to download. Breaking Benjamin, Evanescence, Limp Bizkit, Linkin Park, and Rage Against the Machine. The songs were all rage fueled and defiant, but he never commented on them. He approved them almost instantly. I didn't

know why, though, since they only motivated me to be angrier. Maybe he liked it. I didn't know.

My tattoos were nearly healed now, and I tried to just pretend they weren't there, but they were the fuel to my rage. I would often remind myself that they were only ink after all and could be removed in the long run. It didn't piss me off any less that they were there, though. It also didn't help that my stupid cuffs kept rubbing against the scabs and it made them itch like crazy. I hated those fucking things. I wanted them off so badly, but I knew I would just get used to them eventually.

As more time passed, I started to lose track of time, but it became apparent to me that I had been under Darren's captivity for about a month now. His actions and reactions became more and more predictable, and I was able to avoid setting off any of his triggers for almost an entire week just to see if I could. But after a couple of days, I could tell Darren was itching to fight with me again and would intentionally push my buttons until I snapped at him enough to warrant a punishment. Ignoring him never worked because then he'd just punish me for not paying attention to him. I could never win against his twisted logic, and it was extremely frustrating. And then it dawned on me that I wasn't just here for his pleasure; I was here for his amusement.

Some days, I would seriously find myself pacing back and forth in my room when I knew Darren would be home soon. I was like a loyal dog in a cage waiting anxiously for its owner to return home so they could love them. I felt so attention deprived when he was gone that I feared I would start acting out just so someone would notice me.

As a normal human being, I was craving a connection with someone, anyone, but Darren was the only one available to me, and I hated him. So naturally, I looked forward to him coming home and letting me out of my cage.

Sleep was also hard to come by. I barely slept a couple of hours at a time, waking in the middle of the night covered in sweat and sometimes screaming my lungs out. I had constant nightmares, and the stress of my situation made it difficult to fall asleep. I was allowed to sleep in my room during the week, but when the weekends came, Darren kept me in his bed.

Eventually, I came to notice he would never fall asleep until I had, probably not trusting me to be awake while he slept. But then ultimately the nightmares would come and I'd wake him up. He'd always comfort me

back to sleep, pulling me against his chest while he rubbed my back and played with my hair. It usually worked, and I found it strange that Darren could chase away my nightmares while still being the cause of them. Unfortunately, it quickly became clear the only time I ever slept fully through the night was when Darren fucked me into complete exhaustion. My body couldn't help but need a full eight hours of rest to recover from that kind of exertion.

At first, Darren's touch had disgusted me, and I made sure he knew how much I hated him as often as possible, but it never deterred him. Sometimes, he'd get annoyed with me, and other times, he'd make me take back my words until I apologized and learned to respect him. But I kept up my stubborn fight. I refused to break, but goddamn if he didn't bend me, and most of the time, it was either over his knee or over the side of the bed.

Some days were worse than others, and those days were usually the ones where Darren didn't come home until the late hours of the night. I'd spend all day in my room, have dinner alone, and sometimes cry myself to sleep from desperate loneliness. I missed Jason like my heart missed its other half. It was so confusing and destructive when some days I longed for Darren's attention, but then when I finally had it, I hated it that much more. Maybe I just hated it because I wanted it ... needed it. He was fucking ruining me, and I was falling for it. Isolation was the cruelest mind fuck imaginable, especially since most days I would just lie on my bed staring up at the ceiling, trying so hard not to think about all the things I missed in my life.

There were days when Darren would come home and I'd be in the worst mood imaginable—angry at him for leaving me in my room all day, for taking away my freedom, for making me want him ... and then I'd just attack him. I'd finally give in to my built-up rage, wanting him to know exactly how pissed off I was and that I wasn't afraid of him. Of course, that was a lie. I was terrified of him and the things he could do, but some days my brain didn't give a flying fuck.

There was one day, a particularly bad day, where I knew we were going to fight. I had slept like shit that night, constantly waking every two hours from the relentless nightmares of never seeing my family again. I was snobby at breakfast and earned myself ten strikes on the ass over Darren's knee for acting like a "brat." I had stewed for the entire day in my room, my

adrenaline racing while anger flooded my veins like a disease, and I needed an outlet.

I had even refused to allow my Russian friends to enter my room for my appointment. I threatened to harm them or even myself if they came in. I felt bad for scaring them away, but I had to get my point across to Darren. I was sure he knew I would never hurt them, but they certainly didn't know that and they weren't sticking around to call my bluff. By the time they left, I was this close to throwing my fist through the wall, but I needed to save my knuckles for later. So instead, I plotted.

Darren wasn't coming home until the late evening that day, so yet again, I had spent the entire day in my room. I was beyond pissed, so I slathered my wrists, ankles, and neck in Vaseline, put my hair up in a tight ponytail, and made sure my Nikes were on.

When Darren came through my bedroom door, I didn't even think, I just grabbed the first thing nearest to me, which happened to be a heavy candle and threw it right at his head. But with the reflexes he had, he'd caught it easily before it hit him, sighing as he gave me that look that made me quiver inside; the look that told me I was getting fucked. Hard.

"I'm not in the mood for this tonight, Jaden. I've had a very long day, and now isn't a good time to test my patience," he warned, holding the candle up for me to see.

"Well, I'm not in the mood to be locked away in my room all day like some goddamn modern day Rapunzel."

He sighed heavily at me, slightly shaking his head. "Now, is that any way to greet me?"

"Pfft, it's certainly not even close to what you deserve," I replied bitterly.

He sighed again, setting the candle down on my nightstand while barely taking his eyes off me. I glared back at him in return, watching him as he took small slow steps toward me.

"Clearly somebody wants to fight." He practically tsked at me.

"When do I not want to fight?" I narrowed my eyes at him.

"I can think of a few times." He smiled at me sickeningly, taking another step forward.

"Well, now isn't one of them."

He sharply exhaled through his nose, stopping several feet in front of me. "Why do you do this to yourself? You make things so much harder than

they have to be.”

“I could ask you the same question.” I glared. “You could make your life a hell of a lot easier by just letting me go.”

“Now, why would I do that when we’re both clearly having so much fun?”

I raised an eyebrow at him. “You have a very twisted idea of fun.”

“Oh? And what’s your idea of fun?”

“Bashing your face in while you choke on your own blood,” I said bluntly.

He cocked his head to the side and gave me a devilish grin. “And you call me twisted.”

“The difference is you’d enjoy it with anyone. I’d only enjoy it with you.”

“Well, now, I feel special.”

“Yes. You and everyone else you deal with on a daily basis are on a very *special* list of mine.”

“And now you’re making me jealous.” He smirked, eyeing me from the floor up.

“You should learn to curb it. For someone who loves control so much, you certainly lack it within yourself.”

“Watch it, little girl,” he growled. “You’re already on thin ice as it is. I should have you sleeping in your cage for the rest of the night for fucking up your appointment the way you did today.”

I hated how the tone of his voice could easily make me tremble with fear, but I wouldn’t let him see it. He took another step toward me, but I remained pissed off as ever, immediately bringing my left foot back and turning my body to the side. And then he smiled at me, a chuckle vibrating up his throat.

“I love it when you do that.” He gestured at me with his hand. “It’s so cute.”

I furrowed my brows in absolute rage. “We’ll see how fucking cute I am when I’m covered in your blood,” I seethed with demonic fury.

This time, he full out laughed, and I clenched my jaw until it hurt. I was so giving him a black eye tonight.

“Baby tigers are still cute even with blood all over their furry little faces.” He continued to chuckle, folding his arms across his chest.

My hands balled into fists, and my shoulders bunched with tension as red clouded my vision. He was doing it again; pushing my buttons to piss me off.

Make that two black eyes.

I cracked my knuckles. "You are such a condescending asshole."

"And *you* are a disobedient little shit who very clearly wants her ass beat tonight," he fumed, that angered tone sending chills up my spine, but I ignored them, a single word now giving flight to the wings of my wrath.

"Call me little ... one more time," I warned him menacingly, holding my index finger up while my eyes narrowed in on the dark blue of his.

A dark grin came across this face. Yes ... I had challenged him; I knew that. But right now, I wanted a challenge worth fighting.

"I'm not sure you realize this," Darren said, sauntering back and forth on his heels in obvious amusement, "but you are like the size of an overgrown child. So that makes you pretty fucking *little*."

Yep, I lost it. I completely lost my shit.

Before I could fully register what I was doing, I grabbed the chair at my desk, which was light to begin with, and heaved it at Darren's face. He caught it as I expected him to, but as I threw it, I advanced quickly and side kicked the shit out of his gut and sent him back a single step. He crouched forward for only a second before tossing the chair to the ground in a heap. He could have tossed the chair back at me, but I was beginning to notice he was changing his fighting strategy so that the only bruises I sustained from him were either on my wrists, neck or ankles. My ass was obviously the only place he loved to see them. That was a given.

Anger formed across his face as he lunged for my throat, but luckily, the Vaseline I had coated it with made it that much easier for me to pull him off me. I maneuvered my arm around his, locking it around his elbow, but as I did, the power of his body forced me to the ground. But I anticipated that. I immediately grabbed a tighter hold on his arm and pulled my legs up to wrap them around his neck, effectively putting him in a triangle choke hold. Squeezing my thighs together as tight as I could, I held onto his arm to keep it in place, but as I flexed my hips, his face lit up with a smile.

"Very good," he groaned with approval. I was glad to see my choke was affecting him, but the look in his eye told me my hold on him wouldn't last because before I knew it, he simply stood up with my body still wrapped around his arm and throat.

My eyes lit up in shock at his annoyingly evident strength as he made his way to the bed. I knew what he was going to do before he even did it, so I quickly forced my free hand around my legs and grabbed his tie, yanking on it as hard as I could and wrapping it around my fist. I heard him give out another groan as he quickly lifted his arm up and then slammed me down on top of the bed. The wind was momentarily knocked from my lungs and though I tried to hold on even tighter, the impact caused my legs to loosen just enough for him to rip himself from my hold.

As soon as he was free, I brought my legs back up to kick him. My feet landed on his chest and he made a move to grab my ankle, but it slid right out of his hand and I was able to roll backward off the bed to the other side.

Darren looked down at his hand and rubbed his fingers together feeling the mysterious oily substance on his hand. He looked at me in confusion.

“Vaseline,” I replied confidently.

A thick smile grew on his face again, and this time, it looked almost proud. “Clever girl.” He smirked. “But I don’t need to touch your ankles or wrists to bind them.”

“True.” I nodded, afraid he might actually activate my cuffs, but I really didn’t want him to. “But then, where’s the fun in that?”

Another grin. God, he was so sexy sometimes. It was just a shame he was so ugly on the inside.

“And I am a fan of twisted fun,” he sneered at me.

“Exactly.”

He started to walk around the bed toward me, and I tensed up, ready for another fight.

“Your triangle hold is lacking. Your legs aren’t strong enough against someone like me,” he said casually while his arms hung loosely at his sides. What the fuck?

“Are you critiquing me?”

“I thought you might want to know.” He shrugged.

“Like I need advice on technique,” I practically spat. I had been a martial artist nearly all my life. I didn’t appreciate this kind of insult.

“No, you really don’t. Your technique is nearly perfect. Every move you make, even the steps you take, are calculated and precise. I love that

about you. In so many ways, you remind me of me. Unfortunately, you just lack the strength and size to really harness it.”

My face lit up with revulsion. “Don’t compare me to you. We’re nothing alike. You’re a cancer that infects everything around you. And I swear to God, Darren Davis, one day I’m going to eradicate you from this world.”

A soft seductive chuckled rolled up his throat and made me twinge in anger.

“You and I both know that’s never going to happen. You’re mine, and you’ll remain mine no matter what you try to do. Forever.”

I slowly shook my head at him. “You’re so fucking delusional, it’s pathetic.”

“Careful,” he warned. “Or you’re going to get a lot more pain than what’s already coming to you. Don’t make it worse for yourself.”

“Like I said,” I replied, twisting my neck and cracking my bones, “I’m in the mood to fight.”

“And don’t I love it when you’re in a mood.” He smirked.

This time, I lunged at him.

I moved to kick him in the stomach, but he casually sidestepped me, causing me to miss completely. But I didn’t let my momentum go to waste as I quickly turned my body around and elbowed him in the gut, but it wasn’t very hard as I hadn’t fully prepared for it.

But ducking low and being in that position made me vulnerable, and Darren seized his opportunity by grabbing my ponytail and pulling me down onto the bed. He immediately straddled my hips and took my wrists in his hands. They slid out like butter, and I went to punch him right in the dick. I wasn’t fast enough, though, as he gripped my wrists again. He forced them down on the bed and quickly wiped them with my bedsheets.

Well, fuck...

He gripped them again in one hand, grabbed my jaw, and kissed me roughly on the mouth. His fingers dug into the side of my face until I finally opened my mouth to let him in. His tongue seeped in, taking mine hostage as they battled for authority. And then I decided to see if I could play this to my advantage. I kissed him back aggressively, pushing my pelvis against him until I felt his grip on my wrists start to loosen. A small amount of Vaseline still lingered on my skin, and I managed to slip out of his hold. He raised his head to regain his position over me, but I had accomplished a

quick elbow to the side of his face. His face jerked to the side from my impact, and a small short groan escaped his lips as he fought to restrain me.

“That’s enough, Jaden!” he roared at me.

“What’s the matter, Darren? Can’t take a hit by a *little girl*?” I practically spat, eyeing him intensely.

“You wanna talk about taking hits? Let’s see how many you can take before you start screaming,” he seethed.

Darren ripped me from the bed and placed my wrists around one of the tall posts of my bed. He then activated my cuffs and tethered me to my bedpost. He forced the rest of my wayward body over his lap where he rained down his hand until my ass swelled with heat and my lungs scorched from screaming. And then he continued with his belt against my back until it matched my ass.

“You think I’m gonna let you roam the house in my absence with an attitude like this?” he shouted at me. “You must have me confused with someone who rewards bad behavior.”

“It doesn’t matter what I do. I never get my way anyway,” I bit back with clenched teeth. “So I might as well act how I want.”

“And look where it’s gotten you,” he replied, giving me another swift smack on the ass. “You want out of this room? You had better make damn sure you make me pretty fucking happy in the next couple of weeks. Otherwise, I’ll start a whole new method to ensure you behave when I’m gone. Things can always get worse, Jaden. Don’t push me.”

After that, Darren proceeded to fuck me three times that night, waking me every half hour for another round until I was sore and desperate for sleep. I was reminded who I belonged to and that this sort of behavior wasn’t acceptable. And then, when he was finally done with me, he did, in fact, force me to spend the rest of the night in my cage, reminding me how things could always get “worse.”

Since then, I never wanted to do anything that would warrant my ever having to see that fucking cage again. I felt drained and hopeless for a long time. No matter how hard or often I fought Darren, he always won.

Eventually, I had learned to stop fighting him as much and just let him have his way. It really wasn’t that hard to give in, though. He terrified me on a daily basis, and I wanted to keep him happy enough to avoid his punishments. I knew how cruel he could be. So I had to change my strategy.

Sometimes, I would think of little things to please him and show him I cared about keeping him happy, even though it was only for my sole benefit. Most days he never really acknowledged it, but I was sure he noticed. Little things like soaking in fragrant bath oils before he came home or gently kissing his shoulder every now and then when he was nice since I couldn't reach his face very often. I'd even try to smile at him occasionally, and usually, he'd give me a small smile back.

Even with the fear of punishment, it was difficult to keep my attitude in check—especially when he tried to push my buttons or deliberately patronize me—but my sass was never far behind. He'd reprimand me every time I accidentally cussed around him, but I could see the smirk forming on his face when my smart-ass humor came out. It entertained him, and if I could make him smile, he might actually make me smile in return.

I had realized in the beginning he was using sex as a form of punishment, a reminder that I was his, but eventually, it just became another one of my many duties as he didn't have to punish me very often anymore. I would still try to keep up my feisty attitude every now and then because I knew that Darren liked it; he loved it even more when he got to give me a good swat on the ass every time. He didn't need a reason to, but he liked having one.

Every other week, Irina and Anya would return to redo my nails and treat my hair. I apologized to them for my behavior last time, and even though they had no idea what I was saying, they seemed to understand. I let them do what they needed to without a fuss and didn't even complain when they waxed my unwanted hair since I wasn't allowed to have any razors. The Vaseline had also been removed from my bathroom, and I found that hilarious.

Aside from Darren and the occasional Scott, the Russians were the only other humans in my life and the only source of estrogen I had access to. I often found myself looking forward to my appointments with them, even if they weren't allowed to converse with me. I was just grateful for their company.

One day, a few weeks after my last run-in with the cage and after coming home from work on a Friday, Darren had a gift for me. I involuntarily sauntered back at the thought of receiving a gift from him, as I was already terrified of his surprises. But when he held out a small robin

egg blue box with a white bow tied around it, I felt I was able to relax a little.

“Open it.” He smiled.

I tentatively took the box from his hand, pulled the ribbon off, and opened the lid to find a beautiful platinum diamond studded infinity ring from Tiffany’s. I had always wanted one, but now that it came from Darren, I just wanted to throw it to the floor and crush it under my foot.

“Do you like it?” he asked me.

“It’s beautiful.” I smiled like Miss Fucking America.

Darren then took the box from my hand, pulled the tiny ring out, and slipped it on my left ring finger. My eyes widened in shock as I looked up at him, hoping my suspicions were mistaken.

He just chuckled down at me. “No, it’s not what you think it is, princess. It’s just there to keep this finger warm until I decide the time is right. Consider it a gift for the dramatic improvement in your behavior as well as a promise for the future, which I expect to last infinitely.”

“Thank you, Darren. I love it.”

I fucking hated it. It matched my fucking cuffs!

“I’m glad,” he said and then his expression became very serious. “It is never to leave this finger. Is that understood?”

“Yes, of course,” I said a little taken aback by his abrasiveness.

“Good. Now, I have another gift for you. Follow me.”

Oh, no.

He took my hand and led me downstairs to the foyer where we stopped and he smiled down at me.

“This is your gift,” he said slowly holding his arms out and looking about. I gave him a very confused expression as I looked in all the same directions he had. “I’m officially giving you the ability to roam the house while I’m gone. I think you’ve proved well enough that you are capable of following my rules and should, therefore, receive a reward for pleasing me the way you have.”

I blinked a few times, really wondering if I had even heard him correctly.

“Really?” I asked softly, disbelief filling my voice.

“Yes, really,” he replied.

I was in shock. I had wanted to be able to leave my room so many times only to have the slight reminder of a minor shock instead. And now,

here I was, finally able to explore and live just a little bit. I was so overfilled with joy that I ran over to him and slammed him in a hug so tight I thought I would break his bones, but of course, he felt nothing.

“Thank you,” I whispered against his chest. “Thank you so much, Darren.”

His arms wrapped around me and held me in a tight embrace as he kissed the top of my head. “You’re welcome.”

He then held me back by my shoulders and lowered his face to mine. “You are still to remain indoors at all times. No going outside, Jaden. If you can demonstrate your ability to continue to follow my rules, that could change eventually, but I need to see how you handle this first. Don’t disappoint me.”

“I won’t,” I vowed.

“Good girl. Now, let’s go upstairs so you can thank me properly.”

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Fuel

Another week went by after that, and I felt so much better being able to roam the house while Darren was away. There was so much to explore and do, and I could feel my spirits finally lifting. Each day after breakfast, I would wash my makeup off, work out and train for an hour or two, shower, and make myself pretty all over again. My workouts did wonders for the depression that had been slowly seeping in, and I looked forward to it every day. I could feel myself getting stronger, and it wasn't long before my body began to bounce back. Darren still had not supplied me with boxing gloves, and I think he was afraid I'd break another nail again. Stupid girly concerns.

Now that I was able to roam, I had a better idea of the staff who helped manage the estate. I discovered there were, at least, five guards who roamed the inside of the house and three who guarded the outside. They never spoke to me, but I knew they were watching me, reporting my daily activities to Darren. I was careful not to draw too much attention to myself as I was still plotting my escape. I had made it through phase one; now, I just had to be able to make it outside.

The rest of the staff was quick to ignore me. There were a few maids here and there along with gardeners and people who tended to the grounds. Once I thought one of the gardeners had recognized me. I had been watching the birds through the windows and caught him staring at me as if he was trying to place my face. I had glanced at him for only a second, but the glimmer in his eyes told me he suddenly knew who I was. A twinge of panic had filled my stomach then as I wondered if he would act on it, and then I sighed to myself hoping he wouldn't because he would just get himself in trouble. I left the window then, hoping he would forget about me. I was still lonely, but at least, I had so much more to do with my time. I welcomed the distractions, but with more privileges came more responsibilities.

When Darren came home, he enjoyed hunting me down and fucking me, no matter where I was or what I was doing. Some days, he would throw me over his shoulder and carry me up to his bedroom, and other days, he would call ahead to one of the guards, telling them to inform me to be waiting for him at the door or in his bed the second he came home. I had to admit the smile on his face when he first walked through the front door did make me feel pretty special. I hated that I felt that way, but my subconscious was clinging to any feeling that made me feel good, no matter who or what it came from.

How I ever got past the disgust of him being inside me, I'll never know. I had somehow trained myself to forget and pretend it was consensual, but the more I pretended, the more I came to realize a disturbing change in my body. The oddest thing to come out of my conditioning was the horrifying surprise of how wet I became when I found myself terrified in Darren's presence. I didn't know why my body responded that way, but every threat he made, every warning he gave, made something dark and hot blossom inside me. I couldn't explain it, but the more time I spent with him, the more frequent it became. I felt twisted and confused, and even more embarrassed when Darren acted on his threats and discovered my misplaced arousal. The smugness on his face would last for days, further adding to my mortification.

Some days were easier to forget when he was gentle and loving, but it was rare. Most of the time, he fucked me like some kind of crazed animal, marking his territory, reminding me I was his and no one else's. What was worse was that I found myself craving it. I hated the man so much, my need for revenge and blood never wavering, but when my body was under his, I somehow became a different person. And I didn't like her. I allowed that to happen ... because I knew it had to happen. I had to give myself over to his demands if he was ever going to trust me. So I had to make it real, but that didn't make it any easier.

Accepting his ownership was still difficult for me. He drilled it into my head every day, kissing my wrists where his name permanently adorned my skin. It was hard to hide my revulsion at first, but eventually, I grew to ignore it. He could believe whatever he wanted. It didn't make it true. But then again, the scale was about to tip, and I wasn't sure which way it would favor.

One afternoon, I had been roaming the house, bored, wishing I could go outside, but it had been cloudy all day. I headed down to the living room to find the rain clouds had finally claimed the sky above the house as tiny droplets came splashing down on the pavement of the back patio. Plopping my ass on the cold leather couch, I perched and stared out the window. Darren would be home soon, and I needed to decide where I wanted to be fucked when he found me. I supposed the couch would be fine.

I randomly glanced around the room until my eyes caught the attention of the big black flat-screen TV that stared right at me in the corner of the room. I knew I could watch movies in the theater, but I wondered if Darren would permit me to watch cable. I decided to find out. I grabbed the remote from the TV stand and turned the screen on. Within seconds, the sound began to roll from the speakers as the television came to life.

I sat back down and surfed through the channels randomly, not really looking for anything to watch until something very familiar caught my eye and stopped my heart dead in its tracks.

It was me. A giant photo of myself was plastered on the big screen as a national news station read details about my sudden violent disappearance. Photos of the parking garage and my shot-to-shit car appeared on the screen and I was immediately reminded of that awful fucked up day. And then there was an interview with my family. My mother sat between my two younger brothers while she cried and begged for my safe return. But then I forgot how to breathe when I finally saw Jason's face.

I stood on shaky legs as I stepped closer to the screen. He looked like he hadn't slept in weeks—red circles around his eyes and dark stubble shadowing his jaw and chin. He looked like he'd lost weight, too. His usual sexy muscular body had lost some of its tone as if he hadn't eaten much or kept up his usual workout routine. I couldn't blame him, though. I'd be the same way.

His voice was hoarse and tired as he spoke about trying to remain hopeful as he continued his pursuit with local search parties to find me. He wasn't giving up. Luckily for him, neither was I.

At that moment, I wanted to scream. I wanted to destroy everything in my path until there was nothing left but ashes and rubble. Pure rage boiled up inside me as I watched my family suffer in my absence because of my absence. Darren had hurt my family; whether he meant to or not, he had

done them wrong and they didn't deserve that. They at least deserved to know I was alive.

I continued to stare at the picture of my family for several minutes, tears slowly falling down my face until the TV randomly shut off.

"I think that's enough TV for today," said a dark voice behind me.

I turned with enough fury on my face to practically light Darren on fire.

"You think?!" I shouted at him and turned to throw the remote control as hard as I could at the TV. It crashed into the screen shattering the entire thing while the remote slammed back onto the floor. Satisfied with my destruction, I marched toward the door to the patio.

"Jaden, don't you *dare* walk away from me like that!" Darren shouted at me with so much anger in his voice it actually rattled me. But only for a second.

"Or what, Darren? You're gonna hurt me, again? Put me in my place? Show me how much of a big, strong man you are? Go ahead ... because I officially don't care anymore."

And with that, I walked right out the door into the now pouring rain. I didn't know where I was going, but I didn't care. I just wanted to get out of that house and away from him. But I honestly didn't even know what I was thinking because I didn't make it two feet out the door before I heard his footsteps thundering behind me.

He grabbed the back of my arm and spun me around, but as he did, I immediately brought my hand up to punch him in the face. He saw it coming and grabbed my wrist, twisting it around painfully, causing me to gasp out loud.

"Just who the fuck do you think you're talking to, huh? Obviously, you do need another reminder of your place since you forget it so easily!" he roared as rain dripped down his face.

"Fuck you, Darren! You're nothing but a coward who only needs to dominate me to make yourself feel better about your pathetic existence."

"A coward? Really, Jaden? That's the best you can come up with?"

I glared at him with hellfire in my eyes as I imagined him bursting into flames right then and there.

"You know what I'm beginning to think?" he said as rain dripped down his face. "I'm beginning to think you like pissing me off ... because you like what comes next, don't you?" He swung me around and shoved me

up against the side of the house. The rough brick scratched my back, and I cried out from the contact. Darren moved in then, trapping me between his body and the house, leaving me with nowhere to go. "You like it when I'm rough with you. When I hurt you. When I make you scream. In fact ... I think you want more of it."

"You don't know shit," I retorted defiantly.

"Are you sure about that? I bet if I reached between those legs right now, I'd find a soaking wet pussy with my name on it," he seethed.

"You'd be wrong," I bit out.

"Let's find out then," he challenged and practically ripped open the bottom of my dress.

I clutched my legs together as tight as I could and attempted to push and squirm away from him, but Darren's hand took hold of both my wrists and pinned them above my head while the other wrenched my legs apart. His hand reached into my panties roughly, sinking his fingers deep between my lips until a slow devious grin spread across his face.

"Just as I thought," he sneered.

Goddamn my body for being such a traitor. I tried to rationalize with myself as I bit back the tears that threatened to fall from Darren's obvious truth. I couldn't help that I liked it rough. I wasn't a gentle person by nature, so why in the hell would I be the same way in bed? It didn't help that I happened to find Darren extremely attractive, and it became a strange new feeling when I somehow found my fear of him a turn-on. It just meant he would ravage me that much harder. It was as if I was becoming used to a drug I had no idea was in my system. But I would never admit it to him.

Darren then retracted his hand and placed those two fingers in his mouth, sucking them until his tongue cleaned off my sex from his skin. I felt revolted, but it still turned me on nonetheless.

"You're such a horrible liar, princess." He grinned at me.

With that smile still twisting on his face, he suddenly gripped the underside of my jaw and kissed me violently, swirling his tongue inside my mouth. I could taste myself on his tongue while a surge of heat thrived between my legs. Rain poured down hard over us, drenching our bodies and turning my hair into a stringy wet mess as Darren continued his assault.

"And you know how much I hate it when you try to lie to me," he growled, tracing the tip of his finger down the side of my soaking wet face. My wrists were throbbing from the pressure he kept on them, as they

remained trapped above my head. I tried to twist them free, but they remained in his strong grip.

“But I also know how much you love it when I break your rules,” I seethed back through clenched teeth.

“And why would you say that?”

“Well, aside from the dead giveaway in your pants,” I eyed him dangerously, “it gives you a reason to punish me. And that drives you wild.”

“I don’t need a reason to punish you, princess,” he said, grazing his lips against my cheek.

“But you certainly love having one. Otherwise, it contradicts the ‘training program’ you’ve designed for me.”

“That little program is designed to teach you one thing. Do what you’re told and I won’t have to hurt you.”

“But it doesn’t matter whether I listen to you or not. You’re going to hurt me anyway. You always do.”

He was silent for a moment as he sucked in a breath, and I wondered if he was going to admit the truth. And he did.

“Yes,” he whispered in my ear, his thumb rubbing back and forth along the curve of my jaw. “You’re right. I am. I’m that monster in the dark that loves to terrorize you, Jaden. But you’re the one who thrives so well in the lion’s den.”

I looked at him confused. “And just what is that supposed to mean?”

“It means you can lie to yourself all you want, but that shit ends with me. If anyone’s the coward here, it’s you, Jaden. At least, I can admit I’m a monster. You can’t even admit how much you enjoy what I do to you because your stupid feminist pride won’t let you.”

My stupid feminist pride? Was he serious?

“You think I enjoy this?” I yelled at him as more rain continued to fall and drench us. “You think I enjoy having my freedom taken away?”

His eyes blazed with an intensity that rivaled the ocean. With his hair loose and wet from the rain, he looked like a crazed animal ready to devour me at any second. And still, I continued my stupid rebellion.

“Yes, as a matter of fact, I do,” he said. “I know what kind of life you lived before me, Jaden. I know you were always in charge, calling all the shots, leading the way and securing yourself a nice little pedestal for the future. But I think, deep down inside, you’ve always wondered what it

would be like for someone like me to come along and take all that away from you.”

“I have no idea what the fuck you’re talking about.”

“Oh, I think you do, princess. I think, deep down, you want to be afraid of someone. I bet even the idea of it fascinated you long before I ever got my hands on you. I bet you used to lie in bed at night next to that piece of shit of a man, wondering what it would feel like to have someone truly strong enough come along and dominate you until you finally found yourself begging for more. But of course, you could never give in to those whims, could you? It would contradict your image too much. I think, for as strong as you are, you want to know what it feels like for someone to finally break you down and force you into submission because we both know that’s the only way you ever would.”

My heart was pounding under the weight of his words. They hurt like sharp darts piercing my soul, hitting the bull’s-eye every time. But not for the same reason. He was wrong. He had to be. I was lonely and had grown accustomed to his ways. I was adapting to my treatment, evolving into something I hadn’t anticipated. Yes, I wanted him. I wanted his attention, his affection, and his touch, but I’ll be damned if I didn’t want my freedom more and that was all the confirmation I needed to remind myself that I wasn’t completely brainwashed. I knew my body contradicted my mind and my heart, but that was all Darren needed to validate his claims, which in my book wasn’t admissible as authentic evidence. But, as usual, his word was all that mattered.

“Whatever helps you sleep at night,” I said, shaking my head and looking away from him. Arguing with him was pointless and exhausting. It never did me any good, and I was always wrong anyway.

“The only thing that helps me sleep at night is fucking you until you’re sore and broken and gasping for more,” he growled at me and ripped me off the wall.

I met the pavement of the patio hard while puddles of rainwater splashed around my body. Thunder rolled above me, or maybe it was just Darren ripping my clothes from my body in a flash of violence and extreme determination. I put my hands up in defense, but it didn’t stop him from pulling himself free and plunging into me.

My body suddenly bowed to him in ways I didn’t think possible. The heat that had been burning deep inside of me was finally satiated as Darren

drilled into me with a primal need that I had no way of understanding. In a bold move filled with anger and frustration, I suddenly decided to whip the lion and ripped Darren's shirt open, buttons flying in all directions as my nails clawed down his bare chest. Darren made a low growl of approval as he brought his mouth down to my neck, biting me until I screamed from pain and pleasure.

Heat soared throughout my body as Darren pumped into me, sending my blood rushing like Niagara Falls. The roughness of the pavement scratched my back, but it didn't last long as Darren's long arms reached under me, resting me on top of them while the underside of his forearms absorbed the brunt of his thrusts. It wasn't long before the savagery gave wings to the orgasm that took flight almost immediately. I was taken to new heights as pleasure collided with pain when Darren abruptly rammed into me even harder and I screamed out while his own orgasm took him over.

He rested his head in the crook of my neck while his chest bobbed up and down from exertion. The rain continued to pour, washing over us as we came back down from the high of each other, and I wanted nothing more than to pass out right there on the patio, drenched from the rain.

Darren then rose from me and my pussy instantly protested as it throbbed from his powerful onslaught. I laid there, too exhausted to move while the rain washed away the mess between my legs. Once Darren had righted himself, he reached down and picked me up, cradling me tightly to his chest. As he turned and carried me back to the house, I felt the weight of my eyelids become too much as I could barely hold them open.

"Don't fall asleep so soon, princess," Darren said, staring down at me. "I'm not finished with you yet."

~*~

I carried Jaden's soaking wet body up the stairs to my bed, eager to have her writhing underneath me again. I was furious, anxious, and hungry for her body like a starved man on the edge of combustion. I nearly kicked my bedroom door down as I rushed into the room, slamming Jaden down on top of my bed, ready to devour her all over again. Her body was slick while her wet and wild hair fanned out around her head as she lay below me, panting with heavy lids. Her eyes were tired, but I was about to wake them up.

After shedding my soaking wet clothes, I gripped the back of her knees and roughly pulled her to me, a gasp leaving her lips and filling my chest with excitement. And then, without any more hesitation, I dipped my head down and took her clit into my mouth. Satisfaction filled my ears as I listened to Jaden's little moans. Even as she tried to hide them, she couldn't. I sucked and tongued her clit, eagerly licking her entire slit and savoring every drop. She was fucking delicious, and I wanted to taste her every single day.

Over and over, I teased her clit, giving her only just enough pressure of my tongue to feel it but not enough to come yet. I wanted her begging, and I knew just how to get it. I moved my hands along the soft skin of her outer thighs, over her hips, and up her abdomen until my hands finally found her beautiful, perfect breasts. Another whimper left her mouth as I squeezed and massaged, running my thumbs over the peaks of her nipples and causing her body to buck against me.

Her gorgeous face twisted with pleasure while her hands clawed the sheets beneath her. I continued to circle my tongue around her clit, licking her lips and driving her wild. She wanted more, I could feel it, but I wasn't letting up, not until she gave me what I wanted. Jaden began to bite her bottom lip, and I suddenly found myself wanting to be the one biting down on the soft flesh of her lips. So I did.

I took one of her outer lips into my mouth and sucked on it and a sharp breath left her mouth in a lustful gasp. Her muscles began to tense under her skin while her chest heaved up and down as she panted underneath my tongue. So close ... and then she finally spasmed.

"Fuck, Darren! Stop teasing me!" she practically growled in her sexy, heated voice.

Anger and amusement flooded through me. She knew better than to speak to me like that, but obviously, my tongue was making her forget the rules. I decided to remind her and bit down on her outer lip while pinching her nipples hard and sending a small jolt of pain through her body. She shrieked and jerked her hips, but I didn't let her move an inch away from me.

"You don't make the rules, kitten," I said, releasing her lip. "I do. And if I want to tease you to the edge of destruction ... then I fucking will."

I gave her a good smack to the side of her ass for good measure before returning my hands to the soft skin of her belly. I then blew a gentle

breath onto her clit, and she gasped a moan that went right to my cock, which was ready to burst from my pants any second.

“Do you want me to continue?” I asked darkly, smirking at her from between her shaking legs.

“Yes, Darren,” she panted. “Please.”

Fuck, I loved hearing my name roll off her tongue like that. It made my blood rush, but the sound of her begging made my cock twitch even more. I didn’t make her wait any longer as I was anxious for her sweetness. My tongue dipped back between her folds and her back arched, sending her breasts high into the air while I fucked her with my mouth. It only took a few seconds for her body to ripple in the wake of an orgasm quickly approaching.

“Oh, God, Darren, I’m going to come,” she groaned.

“How bad do you want it, baby?” I asked as I slowed my tongue to tease her again.

“So bad,” she whimpered. “Please.”

“Tell me you’re mine,” I said, tonguing along the side of her clit.

She hated it when I forced her to say those words, but I loved it, and a part of me loved that she hated it. Mind games were fun when they came to her, but in times like this, when she was on the edge of sexual detonation, there wasn’t a single thing she wouldn’t do or say if I demanded it. It didn’t take me long to figure out how her body worked, what she liked, and how she liked it, and I relished in forcing the pleasure on her, even when she tried to fight against it. She learned to give in, though, to take me in whenever I wanted it, and she knew full well that denying me was never an option. She learned that quickly; a lesson I had certainly enjoyed.

My tongue continued its torture until she finally uttered the words that would release her from her sexual frustration.

“I’m yours,” she finally said with a husky breath, and I nearly exploded right there. I loved her admissions, lived for them.

And as a reward for both of us, I unleashed my mouth on her, devouring every inch until she bloomed against my mouth.

“Oh, God!” she moaned and came hard all over my face, her body rippling with tension as her hands tore at the sheets. She was so unbelievably sexy when she came undone like that... and so mine.

Before her waves had even finished washing over her, I quickly removed my pants and plunged into her heat. She cried out as I began to

drill into her, furiously fucking the shit out of her all over again. My hands gripped her already bruising hips from our earlier venture, slamming into her harder and harder every time before taking her legs and throwing them over my shoulders for a better angle.

Fuck, she was so tight as her pussy wrapped around my dick like it was meant to be there. Her breasts bounced back and forth over her chest until I grabbed both of them; bringing my face down, I sucked her tempting nipples into my mouth. She arched her back toward me, and I about lost it as her second orgasm took off, her core choking the life out of my cock, but it was all I needed for my own orgasm to take over. An ocean of pleasure washed over me as I spilled myself into Jaden, filling her up until her pussy had practically milked me dry.

I pulled her legs from my shoulders and wrapped them around my waist as I collapsed on top of her. Her breaths were shallow and heavy as her chest heaved against mine. Her beautiful amber eyes blazed with a fierce intensity that made me want to take her a third time. And I probably would. But first things first.

I leaned down, gently running my nose along the column of her throat. Drowning in her intoxicatingly delicate scent, I felt her body shudder underneath me. God, I loved that, and I was about to get a hell of a lot more of it. I gently took her earlobe between my teeth and bit down, causing her body to tense with the slight twinge of pain I was now creating, warning her of the trouble she was in.

“You’ve been a very bad girl, princess,” I drawled into her ear, and I felt every muscle in her body tense with fear. It brought a smile to my face. “And you know what I like to do to bad girls.”

I hadn’t quite shown it, but I was still furious with her. Her discovering her family on the news, destroying my things, lashing out at me—she had a severe ass beating coming her way and she knew it. She knew I wouldn’t tolerate that sort of behavior from her ... yet I loved that she had lashed out. I saw the fire burning in her eyes again, and it made my cock ache for her heat. I loved it because I enjoyed snuffing it out and reminding her who was in control.

Faster than she could blink, I grabbed her and threw her over my lap, fisting her damp hair at the bottom of her scalp to hold her in place. Her entire body trembled as I brought my hand to graze over the soft skin of her back. Her shoulders and arms tensed as she attempted to keep herself in

check. She knew if she fought me, she'd only make it that much worse for herself; though there were some days when I wished she would.

Ready to savor the moment, I brought my arm up and slammed my palm on Jaden's perfect ass, enjoying the ripple of her skin as it absorbed the contact. But just as I turned my head, expecting her to begin the count, a muttered, "Fuck this," slipped from her lips, and she immediately brought the heel of her foot up and kicked me right in the temple.

The shock of the blow diminished my senses for only a second, but a second was all Jaden needed when my grip on her hair loosened enough for her to turn her body toward me and throw her arm out to punch my throat. I caught her wrist before she could, but as I did, she lunged at me from my lap. I entertained the idea of letting her have her way for only a brief moment and allowed her to thrust herself on top of me. My back hit the sheets while her short legs straddled my sides, and she immediately tried to rain down her tiny fists at me.

I started to laugh as I grabbed her other wrist and held them as she fought with me.

"Aw, does my princess want to fight?" I chuckled. She screamed in fury at me.

I knew how much she hated that I called her that, that I patronized her so often, but she had to have known by now that she had no chance against me, yet she continued to push and fight. I loved the spirit in her, and I realized then that I didn't want to break it; I just wanted to bend it to my will. And I certainly would.

"Yeah, you know what, I'm suddenly in the mood, you stupid controlling fuck," she replied to me.

I felt my blood rush with rage and exhilaration. She was going to be in even bigger trouble after this, but I would enjoy the fight in her for now while it lasted. She hadn't fought me like this in weeks, but I was sure seeing her family on screen had added a little fuel to her burning embers.

She continued to fight with me while I laughed underneath her, showing her that even if she was on top, she still wasn't in control. Eventually, she finally had enough and threw her head down at me in an attempt to head-butt my face, but this time, I wasn't allowing it.

I maneuvered my head to the side so she'd hit my shoulder instead and immediately wrapped my arm around the back of her neck, forcing her into a headlock. She quickly twisted her head to the side so that the tighter I

pulled, the deeper her chin would dig into my ribs, but that was fine. I didn't plan to keep her like that for long. She then tried to punch my side, targeting my kidneys with her free hand, and while I felt her punches and groans to free herself, I ignored it all.

When she realized she wasn't getting anywhere with punching me, I saw her begin to lift her legs to attempt something else. Her kicks were powerful, I had to give her that, and I wasn't about to give her an advantage, so I quickly rolled her onto her back while still keeping her head locked against my side. She was quick on the draw and somehow managed to bring her legs in, which now separated her body from mine.

"You seriously underestimate me," I heard her say as I had kept her head in place.

And then she did the one thing I can't fucking stand. She pinched me. Right under the soft skin of my arm, she pinched me as hard as she fucking could. I jerked from the surprise, but that single jolt provided her with the one solitary inch she needed to slip her head out of my lock and twist her still captive wrist around so that she was now gripping mine.

The second she was free, her legs pushed out with all their might and actually pushed me off her and away from the bed. I stopped my momentum from going any further and lunged at her in fury, but she had already somersaulted backward and was now standing on the opposite end of the bed.

Rage coated her face while her bare chest bobbed up and down from her labored breathing. I had to give it to her. I really did underestimate her, which was why I often found her agility impressive, and I loved the challenge it presented me.

"You are so gonna get it now," I promised her as I narrowed my eyes. What stared back at me was not a girl entranced by fear—no, she had transformed it into misplaced defiance and rage, and I was so looking forward to replacing it.

"Fuck with me," she seethed. "See what happens to you."

Oh, fuck, if that didn't make my dick throb. I was so going to fuck that smart mouth of hers and remind her of what happens when she tries to threaten me—when she defies me. We were in for a long night.

"I'm gonna enjoy this," I said and leaped across the bed for her.

She lunged away from my advance, but I was faster as I caught her upper arm and roughly pulled her to me. The arm I had gripped wrapped

around my own and held it fast, but it did nothing to stop me from wrapping my other hand around her throat and squeezing. Jaden immediately swung her free arm up, hooking her fingers against my thumb that pushed on her trachea and blocked her airway. She managed to pull my thumb away only a centimeter, but it was plenty to allow her to breathe. Before she completed her escape, her front leg kicked out and her tiny foot connected with my abs causing me to lurch forward as a sharp pain enveloped my core.

I refused to allow her any satisfaction of seeing that. I threw her to the floor by her throat and pounced on her before she had a chance to move. She tried to keep her knees together and bent, but I forced them apart and placed myself between them before she could fight me any further. She got in one good quick elbow to my face as I lowered myself to her and pain exploded in my cheekbone, but I ignored it as I took both her slim wrists in my hands and pinned them above her head.

Jaden continued to fight and struggle as she avoided my eyes as if they would turn her to stone if she connected with them, but I wanted her attention. Right now.

“Look at me, Jaden,” I growled at her and squeezed her wrists until she cried out from the pressure. I knew how much she loathed looking at me when I had her in a position like this because it forced her to acknowledge her position under me. Her body language was so easy to read; it was like a fucking children’s book.

When she finally opened her eyes to glare at me, unshed tears pooled at the corners of her lids, ready to fall at any second. Her tears always washed the rage right out of them, and she would eventually grow tired and submit to me as she always did. I honestly didn’t understand why she even fought me in the first place. She was only making it harder on herself, but it didn’t matter to me. I loved it either way.

“Now, what made you think that challenging me like this was a good idea?” I asked her with amusement.

“Seemed like a good idea at the time,” she groaned.

“Not one of your bests,” I replied.

“Fuck you, Darren. Get off me,” she spat as she jerked her body, trying to buck me off, but as she did, she was essentially just rubbing herself on my still excruciatingly hard cock. I was beyond ready to take her all over again. Fighting naked was probably my favorite thing to do with her.

With an intense glare on my face, I slowly bent low to the side of her neck and gently sunk my teeth into her. The pressure of my teeth gradually increased until she squirmed underneath me and eventually cried out from the pain. When I finally released her neck, I tilted my mouth to her earlobe and sucked it into my mouth before whispering into her ear.

“Stop cussing,” I warned and returned my threatening gaze to her eyes. She now had a lovely deep red bite mark on her neck. Beautiful.

She stilled, her chest heaving up and down as her tears finally began to spill down her cheeks. Jaden was beautiful even when she cried.

“If you think I’m going to tolerate this sort of behavior simply because you accidentally came across your family on the news, then you are seriously mistaken, my love.”

“You’re nothing to me,” she said bitterly.

I almost laughed. If she thought I gave a shit about what she thought of me, then she was seriously wasting her energy. I knew full well what she thought of me—how she felt about me—and it only motivated me to continue my mission to mold her into absolute perfection.

“And you’re everything to me,” I retorted, grazing the tip of my nose up the column of her throat. Her body shuddered from the contact, and it made my dick jump with urgency. “So much so that I’m this close to having your little family eliminated so they can stop interfering with your conditioning. I don’t appreciate this sort of regression.”

Her eyes widened in fear as more tears rolled down her cheeks. I was serious. I was tired of this bullshit, and if her family were out of the picture, she could mourn and move on instead of plotting and hoping she’d one day be free of me so she could see them again. They were the only thing connecting her to the outside world, and it was time to sever the connection. This way, her motivation to escape would be gone as she’d have nothing to return to and she would eventually just give in to me. Sure, she’d hate me even more, but she’d get over it. She might later conclude that I no longer had any leverage over her, but I would always have leverage. There were plenty of innocent people out there, and I was a master of persuasion. In the end, Jaden would realize she was mine no matter what; there was no other way around it.

“P-please, Darren. Please, don’t,” she pleaded quietly. She knew I was serious.

And then I smirked at her as I slowly sunk my cock back into her heat knowing full well she wouldn't deny me now. God, she was still so wet, practically soaking ... for me. She could deny it all she wanted, but she loved this. Loved when I dominated her, when I took her while she tried to fight me. She couldn't let herself enjoy it until she, at least, put up a fight first. And that was the only reason she was crying because she hated herself for loving it.

"Give me another reason, and I won't hesitate to wipe everyone you love from the face of the Earth. And I will make you watch. Go ahead and fuck with *me*, Jaden. See what happens to *them*," I fumed, throwing her own words back in her face. She was silent for a few seconds, and I allowed it so she could fully grasp my words.

"Y-you're right. I'm sorry," she whispered, fresh tears falling down her face as she relaxed her muscles and officially submitted like a good little girl. Fucking win.

"Who do you belong to, Jaden?" I said, pulling out and then sliding back in to watch her breasts bounce.

"You," she whispered as a sob wrenched up her throat and she finally began to cry.

Her beautiful tears ran down her face as she ultimately gave in to me. I had her, and she knew it. Her family would always be her weakness, and so long as I had them under my thumb, she would always be reminded to behave. I didn't want leverage forever, though. Eventually, I wanted everything to be real, but if she continued to have something of her past to cling to, then it never would be.

After wiping away Jaden's tears, I fucked her three more times that night, completing her delayed punishment with my belt instead of my hand against her ass until she screamed for mercy. I made her swallow my dick for her disrespectful words and only then did I fuck her for the fifth and final time that day.

By the time I was done, I barely had any energy left, only giving Jaden a fifteen-minute break between each time. Her fights with me always made me super fucking hard, and she had to have realized this by now because by the end of the night, her fury had been reduced to that of a rag doll as she just laid there underneath me, coming furiously while I drilled into her.

When I was finally satisfied with her, it was dark out, so I picked her up from the floor and carried her dead weight to the bed. Tucking her into my side, I laid her tear-stained face on my chest and wrapped my arm around her torso while draping her leg over my own. My thumb traced along the lines of her feather tattoo while she slept peacefully in my arms.

God, she was so beautiful ... and resilient. I had poured another bucket of water onto her fire, and I wondered how long it would take before the embers burned wild again. Considering I had just threatened her entire reason for living and practically fucked her to death, I had a feeling she would behave for quite a while. It didn't matter, though. I knew how to get a rise from her if I wanted one, but I think I'd prefer to enjoy her submission for a little while longer before I start eliminating everyone she held dear. Then the real fun would begin.

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Chapter Twenty-Eight

Acceptance

I woke up the next morning with a jolt from a nightmare and was consumed with more pain than I thought imaginable. My body ached, my ass burned, my pussy throbbed, my throat was sore, and my eyes felt puffy and heavy from crying. I was a fucking wreck. When I opened my heavy lids, the light in the room was still very dim and soft. It was probably near dawn.

I rolled over, clutching the soft bed sheet to my chin and realized Darren was not in bed with me; he wasn't even in the room with me. I was beyond thankful. Last night, he had completely destroyed my body with pain, pleasure, and more orgasms than I could count. After seeing my family on TV, I had obviously been in a stupid, uncalculated rage, and I tried to make Darren pay for it, but I was such a stupid little girl if I thought I could ever really hurt him. And he certainly proved that to me last night. Eventually, I had just given up, too exhausted to continue fighting with him, and just let him prove his point until he was well satisfied. And now I was still paying for it. I would probably pay for it for the rest of the week.

And then I realized my family could pay for it, too. When he threatened to eliminate them like that, it put things in a whole new perspective for me. He had used them as leverage if I ever managed to kill him, but now he was using them if I simply didn't behave for him. I definitely couldn't let anything happen to them. I would have to behave until I figured something out.

As I laid down, I realized how the pillows and sheets smelled just like Darren. That clean musky, woodsy scent of his was engulfing me, and I suddenly didn't want to spend another moment in his bed no matter how shitty I felt.

I slowly rolled my naked ass off the bed, taking small steps between winces of pain as I grabbed a silky black robe from Darren's closet, it reaching well passed my knees, and made my way toward the bedroom door. I was determined to sleep in my own fucking bed since he was

probably gone for the day. But as I just about grabbed the handle, a small warning shock from my collar stunned me, and I stumbled back away from the door.

Son of a bitch.

Well, I might not be able to leave his room, but I certainly wasn't staying in his bed. I decided to step out onto his balcony and watch the sunrise from one of the cushioned lounge chairs. But as I stepped out to admire the view, my eyes focused on some movement on the beach.

When I focused my eyes, I realized it was Darren. He was standing in the sand, bare-chested, black pants, and barefoot holding what looked like two wooden sticks in his hands. Surrounding him were four men dressed in all black, each one holding a single wooden stick similar to Darren's. When I focused my attention, I realized they were arnis sticks, another traditional weapon of a practicing martial artist.

One man stood in front of him, one to his back, one to his left, and one to his right. And then all at once, they attacked him. But, oh, he was flawless. He maneuvered around his opponents effortlessly, blocking their attacks with his arnises and aggressively counterattacking.

Darren's muscles flexed under the weight of each strike, and I found my heartbeat suddenly increase at his graceful yet ferocious agility. His technique was beautiful as he wielded his weapons with absolute perfection, carefully calculating every move, every strike, and subduing his opponents in less than a few minutes. They all laid in the sand surrounding him while they clutched their bodies and moaned in pain. It was then that he looked up and saw me standing on his balcony, arms folded across my chest and watching him. He smirked, placed both arnis sticks in one hand, and blew me a kiss. I just stared him down before slowing turning on my heels and heading back into his bedroom.

Fuck, he was impressive and obviously really fucking dangerous. I wished I could compete against him like that. But if he could handle four guys at once, then I was seriously fucked; especially since he had just spent all night fiercely fucking me before being out there at the crack ass of dawn, training like it was no big deal while I was up here throbbing and aching all over. He had to be an alien. There was no other explanation.

I went back inside and took a shower in Darren's bathroom. While I waited for the water to heat up, I summoned the courage to look at myself in the mirror and nearly cried. My eyes were red, puffy, and bloodshot from

last night's tears and lack of sleep, and a large red bite mark on the side of my neck stung like a bitch. Small bruises marked my wrists, hips, and ribs, and my ass had small red lines across my cheeks. God, I was a fucking mess.

I barely had any energy to stand, so I sat in the corner and washed myself until I felt clean enough to just sit there and rinse off. I let the spray of the hot shower rain down on me, enveloping me in a warm and wet heat. I pulled my knees to my chest, wrapped my arms around my legs, and laid my forehead on top of my knees. That was when I started to cry. Again.

I was in pain, both mental and physical, and I wanted everything to just go away. Last night had been horrible, and I was seriously pissed at myself for going after Darren like I had. He was so unfazed by me; the only thing I could successfully do to him without fail was give him wood. Stupid. So stupid.

After a while of just sitting there and silently crying, I heard the shower door open and knew it was Darren. I felt my body tremble as I tried to hide my face from him, hoping he'd just leave me be, but he hesitantly stepped in, closing the door behind him. His steps were soft and slow as if he were afraid of scaring a wild animal.

He crouched low beside me and placed his large warm hand on my shoulder. I shuddered and choked back a sob as I continued to hide my face from him. He then moved me a few feet from the tiled wall and stepped around me to sit down behind me, his legs on either side of my body. He then pulled me against his chest and wrapped his arms around my entire body, clutching me to him. It only made me cry harder that he was trying to comfort me when he was the source of my pain, not my solution.

For the longest time, he just held me like that while I cried my sorrows down the drain. Eventually, he was able to pull my head away from my knees to lay it on his chest. His hand cradled my face and he patted down my wet hair while I melted into his body. I hated him so much, but I had never been more grateful for his unusual tenderness.

At that moment, I suddenly wanted him to take care of me, to comfort me in the aftermath of his fury. I wanted him to show me how much I truly meant to him, that I was everything to him as he had said. I wanted him to prove it. I wanted him to make me feel cherished and special and loved so I wouldn't notice the shadow of misery that promised to consume me if he didn't. I was so tired of being afraid all the time. I just wanted to feel

something, anything, other than the absolute hopelessness I felt right now as I crumbled in his arms.

He *was* breaking me. I could feel it. I was shattering right before his eyes and I hated myself for it. I suddenly had no desire to fight him, at least not at this moment. I was pissed off at how fucking weak I looked right now, but I told myself this was only temporary. I had to release my weakness if I was to become strong again and rise above it. I would regain. I would survive. I wouldn't let him break me. I was Jaden fucking Wilder, and I was made of fire and steel.

When I was done with my stupid fucking tears, I rose off Darren and looked him dead in the eye. He had a nice little red mark at the top of his cheek from my elbow, but other than that, he came out of last night completely unscathed. Zero expression on his face, Darren took my face in his hands and wiped my tears away with his thumbs. A small moment of mutual understanding passed between us, me showing him I could withstand him, and him loving that I could. His eyes blazed with intensity as his gaze met mine, but I wasn't afraid. Not this time.

And then he leaned in, pulling my face toward his so he could kiss me with an utmost gentle passion I had never experienced with him before. That kiss spoke a thousand words of need, want, lust, and absolute acceptance. Darren was who he was, there was no changing him, and there was no changing me, but what I could do was evolve around him and he would ensure that.

We finished our shower together in silence, and then, after carefully drying me off, Darren carried me back to his bed and laid me down. I felt the weight of my eyelids again as I fought to keep them open, but they were quickly winning their battle with me. I felt Darren climb in beside me and pull me to him as he had the night before. I relaxed against him with my head on his chest and his lips on my forehead while I finally drifted back to sleep.

~*~

I had never witnessed anything so honest and pure in all my life. When I opened the shower door, I didn't know what to expect, but seeing Jaden huddled in a ball and crying on the shower floor, my heart suddenly swelled for her. I wasn't sorry for what I had done last night, she needed to

learn her lesson and she obviously had, but when I saw her like that, all I wanted to do was hold her and comfort her until the tears stopped. And eventually, they had. They stopped because Jaden had something most women I knew didn't—resilience. When she finished crying and looked me right in the eyes like that, my level of respect for her had grown immensely.

She was showing me that, yeah, I might hurt her and make her regret every fight with me, but she could take it. She could withstand my wrath, and though it might take her some time and tears to recoup, she would always eventually come back to me with eyes blazing and fire in her heart. I loved that about her. It was exactly why I chose her. She was absolutely perfect for me, and I was never ever letting her go.

When Jaden's breathing evened out, I gently eased out from under her, pulled the sheets over her shoulders, and slipped out from the room. I wanted to stay. I wanted to watch her sleep against me while I listened to her soft breathing and beating heart and felt her silky skin under my fingertips, but I had too much shit to do.

When I saw her standing on my balcony, I suddenly ached to be at her side. I hadn't expected her to wake up so early or to see me train the way I did. That was a normal once a week routine for me to keep my skills sharp. Not many people battled the way I did anymore these days, but I prepared for everything and anything.

I left Jaden in my bed and decided to let her sleep for as long as she needed. She wasn't as used to those long nights as I was. I changed into a pair of jeans and a black dress shirt since I planned to work from home today. I left a note for Jaden on my nightstand and headed to my office, punching in the code to enter through the door as a security precaution.

My office was huge. A large conference table with twelve chairs sat at the end of the room while two black leather sofas faced each other over a black Persian rug in the middle of the room. A long, glass coffee table sat between the two couches with a large glass ashtray placed in the middle. Tall bookshelves adorned my walls to my right and a window the size of the entire wall gave a perfect view of the ocean. My giant black desk rested a few feet away from the window so all I had to do when I needed a break was turn around and find the ocean at my feet. The drawer underneath my keyboard contained several handguns and loaded magazines, just in case. All the windows in my house were bulletproof so I could never be

assassinated in my own home, but I was still never not in reach of an automatic weapon.

I fired up my computer and started replying to numerous emails that required my immediate attention. Two hours and several phone calls later, I had put out four fires and secured a new deal with an arms dealer in Texas. I had also received a report from the new manager I selected from the pile my accountant recommended for the warehouse. Apparently, things were going well and the results of the latest auction were currently pending, but I had been informed sales were through the roof.

Scott handled some shit for me here and there, especially when it came to our soldiers and training facilities. I had a small army at my back to command whenever shit went down with another organization, and so far, we had never been matched. I'd crushed several cartels and other crime families who had crossed me in the past but made millionaires out of those who worked with me favorably. Give me twelve hours, I could easily make you or break you. It all just depended on how well you could negotiate and follow the rules.

I had also scheduled another appointment for Jaden to meet with the Russians to redo her nails. Since I was suddenly feeling generous, I really would let her choose her nail color and I'd even have them throw in a facial and hair treatment.

I decided to leave Jaden alone for the rest of the day and let her rest. She seriously needed it. I said she could wander the house when I was home so I lengthened the perimeter for her collar so she could get breakfast when she was ready. I kept the screen on my security camera in my room up on in the corner of my desktop so I could watch her as she slept and know when she woke. Normally, it was off as I didn't need my own men watching me, but I could turn it back on whenever I wanted.

I figured it was probably time to start thinking about the strategy I would take to eliminate Jaden's pest of a family, either piece by piece or all at once. I would want every single member located before I gave the order to strike. I'd have my men watch them for a while, study their habits and routines – the same way we did when selecting new targets for the auction. The when could very well be determined by Jaden's behavior, assuming it improved in the next few days. After today, I had a feeling things were going to be very different with her. That moment in the shower today seemed to have clarified something for her and I hoped it would help her to

accept her place. The sooner she made peace with that, the better. It would make her life with me a hell of a lot easier ... for both us.

I gave Scott the order to start locating all of Jaden's family. I wanted to, at least, obtain the leverage first. It was time to get the wheels of that train in motion.

~*~

I woke up several hours later absolutely starving. I had missed dinner yesterday as well as breakfast this morning because, when I looked back over at the clock, it was after two in the afternoon. Holy fuck, I couldn't believe I had slept that long or that Darren had allowed me to sleep that long. I guess he knew I needed it. I was still sore as fuck, but sleep made me feel well enough to leave the bed. Darren was nowhere to be found again, so I imagined he left me alone to sleep. I looked over at his nightstand and found a note from him.

I'll be working from my office today.
Go get yourself some breakfast and I will find you later.
No going outside.
-Darren

It was weird to see his elegant yet completely masculine handwriting. Another perfection of his. I grabbed one of his dress shirts from the closet, wrapped it around myself, and left his room, heading for my own. I used the bathroom, which was not comfortable to use and braided my mop of a head into a loose braid, draping it to one side so it fell down to the right side of my neck, covering the bite mark that lingered there. I then chose a very loose fitting, rosy red high-low dress and put on the lightest amount of makeup possible. I slipped on some black flats and headed down for "breakfast" or an early dinner, as I should have called it.

When I entered the dining room, it was all but empty except for one guard who stood next to the window until Pascal hurried through the swinging door that led into the kitchen.

"Ah, good afternoon, mademoiselle," he said in a heavy French accent. I gave him a fake smile, shocked that he was even talking to me,

especially in front of a guard. Was this even allowed? “What would you like to eat?” he asked me with a wide happy grin.

It was strange having another man actually address me without Darren shooting daggers at him with his eyes. It was so nice for another person to actually acknowledge me for once.

I gave him a small smirk. “How about French toast?” I asked with a hint of amusement.

He returned my smile though his was heavy with entertainment. “Ah-ha!” He pointed at me with laughter. “Excellent choice! Have a seat! It will be out shortly. Prepare to have your taste buds mesmerized!” And then he disappeared behind the door.

What a weird little man. At least someone was in a good mood around here.

I took a seat and made myself some tea. In five minutes flat, Pascal came out with a fresh batch of cinnamon French toast sprinkled with powdered sugar and a side of real maple syrup. It was the most delicious French toast I had ever tasted. I thanked Pascal, and he cheerfully disappeared back into the kitchen.

Once I was done with my breakfast, I wandered the house for a while. I checked out the theater, contemplating on catching up with some of my favorite shows. God knows I had been dying to see the final season of *Sons of Anarchy*. I spent the next hour looking through the library before I became bored of that and headed into the living room. I had so much space to explore, and here I was, bored with it already. There was no true freedom if you were limited to a cage, no matter how big the cage.

Since I had no desire to work out today, I wandered the house for hours—memorizing every room, every corner, every crevice—until I knew it like the back of my hand. I discovered the posts of many of the guards throughout the house—not as many as I had thought there would be. Only five monitored the inside of the house, but so far, I had only ever seen three monitor the outside. I noticed the ones outside carried assault rifles in their hands at all times, while the ones inside seemed to carry concealed.

I eventually found myself wandering through the library. I decided to look for a book on electricity that might help me figure out how to break this damn collar around my throat. I did eventually find something, but it didn’t really have the information I was looking for.

As I sat on the couch near the bay window, I looked out at the ocean, wishing I could go jogging on the beach. That would be nice. But the mechanical sound of a weed eater coming close by drowned out my daydream. As it got closer to the window, I realized it was the same gardener who stared at me the one day.

As he looked up from his work, he caught my gaze, and he stared back at me, obviously focusing on my face again. He really was recognizing me! I wondered if he knew me from the news. Oh, God, what if he was going to report me to the police? Darren had already warned me about the police being in his pocket. I couldn't let this man jeopardize himself so I glared at him and slowly shook my head, hoping he would heed my warning. He gave me a sad look, nodded, and then went about his work. I hoped that put an end to whatever he was thinking because I knew the consequences of those thoughts would probably affect me as well.

Darren met up with me a little while later. We had dinner together on the patio and watched a movie in the theater. I fell asleep against his side before the movie was over, and he carried me to bed and tucked me in under the sheets. I fell asleep almost instantly as Darren pulled me to his chest and spooned me from behind. My body was still sore and tired, and I was just ready for the day to be over.

I felt something tickle my hand and trickle down my finger. Reluctantly, I slowly opened my eyes and watched a giant black spider crawl down my finger and onto the bed beside me. Like a fire had been lit under my ass, panic enveloped me and I jolted from the bed as far away from the spider as I could, practically rolling myself over Darren's body. He woke instantly, and with his arm still draped around my torso, stopped me from rolling over him and slammed me back down on the bed back next to the spider.

"What the fuck!" Darren shouted at me.

"Fuck! No! Kill it! Kill it!" I shrieked, as I tried to inch away from the spider and further into Darren.

"What?" he looked at me angrily and confused.

"Kill it!" I pointed.

He leaned over to look at the spider I was freaking out about and immediately laughed at me as if it was the funniest thing he'd ever seen.

"Are you fucking serious?" He laughed hysterically. "My little warrior princess is scared of a harmless little spider?"

"Just kill it already!"

He shook his head, smirking, as he leaned over and flicked the spider off the bed.

"Did you kill it?" I asked in a panic and leaned over to make sure it was dead, but I couldn't find it.

"Trust me. I know how to make things dead." He gave me that sexy shark grin of his.

"Oh, thank God," I said, ignoring his comment about making things dead. I rested my head back on the pillows with a sigh of relief.

"Of all the things you could be scared of, I never thought spiders would be one of them."

"Yeah, yeah, it's hilarious, I know." I rolled my eyes at him. "But when I was a young kid, I was running through the woods and accidentally ran through a giant web of spiders. They got in my hair, crawled on my face, and all over my clothes. I've been traumatized ever since."

"My poor little Jaden." He snickered. "Don't worry. I'll protect you from all the spiders." He leaned over and kissed my forehead, a smart-ass grin smacked across his face.

I put my hands over my face and rubbed my eyes, groaning in absolute embarrassment. I just watched this man take on four men with arnises, and here I was freaking out about a little fucking spider. God, I felt pathetic, but I could never shake the trauma I felt whenever I thought back to that moment where I wanted to rip my skin and hair out.

Darren just continued to chuckle at me and kissed my temple. "So adorable." He smirked and then smiled down at me.

Wow, that smile was something else. Genuine, honest, and for some reason, sexy as hell. It was suddenly hard to believe I was looking up at the same man who had caused me so much pain the night before, yet here he was practically beaming at me and rescuing me from my childhood fears. I hated the whiplash I felt when he was a complete monster one minute and a total heartthrob the next. I didn't know what to make of it, but I certainly appreciated the heartthrob to the monster any day.

I briefly wondered if behaving for him would actually keep the monster at bay, or if it would still require its fix. Darren was easier to tolerate when he was just the cocky asshole; I could handle that. But it was when the true colors of his cruelty shined through that I found myself wanting to run for the hills.

He wanted me to see both sides of him, the man and the monster, both of which he expected me to fear, love, and obey. The man was the one obsessed with keeping me while the monster was the one obsessed with hurting me. One to revel in my submission and the other to combat my defiance. I would have to learn how to manage the two, to keep them in line so they fed from each other and not from me. Maybe *I* could bring Darren to heel for once—show him the rewards for treating me well instead of merely dismissing them. Maybe then he would forget about my family and solely focus on me. Maybe all I really had to do was distract him from the bigger picture. I had so much experimenting to do.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Tests and Lessons

Another month went by and it was officially fall and football season. Almost every Sunday, Darren and I, and some days even Scott, would spend a few hours in front of the big screen TV in the living room, enjoying a beer and watching the game. It was amusing watching Darren react to the game, true emotion coming out of him without restraint. Sometimes it was anger, but most of the time, it was fits of thunderous joy. But for someone who was in charge of a criminal organization, seeing him watch and enjoy football almost made Darren seem normal—human—and it fascinated me.

Once, I made the mistake of letting him pull me into his lap during a game, and when his team scored the winning touchdown, he had leaped off the couch with such force, I flew off him and landed on the floor. He hadn't even noticed until he saw me on the ground scowling at him, rushing his arm down to help me up and apologizing sincerely. It was weird to hear him apologize, but I guess if he unintentionally hurt me, he did feel bad about it. Maybe there was hope for him yet.

As far as actually watching the games, I really only paid attention when the Lions were playing. It brought back so many memories with Jason, and I had to try so hard not to let Darren see my heartbreak. Sometimes, I would need to excuse myself so I could collect my thoughts and dismiss them before they threatened to consume me. At one point, I thought Darren was starting to catch on, but eventually, my memories got easier to ignore.

Oftentimes, he would catch me staring out the window, lost in my own thoughts and longing to be outside. I really wasn't an indoor girl. I loved to be outside and active, soaking up the sun and enjoying the world around me.

Ever since I had been taken, a lot more came into perspective—what was important and what wasn't. I needed to stay as positive as I possibly could in this kind of situation, and the only way to do that was to surround

myself with all the things I loved. My only problem—Darren kept so many of them away. I hated being cooped up in the house all day. Granted, my cage had expanded immensely since my confinement to my room, but it wouldn't be enough. It would never be enough.

During halftime, Darren noticed me leaning against the arm of the couch, my chin resting on my folded arms as I stared out the window. I felt his hand graze my back in a gentle sweep, and I turned my head back over my shoulder to acknowledge him.

"What's on your mind?" Darren asked me.

I wanted to lie. I wanted to say nothing, but he would know and then I'd be in trouble. So I spit the truth out as I usually did.

"I'm just wondering when you're going to let me go outside when you're gone," I said, trying to sound as pathetic and puppy dog like as I could.

He rolled his eyes and sank back on the couch, eyeing me intensely.

"I just gave you free roam of the house when I'm gone, and now, you're already pushing to go outside?"

"Hey, you asked, and I told you the truth. You can't be mad at me for that," I replied, my voice picking up a bit.

He sighed and stared off into space for a moment before returning his gaze to the TV to finish watching the game. Eventually, he spoke up again after I turned my head back around to continue looking out the window.

"Is that something that you seriously need?" He leaned forward, staring at me intently. "With more freedoms come more rules and responsibilities."

"Yes," I asserted softly. "I feel like I'm starting to suffocate in here."

I knew there would always be rules whenever it came to new freedoms, but eventually, they would change when Darren could see I wouldn't betray him. He stared at me for a moment; his face was expressionless as I searched his eyes for any hope he might ease my suffering.

"I'll think about it," he finally said and turned his attention back to the game. That was meant to be the end of the discussion ... but I was stupid, so ...

"No, don't think about it," I replied, turning my body to him completely. "You said you wanted me to be happy. This will make me

happier, and I will respond to you better when you stop keeping me cooped up in the house all day.”

He quickly turned his head and narrowed his gaze on me. I had probably stepped out of line.

“I’ve expressly told you my decisions were final. When I said I would think about it, I will do exactly that and nothing more. Do not push your luck with me, Jaden,” he warned.

I could have slumped into myself. I could have let his words discourage me, but I wanted to experiment with something and see where it got me. I leaned forward and put both of my hands on the couch, staring at him with a sexy yet sorry look on my face. And then I slowly crawled over to him from the couch.

“You’re right,” I said softly. “I’m sorry.”

His eyes watched every move I made as I gently eased myself over him and straddled his lap, placing my hands on his muscular shoulders.

“Please don’t be mad at me. I know you know what’s best. I didn’t mean to push,” I said carefully, sighing as I ran my hands down his chest.

I wasn’t really trying to seduce him, he would catch on to that, but I thought if he actually took it for an apology, he might fall into the seduction of my submission to him rather than deny me flat out if I fought him physically. If fighting for what I wanted meant giving him the kind of submission he liked, then I would learn to work that to my advantage.

I sighed a defeated breath, hoping he would notice my surrender. “Forgive me?”

He released a short breath through his nose, and suddenly, kissed me on the mouth. His hands went to the nape of my neck, pulling me to him while his tongue sunk into my mouth. I moaned into his lips, giving him what he wanted while his hands eventually found their way into my hair. And then, before I knew it, he was roughly dragging me down by my hair to sit between his legs while he released his cock from his pants. Pulling my face toward his lap, I didn’t hesitate knowing full well what he wanted and took his straining erection into my mouth.

I managed to suck him off in under three minutes and swallowed his entire load as he expected me to. My throat was a little sore then from the head of his cock bumping against it, but in the end, I considered it a win. I ultimately wanted to see if I could affect him the way I wanted to and I had. It didn’t matter that it ended in a blowjob; what mattered was that it ended

the way I intended it to—him giving into an urge I was creating, my way of manipulating him.

With that sort of behavior, I knew he would grant my request eventually. I hoped by next week, though, because I was going fucking insane inside this house.

Another week went by and I was beginning to grow antsy. Darren still hadn't approved my request to go outside while he was gone, and I was barely able to go out even when he was here. It was as if he was deliberately stalling to spite me for my transgression when I had initially complained about him only thinking about it. I didn't bring it up again, though. Instead, I would blankly stare out the window for the longest time, committing to the importance of my request.

I barely ever went outside unless I was with him, and that was only if he even wanted to go outside. Sometimes, we'd go for walks along the beach when he had time, and once, we went swimming, but he was always so busy so it was rare. I wanted to be free to go wherever I wanted, whenever I wanted. I was over being on a fucking leash all the time.

I had already completely explored the inside of the house, knowing absolutely everything about it I could learn on my own, but now, I needed to know the grounds that surrounded it. I needed to know how big the estate was, what surrounded it, and hopefully, I could finally figure out where the fuck I was being held because it certainly wasn't Michigan. Darren wouldn't even leave his newspapers around for me to find, and it annoyed the fuck out of me.

After another week, I found myself becoming mopey and depressed. I wanted to push, I wanted to fight with him, but I knew that would just get me in trouble and then I could kiss my request to go outside good-bye. I did everything I could to improve my behavior—from smiling when he came around me to fully losing myself in the throes of passion when we fucked. I was attentive, affectionate, and managed to keep myself from releasing a single cuss word. I even tried not to wince when he called me princess, but nothing fucking worked! I was beyond frustrated, and when I realized my efforts were all for nothing, I gave up and went back to staring out the window until Darren finally came home.

I felt his hands on my shoulders then as they started to move down my back and to my sides. His lips found the back of my neck, and he kissed all the way down to my spine, causing my skin to quiver. Gently, he turned my body to face him, and I met his gaze with a blank, expressionless face. I wasn't in the mood, but I knew better than to deny him.

He kissed me softly, and I kissed him back like the good little girl I was. His hands found their way into my hair and finally came around to my face, clutching me to him. When he eventually released me, he looked down into my eyes and saw the hopelessness and regret I was trying to hide.

"Ah," he said with a smirk. "I think someone's finally learned their lesson."

I looked at him confused. "Huh?" I asked.

And then without a word, he gripped my shoulders and swiftly turned me around so that I was facing the window and leaning over the couch. He took my neck in a strong grip, forcing the side of my face down to the top of the couch, and pulled my thong to the side to enter me roughly from behind. By some fucking miracle, my body knew what was coming and was ready for it, the moisture already coating my walls and soaking me.

God, he was rock solid inside me as my body adjusted to his girth. I groaned as he pulsed in my core, yet it felt so good. But then his hand reached around and instantly gripped my throat, hauling me back to his chest and holding me there. Fear enveloped my entire body as my hands immediately wrapped around his forearm and wrist while I tried to keep my balance.

"I know how badly you want to go outside," he drawled in my ear, "but you need to accept the fact that any freedoms I grant you are my decision alone." He pulled out slightly and pushed back in, sending a jolt of pain and pleasure throughout my body. "It doesn't matter how much you try to persuade me or how mopey you become when you don't get your way. I know when I'm being manipulated, Jaden, and I don't appreciate it." Again, he pulled out and thrust back in, his other hand on my hip while I whimpered against him. "I know I said good behavior is rewarded, but only when it's honest. I expect it all day, every day, not just when you want something. So the next time you get the guts to ask me for something again, remember that, and I may not make you wait two weeks before I grant it. Do you understand me?" he said, thrusting back into me for emphasis.

"Yes, Darren," I gasped, trying to keep it together.

Double fucking ouch.

I knew I had crossed a line before, but goddamn, this was ridiculous. Darren fucked me relentlessly on the couch until we were both coming and I was screaming his name. When he was done, he pulled out and immediately righted himself, tucking his cock back into his pants. I remained exhausted and limp on the couch, my eyes still lingering on the window as I fought to catch my breath.

“Tomorrow, you can go outside when I’m gone, but there will be new rules in place. I will discuss them with you later. Right now, I have work to do.”

He gazed at me for a second while I remained in my position. He leaned over taking my face in one of his hands while his thumb grazed over my chin. He then kissed me softly on the lips. “Behave,” he warned and then walked away to his office, leaving me a heaping mess on the couch.

Well, if I didn’t feel super fucking pathetic right there.

I should be excited that he finally granted my request, but I still felt like a fool for some reason. He had been on to me the whole time. Here, I thought giving him special attention would motivate him to reward me, but the more I thought about it, the more obvious it became to me that I was only doing it to get what I wanted, and once I got what I wanted, of course, I had planned to stop. And clearly, Darren wasn’t having any of that.

So fucking stupid ...

I rolled off the couch and went to my room to clean up. I had dinner by myself downstairs as Darren was still busy with work and even went to bed without a single interruption throughout the night. He must be really busy with something if he left me alone for the remainder of the day.

The next morning, I met Darren downstairs on the patio for breakfast. He was reviewing some documents and talking on the phone when I sat down and made myself some tea. A guard stood off to the side, his hands behind his back, and he looked off blankly into the distance. I tried not to pay attention to him.

“You think I give a damn what your excuses are? You tell them to figure it out and take care of it before I do.” Darren had a dark edge to his voice as he spoke to whoever was on the other line. He then hung up and stuck the phone in the inside pocket of his black suit jacket. He took a deep breath then looked over and smiled at me. “Good morning,” he said.

“Morning,” I replied, eyeing him carefully as he turned back to his work.

I could feel an intense energy coming off him, and it made me a little nervous. After a short minute, I just sat back in my chair, sipped my tea, and stared out at the ocean. I was sure Pascal would have our breakfast out soon anyway. And eventually, he did.

David brought out a single silver tray and placed it down in front of me. Nothing for Darren but his coffee. David lifted the tray revealing scrambled eggs, fruit, and a small cup of vanilla yogurt. I pushed my eggs around with my fork, suddenly not really hungry. Darren might not realize it, but he greatly affected my appetite like nobody’s business.

I sipped on my tea instead and continued to stare at the water until I heard Darren clear his throat.

“Eat your breakfast, Jaden,” he said without even looking up from his work.

I furrowed my brows at him. I had a smart-ass comment on the tip of my tongue, but he had just granted my request to go outside today while he was gone and I didn’t want to fuck that up.

I stabbed some eggs with my fork and took a bite, trying to eat slowly so as not to upset my stomach. When half my eggs and fruit were gone, I sat back and slowly picked at my food until I thought Darren might be satisfied enough to at least address me. But after a few short minutes, he took a final sip of his coffee, grabbed his things, and put them in a nearby manila folder before standing from his chair.

“I will see you later,” he said, as he buttoned his jacket.

I looked at him confused. Didn’t we have something to discuss this morning?

“What about the rules?” I asked him.

“What rules?” he looked at me as if he had no idea what I was talking about.

My eyes almost widened in panic. What if he forgot? Would he take back his word?

“You said I could go outside today while you’re gone,” I replied carefully.

He squinted his eyes for a second as if he were trying to remember and then his eyes finally lit up.

“Oh yes, that’s right. I did say that,” he said casually.

I breathed a sigh of relief ... until he gave me that intense warning look again.

“You are to remain within the sights of the guards at all times. No going beyond the trees and no swimming beyond those buoys.” He pointed out to the water where five large orange buoys were floating about a hundred feet away from shore. “Your perimeter has been extended to my property line, but that does not mean you are to try and discover it. Stay within the limits I have given you, and eventually, you will be able to go beyond them.”

“Okay,” I said softly, my eyes staring right into his.

“Come here,” he said, holding his arms out.

I slowly stood and went to him. When I closed the distance, Darren wrapped his arms around me and pulled me against his chest in a tight embrace. He held me for a while, his nose in my hair as he took several slow, deep breaths as if he were breathing me in. I rested my cheek on his chest and listened to his heartbeat. It was strong, steady, and oddly calming to me as I focused on the tempo.

Moments like these confused me the most. For someone so strong and so cruel, I loved that he could be gentle with me and could just hold me like this. Moments like these told me I meant something to him. That I was more than just a tight fuck toy for him. And moments like these left me hungry for more.

After a short minute, Darren pushed me away from him by my shoulders and looked me straight in the eye.

“You will listen to the guards and obey the rules. If they tell you to refrain from doing something, you don’t fight or argue. You do what they say, when they say it because, believe it or not, it’s for your own protection, Jaden. They’re not here to just watch over you. They are here to protect you. Let them do their job.”

“Okay.” I nodded. He turned his head and gave me a warning look. “Yes, Darren,” I corrected myself.

He relaxed slightly.

“I know how much you wanted this, and now, I’m trusting you not to make me regret it. Do not disappoint me, Jaden, because if you do, this will not happen again for a very long time.”

Darren’s face was intense with warning, and I didn’t want to think about being shunned back into my room because I fucked this up with my

stubbornness. I needed to behave long enough for him to trust me.

“I’m not going to disappoint you, Darren,” I replied, sounding as serious as I possibly could. “I promise.”

“Good,” he said. He then leaned down, took my face in his hands, and kissed me softly on the mouth. His lips were gentle as they caressed mine, his tongue sliding in and claiming everything it touched. By the time he was done, I was breathless and disorientated, but I shook it off as he looked down at me and smiled. “I’ll see you at dinner,” he said, then kissed my forehead and walked back into the house, leaving me on the patio.

I sat back in my chair with a huff of relief and looked out to the ocean. So many new possibilities before me and I couldn’t wait to explore.

Chapter Thirty

New Boundaries

After running upstairs to change into some workout clothes and wash my makeup off, I practically skipped my happy ass all the way back to the patio. I decided I wanted to go for a run on the beach. But when I came back to the patio, there wasn't just one guard standing there, there were three. They were big guys, too, not nearly as tall as Darren, but still much taller than I was. I eyed them carefully as I stepped around them, looking them up and down and noticing everything I could about them. None of them even looked at me.

"Uh ... I'm gonna go for a run on the beach." I pointed with my thumb over my shoulder.

One guard, the one in the middle, nodded slightly but still didn't look at me. God, that wasn't just annoying, it was plain fucking rude. I rolled my eyes at them, turned on my heels, and headed down to the shore as my excitement quickly returned.

When I got to the sand, I took my Nikes off and left them on the grass as I walked barefoot to the water. A sense of freedom calmed me as I stepped into the oncoming waves of the ocean, and it felt like bathwater against my skin. The perfect temperature.

I took one last look at the guards before sprinting off down the shore. I started with a slow, easy jog just to soak up the sun and breathe in the salty air. I must have run up and down the shore for an hour, turning around every fifteen minutes. I was afraid I might leave the sight of the guards and then I'd be in trouble.

The sun was blazing out, and eventually, sweat covered my body. I could've gone back inside and showered, but I wanted to do something fun instead. So I ran into the water and dived with my clothes on with not a single care in the world. When I surfaced, I floated on my back for a while, just taking in the soft blue sky and watching the seagulls fly above me. At that moment, I forgot everything around me. I forgot about Darren, about

his rules, about his name on my skin, and the cuffs around my body. I forgot about the pain, the grief, and the vengeance and I just ... drifted. It was everything I needed as the clarity I had longed for finally came to me. But it wasn't meant to last forever.

"Miss Jaden!" I heard someone shout my name. I immediately rose up from the water to address the voice, noticing it was a guard calling me from the beach. "It's time to come in for lunch!" he called.

Lunch? Fuck lunch.

Except I promised Darren I would listen to the guards. I didn't want to fuck this up, and I was actually a little hungry.

"Okay!" I shouted back to him as I made my way toward the shore.

The guard stood there watching me and waited for me to walk to him. He had a large beach towel in his hand, and he handed it to me when I reached him.

"Thank you," I said, taking the towel and wrapping it around myself to dry off.

I grabbed my shoes that sat in the grass and the guard escorted me back to the table on the patio where my lunch was apparently waiting. I ate my lunch quietly, trying to ignore the guards as they stood around, staring off into the distance.

"So are you guys, like, my permanent outdoor babysitters or something?" I asked between bites. I probably shouldn't have been talking to them, but ... I was me.

None of them said a word—didn't even look my way.

I nodded at their silence, not really offended but not really surprised. "Lucky you guys," I said, taking another bite of my turkey sandwich.

When I was done with my lunch, I headed back into the house to wash the salt water from my hair and body. The guards remained where they were as I went back inside. After my shower, I redid my hair and makeup, put on another black skort and a hot pink t-shirt, and headed back outside in my Nikes. I was determined to spend the entire day under the sun if I could.

I walked along the gardens, ventured around the pool, and got a damn good idea of the size of the house and all its windows and accesses. Everywhere I went, a guard was not far from my sight, and they watched me like hawks. If I ventured too far into the trees, one of them would call out my name and wave me back. Begrudgingly, I listened to them like a

good little girl to show Darren I was serious about following his rules. I wanted to show him how grateful I was that he was finally letting me out of my cage a little bit.

When he came home that afternoon, he found me lying on the grass, my hands behind my head while I stared up at the clouds. I could hear him coming, sensing his presence even before he was near when suddenly his face came into focus and he beamed down at me.

“Hi, there.” He smiled.

“Hi.” I smiled back genuinely, remaining in my position as I looked up at him. I was too happy being outside to let him sour my mood with his presence.

“How was your day?” he asked curiously.

“Fantastic,” I replied. “Yours?”

“Equally fantastic.”

“I doubt that.” I smiled with amusement.

“What are you doing down there?”

“Trying to determine if that cloud looks more like a rabbit or a wolf.” I pointed up at the sky to the cloud I was mentioning.

“Hmm ... I don’t know,” Darren said as he laid down on the grass beside me. I was shocked that he was joining me. I would have thought he might have been afraid he’d ruin his suit. “I don’t think those ears are short enough to be a wolf,” he said, as he folded his hands behind his head as I had mine. I turned my gaze back to the sky.

“But the tail is too long to be a rabbit,” I said.

“Maybe, but the body is kind of small, similar to how a rabbit sits.”

“True, but the wolf could also be laying down on its side.”

“I’m taking it you’re leaning more toward the cloud being a wolf,” Darren stated.

I shrugged. “I like wolves.”

“Well, how fortunate,” Darren declared as he rolled over onto his side, propping his head up on his elbow and giving me a devilish smile. “Because I like rabbits.”

And then, in a flash, he was on top of me; he was kissing me all over my face, my neck, my shoulder, all the while tickling the shit out of my sides and stomach. “I like to hunt them and eat them for dinner.” He chuckled against my skin as he furiously began to tickle me into oblivion.

I screamed in shock and squirmed under him, laughing loudly and uncontrollably as I fought to push his hands away.

“Ah! No, no, no, no! Stop it! Stop it!” I laughed as I squeezed my elbows into my sides to block his strong fingers from my skin. “Darren, stop it!”

His laugh was genuine and carefree as he continued to tickle me in the grass. “Stop?” He chuckled. “I don’t think so.”

And then his lips went back to my neck; I crunched my face to the side to try to block his advance, but his fingers kept my body twitching and jerking under him uncontrollably. I was somehow finally able to grab his fingers; I locked them in my hands and finally pushed him away, but he just rolled us so I ended up straddling him. I looked deep into his smiling face as I came down from my laughter only to realize my position.

I stared into the deep dark blue of his eyes and lost myself for a moment. I could feel Darren staring up at me, and at that moment, I had a feeling he was currently swimming in the amber of mine. God, he was so beautiful, his face carved like that of an angel, but he had the soul of a demon and that made him the ugliest human on Earth.

I could feel my happy mood begin to fade away as I realized I had been laughing with Darren like I was happy, like everything was okay, but it wasn’t. This wasn’t supposed to be, but when I heard the sound of his honest laughter, it did something to me. It wasn’t the normal evil chuckle he administered; no, this one was relaxed and light. It was the sound of his joy ... and it was with me.

“God, that sound,” he said, his thumb coming up to rub along my cheek. “I’ve never heard anything so satisfying in all my life.”

“What sound?” I asked.

“Your laughter. I don’t think I’ve ever heard it like that before.”

My face went blank. Fuck, he’d nearly been thinking the same thing.

“Sorry to disappoint, but I haven’t had much reason to laugh lately,” I said carefully.

“I know,” he said in understanding. “But if you let me, I can easily change that.”

I didn’t know how he thought he could. He really expected me to relinquish my freedom to him and just accept the life he was “giving” me, even if it was completely incompatible with who I was as a person. In no

way could a woman like me ever be happy with a man like him. If you could even call him a man.

“I’m just not sure you can,” I said softly. I didn’t know why I told him that, but it seemed like there was a lot of honesty going on.

“You don’t think I can, or you don’t want me to?” he asked, a challenging look in his eye.

Did I want him to make me happy? Did I want him to be the source of my laughter and smiles? No, of course not. Darren was not what I wanted out of life because he came with chains that controlled and hurt. Who would want a man like that? Sure, many women were turned on by an alpha male, myself included, but Darren wasn’t just an alpha. He was my fucking warden, my tyrant, my captor, and I hated him for it. But it didn’t matter whether I wanted him to be the source of my happiness because the only thing I would ever feel when it came to him was misery. I highly doubted anything could change that.

I suddenly noticed the position I was in as I straddled Darren, distress beginning to shadow me as I remembered the last time I had straddled him like this. Things hadn’t gone so well for me then. I pursed my lips and moved to get off him, but he grabbed my hips and held me fast.

“No, don’t run,” he said seriously.

“I’m not running, but the last time I straddled you like this, things did not end well,” I told him honestly.

“Then don’t misbehave this time and they won’t,” he replied matter-of-factly. “Now, answer my question.”

“I don’t want to cause a fight.”

“Then *answer* my question and you won’t,” he said, that warning glare arising again.

“I ...” I started to answer but was too afraid to finish. I really didn’t want to end up back in my cage for angering him with my opinion.

I looked down at him with a blank face, though I was sure he could feel the sadness that clouded my eyes like a rainstorm. My eyes fell to his chest, taking in the dark gray tie that rested over his light gray dress shirt and suit jacket. As if noticing my distraction, Darren took one of my wrists in his hand and brought it to his lips. His nose tickled up the soft skin of my wrist, tracing my tattoo before kissing it gently over and over again.

“You don’t have to be so scared all the time, Jaden,” he said softly, keeping his eyes on my wrist. “I won’t deliberately hurt you unless you give

me a reason to.”

“Yet you somehow always manage to get me to give you a reason,” I replied with caution.

“Yes, you do have a very sensitive fuse that’s easy to light.” He smirked at me between kisses.

“No more sensitive than yours.” I glared back.

“Yes.” He almost laughed. “But mine is the one you need to avoid.”

“Yet mine is the one you love to light.” I smirked back like the cocky little shit I was.

He chuckled at me then as his eyes roamed over my body. And then, before I could blink, he rolled us over and I was back on my back, Darren now nestled between my legs while his hands rested on the grass at my sides. There was that gorgeous smile again. God, it made me liquefy inside when I saw it. This was his warm smile, the one that told me I was safe from the monster inside him so long as I didn’t feed it.

His lips found the underside of my jaw and they made a sweet little trail up to my ear. “Stop dodging,” he said softly. “Answer my question.”

I sighed, hoping he would concentrate on something else other than the thing I knew would ruin both our moods.

“Look at me,” I said carefully. Darren brought his eyes up to face mine, but there was a dangerous look to them. Yeah, yeah, I told you to do something. Get over it. “And I mean really look at me, Darren. Have you ever seen a wild lion at the zoo? One that didn’t grow up in captivity?”

Darren’s face remained blank as he stared down at me, but I could tell he was listening intently.

“You ever see the fire they once had in their eyes disappear when they remember how they used to roam free in the wild? Hunting and running as they pleased only to be locked away in a small, barely recognizable habitat for them to spend the rest of their tormented lives in? You see how that fire dies? That’s me. And that’ll be me for the rest of my life if you continue to keep me like this. So do I think you can make me happy? I’m sorry, but you have to understand my sincere skepticism.”

Instead of the intense glare I had expected to get, I received the most smart-ass smirk I’d ever seen.

“Sounds like a challenge to me.” He grinned.

I shook my head, disappointed with his answer. Of course, everything was a challenge to him.

“You’re not listening to me. I’m just a conquest for you. I know I’m the only one who’s ever stood up to you, and I know that’s what drew you in. But what happens if that day comes, when I’ve finally had enough, when I’ve finally given up and I become dull and robotically obedient? You will get bored of me and will eventually want someone else. Probably someone younger. I’m just a phase for you, and when you’ve finally won, you’ll move on to the next challenge.”

Wow, I couldn’t believe I said that, but sometimes my mouth just runs with whatever’s on my mind. I had to learn to curb that shit.

Darren looked down at me with a blank face, but his eyes said something totally different. Anger. I quickly backtracked.

“I’m sorry,” I said anxiously. “I shouldn’t have said all that.”

His eyes narrowed, and I felt chills rise up my spine. Fuck, I knew it.

“Don’t apologize for something you’re not actually sorry for. The only reason you’re sorry is for yourself because you know you’re in trouble,” he said in anger.

“You’re right, I’m sorry,” I apologized quickly. “I didn’t mean to analyze. I am a psychology major, after all.”

“You’re also very wrong,” he replied darkly.

I looked at him to clarify, but he just shook his head at me in disappointment.

“Do you have no faith in yourself, Jaden?” he asked me softly. I squinted at him curiously. “Do you really think I will break you down so badly that you’ll just retreat to something robotic and routine? No,” he said, shaking his head. “There are stages to this, Jaden, many stages. The road to perfection will be long and hard, but I know we can get there.”

“And where does that road lead?” I asked.

“Our happiness,” he said softly with a genuine smile.

Our happiness ...

I slowly shook my head at him in disbelief.

So delusional ...

“I know you don’t believe me now,” he said, tucking a strand of my hair behind my ear. “But things will get easier. I promise. You have to trust me.”

“But,” I started, afraid to finish my sentence. “I don’t want this.”

“Not yet,” he said simply, tracing his thumb along my jaw. “But you will.”

Darren then made a move to prove his point and fucked me in the grass. But it wasn't his usual routine because it was more as if he was making love to me than anything else. He was slow and gentle, taking his time with my body, feeling and kissing every inch until I found myself moaning for more. I was worried about the guards seeing us at first, but Darren assured me his guards knew better than to watch. I was grateful because the things we did in that grass were things I wasn't about to forget anytime soon.

I spent the rest of the night thinking about Darren and what he had said to me. I had challenged him again, but this time, it was for something that might actually benefit me. If he could try to just be a little nicer, a little less demanding, things might be a little more tolerable, but it would never stop me from wanting to escape him. I didn't think that urge would ever fade. He thought I'd eventually give in and come around, wanting him over my freedom, but he was so wrong ... because I wanted someone else far more than he could ever comprehend. My loyalty would never belong to him ... because it still belonged to someone else.

Chapter Thirty-One

Discovery

The following week had been better. Now that I was able to go outside, my mood was better, and Darren seemed to respond better to me now that I wasn't sulking or arguing as much. I hadn't seen him as much as he was working a lot, but he still tried to make sure he, at least, had dinner with me.

True to his word, Darren had started to lighten up. He was softer and less aggressive with me, but he was still just as demanding; I didn't think that would ever change. I didn't think he knew how not to be demanding since he was so used to always getting his way, but it was nice that he was trying to make me less miserable in his presence.

Our conversations were beginning to change. I worked hard to make sure I didn't bring up a single topic that would start a fight, but I seriously had to hold my tongue at times when a certain opinion of his came out of his mouth. But it was when Darren brought up the potential future that I had a hard time not shutting down. He could tell when it upset me, and I knew it was upsetting him that it upset me, but I could see some times when he himself was actually holding back to avoid a fight. Maybe he, too, was trying to keep the peace no matter how temporary it was.

Darren still refused to discuss any of his personal business with me, but I wanted to know more about his dealings so I would know who to watch out for when my plan to escape came to life. I tried to pay attention to his phone calls and conversations with guards and associates. Words like Triguard, Audeāmus, countermeasures and strikes, shipments, and auction. Anytime I heard anything remotely close to mentioning the warehouse, my stomach would backflip. And it only motivated me to start paying attention to names—Ron, Matt, Carlos, Moross, Dan, Dominic, and Ray. My hit list was getting bigger by the day.

The days Darren worked from home were strange. Everyone seemed anxious and on their toes while people I'd never seen before came and went from his office. Darren's guards would often usher me away from his office,

telling me Darren was busy and not to disturb him. But I wasn't interested in him; I was interested in the people he dealt with on a regular basis.

Every now and then, I would continue to see the gardener here and there, and one time, I just flat out waved to him with a fake-ass happy smile on my face, hoping he would see that I was fine. He gave me a small short wave back and returned to his work.

One morning, Darren and I talked about our general interests and found common ground. He still liked to pry me on things about my childhood, and it usually brought a smile to his face, so I obliged.

"You're going to think this is hilarious." I chuckled. "But I used to love flying kites when I was a kid."

"Really?" Darren asked enthusiastically, obviously thinking it was hilarious.

"Oh yeah, and I was really good at it, too. I could always catch the perfect breeze and make it fly for hours. I could even do tricks and make it spin around like a bird. I kind of miss it, actually. It was very relaxing."

Darren just gave me a knowing smile as if he was up to something. He usually always was.

The following morning, Darren had told me he would be late coming home and that I would be having dinner alone. Shocker there, but he suddenly said that he had a surprise for me. He stood up from the chair and went to pull the other chair out that sat across the table from me. He then pulled up a long wrapped present and set it down in front of me. It was wrapped in white wrapping paper with a bright pink bow. I gave Darren a look, but he just urged me to open it. After ripping off the paper and bow, I pulled the top off the rectangular box and pushed back the white tissue paper to find what looked like some dark purple fabric, thin plastic poles, and string. I looked at it curiously before I pulled the fabric out and realized it was the makings of a kite!

"Ha!" I laughed.

I pulled everything out with pure excitement on my face and immediately put the kite together. When I looked back up at Darren with a huge smile on my face, that warm sexy one of his smiled back.

"Thank you," I said earnestly.

"You're welcome," he replied, his eyes soft as he watched me. "Maybe you can show me some of your tricks when I get back." He winked.

“Be ready to have your mind blown.” I grinned.

I gave Darren a very nice good-bye kiss before he left, and then I spent the remainder of my day outside. I smiled to myself as I hooked the kite to my string and let it take off into the wind, but it wouldn't stay in flight for long. The wind wasn't strong enough to keep it up. I would have to wait until after dinner to try again.

Getting Darren to buy me the kite had been easier than I thought. Sure, I loved it when I was a kid, but I couldn't give a fuck less about flying it now. I just needed a good excuse to climb one of these fucking trees to figure out where the fuck I was. And here I thought Darren knew when he was being manipulated. Stupid, cocky fuck.

I had dinner later alone on the patio and afterward casually strolled by the edge of the trees while flying my kite. The wind had picked up as I had hoped. Luckily, it was also pointing just in the right direction. I sporadically glanced around here and there, but I could no longer see the guards who normally watched me. After a while, they had spread out from the patio as they had more than just me to watch over. When I couldn't see anyone for the next several minutes, I purposefully tripped over myself and let go of the handle holding on to my kite. Like a man on a mission, the kite aggressively flew away and landed in one of the branches atop a large, tall tree. Absolute perfection.

I glanced around one last time to make sure no one was watching and quickly started to climb the tree, flats and dress be damned. Truth be told, I was terrified of heights, but I didn't let that stop me as I climbed higher and higher until I finally reached the top and grabbed the stupid kite, securing it in my hand.

I then eagerly looked out from the tree and realized I could see Darren's entire estate from up here. It was a lot bigger than I had thought. I couldn't see his property line as trees surrounded the estate, but from what I could tell, Darren probably had forty or fifty acres of private land. I could see the gate to the entrance of the estate and it looked like it might have wrapped all the way around the property. There were no neighbors, and I could see the private paved road that led to the gate.

Adrenaline began to rush through me as I frantically looked off into the far distance, taking everything in, looking for anything that might give away my location. But as I looked off into the distance, miles away there were buildings, and structures, and hills. I could see a city, but I knew it was

probably about twenty miles away. And then I saw a bridge; a bridge way off in the distance, but one I instantly recognized. The Coronado Bridge in San Diego, California.

My heart leaped with joy as my earlier suspicions were correct and then sank to the bottom of my soul as I realized how far away from home I was. I was all the way on the other side of the fucking country.

How the fuck had I gotten this far without noticing? There was no way I had gotten here without being flown this far, but I don't recall ever getting on a plane. Had I been drugged that heavily? They had to have a private jet and landing strip to be able to get away with it. So many fucking questions spinning around in my head.

Looking over at the horizon, I couldn't help but appreciate the view of the water. I could see sailboats and freighters floating along toward the city, and I suddenly longed to be free like that. I could have stayed up in that tree forever, but I knew that eventually I would have to come down. But things abruptly took a turn for the worst as I heard Darren's loud, angry voice call out my name and I hunched in the tree from shock and fear. In a panic, I frantically started to climb down with the kite as quickly as I possibly could. He'd kill me if he found me up here.

Just as I leaned forward to climb down the next branch, I felt my cuffs link together and I completely lost my footing. I screamed as my stomach dropped to my feet while I began to fall heavily down through the branches, tearing my dress, and scratching up my arms and legs as the limbs of the tree broke against my body.

Fear consumed me as I thought I would tumble down to my death, but luckily, I caught a branch with my arms halfway down. It scratched and tore my skin, but I clung to it tightly as I tried to catch my breath and calm my shaking nerves, pain now enveloping my entire body. It didn't help much when I looked down to find Darren standing underneath the tree. I couldn't see his face very well, but I knew he was pissed.

"Jaden!" he yelled at me. "What the FUCK are you doing up there?!"

Yeah, he was furious.

"Let me go so I can climb down!" I shouted back to him. There was no way I could successfully climb down with my limbs bound like this.

After a few seconds, I felt the force binding my cuffs diminish, and I held on for only a second longer before climbing down to meet my death. I

had lost the kite somewhere among the branches, but there was no point in going for it now.

I jumped down from the last branch and stared up at a very sinister looking Darren and took a slight step back. Faster than I had anticipated, he grabbed my throat and shoved me up against the tree roughly.

“Just what the fuck were you doing up there, huh? And who the fuck told you that you could roam around out here?” he roared down at me.

“I’m sorry! My kite got stuck in the tree! I just climbed up to get it. I didn’t think it was a big deal,” I struggled to say as my hands grabbed his wrist that held me in place. My blood was racing, my heart was pounding out of my chest, and I could feel the heat begin to blossom between my legs. What the fuck was wrong with me?

“So you decided to risk your safety over a fucking kite?” His voice was all malice and venom as it pierced through my ears, further driving my fear.

“It’s just a fucking tree! I used to climb them all the time,” I shot back.

“Watch it, little girl,” he warned, glaring at me. “Your safety is of more concern to me than your childhood activities. Apparently, I need to rearrange your priorities.” He squeezed harder, causing tears to form in the corner of my eyes.

“I’m sorry. It was stupid,” I groaned against his strength.

“Yes, it was very stupid! Do you have any idea how dangerous that was? What if you had fallen and broken something?”

“Well, I was doing just fine until someone decided to bind me up,” I retorted.

“And you wouldn’t have fallen had you not been up there in the first place!” He was yelling now, and I flinched back in my skin and looked away from him.

“You’re right. I’m sorry. It won’t happen again.”

“You’re goddamn right it won’t,” he snarled and flipped me around, shoving my dress up all the way to the back of my neck.

Taking off his belt, he whipped me hard fifteen times over my back and ass until there was nothing but thick red marks left behind. As if I wasn’t sore enough from halfway falling out of a tree. When he was finished, my face was red as silent tears fell down my face. Darren then dragged me back into the house by my hair. And that was when I noticed

the gardener standing at the side of the house, concern and anger clear as day across his face. Shit. Major bad timing.

My entire backside ached and burned the rest of the day and well into the morning, the need between my legs long forgotten after Darren finished fucking me from behind in his bed. He didn't give a single fuck even when he tucked me against his side that night. He said if I hadn't been so stupid and careless, I wouldn't be in so much pain.

Of course, my punishments were always my fault, and I spent most of that night unable to sleep from tears and pain. But I reminded myself it wasn't all for naught. I finally knew where I was and had a better understanding of the property I was a prisoner of. Tomorrow, I would start the new phase of my plan of escape.

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Chapter Thirty-Two

Trouble

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When I woke up in the morning, I looked down to find Jaden's sleeping form and couldn't help but smile. She had rolled over in the night, resting her head on my shoulder as she slept. It honestly amazed me how she could so quickly fill me with murderous rage and then melt my black heart the next.

I had given her so much in the last month, more than I was ready to, but I had already compared Jaden to the lion in the zoo long before she ever told me about it ... because that was exactly what I was afraid of. All I wanted was for Jaden to know her place—to respect and obey me without question, surrender all of her passion to me, and laugh with me like she was happy. But I couldn't force her to be happy. What I could do was everything in my power to make her happy, yet understand that it would never be enough. I just hoped she didn't end up like the lion in the zoo.

She would never be happy with me as long as she had something else to hold on to. I could see that she was trying to make me happy, but it was for her own self-interests and benefits. She knew what she needed to do to make things easier for herself, but the simple fact was she hated it. Jaden hated bowing down to me, but it was something she was going to have to get used to, and eventually, she would. She'd only been with me barely a short couple of months, but already there was so much improvement and so much potential.

I looked down at Jaden, feeling her soft skin beneath my fingertips. She flinched a little in her sleep when my hand grazed down her back, still sore from my belt yesterday. I couldn't be surprised that she had climbed the tree to retrieve her kite; she'd probably done it all the time before me because she was fearless—another trait I loved about her. It wasn't as if I didn't think she was capable or coordinated enough to climb a damn tree,

but the simple truth was it was still dangerous, and anything that threatened her safety had me raging inside.

Daniel had fallen out of one of those trees a long time ago when we were young boys. He'd broken his arm then and our father had been furious, just as I was now. I had reprimanded the guards watching her and made sure they knew Jaden was never to climb another fucking tree again.

The sun started to shine through the windows and the light poured over Jaden's hair, igniting the beautiful reds and coppers that reminded me of fire. The fire I loved so much.

Eventually and reluctantly, I rolled out of bed, careful not to disturb her, and headed downstairs for my workout. After a good run and warm-up, I sparred with Scott for a while in the octagon; he and I were too equally matched for one of us to actually surrender. We would eventually just tire each other out.

Two hours later, I went back upstairs to find Jaden still sleeping in my bed. I took a quick shower and got dressed, Jaden now finally waking up by the time I was done. She stretched her naked body as I fastened my black chrome Rolex around my wrist, her slight wincing hard to ignore.

"Good morning," I said to her as I went to put on my jacket.

"Morning," she said quietly, looking away. I hated when I couldn't see her eyes.

And then my phone started to ring. I pulled it from my pants pocket and answered, walking away toward my closet and out of Jaden's earshot. I noticed she had been trying to listen in on some of my conversations lately. She thought she was sneaky, but she couldn't hide much from me.

"Yeah?" I said into the phone.

"Darren, it's Hagen. We've got a bit of a situation you're going to want to handle personally. We're on our way over to you now."

I pinched the bridge of my nose. It was too early for this shit already.

"What's the situation?" I asked.

"It's about your girl."

My head perked up. Well, now he had my attention.

"What's your ETA?"

"Five minutes."

I hung up the phone and headed out into my room. Jaden was still sitting on the bed, staring out the window.

"Go get dressed." I pointed at her as I headed for the door.

She gave me a strange look but didn't argue as I left the room, closing the door behind me. I didn't have time to deal with her questions; if something was up concerning her, then I needed to know right fucking now. I gathered Scott and together, he and I and two other guards made our way out to the front of the house. Hagen was just pulling up in his sheriff's vehicle.

He stepped out, nodding in my direction as he began to head toward me while his men pulled a man from the backseat. They dragged him over to where we stood and dropped him to his knees in front of me. I looked down at the man and instantly recognized him. He was one of the gardeners I'd hired to care for the grounds of my estate. The fuck was this shit?

"What the fuck is this?" I waved at the man as I looked at Hagen.

"Well, you see, this gentleman right here claims you've got a girl locked up in your house who's been missing for months. Says you abuse her and won't let her leave," Hagen said casually.

If I hadn't been so pissed off, I would have started laughing.

"Is that so?" I said, looking down at the man who now cowered in fear. "And what evidence does he have to support this wild claim?"

"Says he's seen her several times on the news and recognized her. Says he knows she doesn't want to be here and that she's in trouble. He wanted to help her."

I felt my shoulders bulge with pure rage as I looked down at the puny fuck who actually attempted to have Jaden taken away from me. And what's more, she probably played a part in this. She probably fucking begged him to.

"Please, señor," the man began to plead in a heavy Spanish accent while his hands remained cuffed behind his back. "Please, it's misunderstanding. I-I'm sorry. Please, I have family."

I just glared at him, unconsciously baring my teeth while I thought about ripping his throat out, but I had to confirm something first.

"Get Jaden, now," I told Eric, one of my guards, and returned my attention to Hagen. "Has this fucker told anyone else about this?" I asked Hagen.

"Doesn't seem that way. Otherwise, I'd have a lot more phone calls to answer this morning."

"Clean it up if you do. I don't need anyone else snooping into my business."

“Will do.” Hagen nodded.

I heard the front door open and the sound of struggling caught my ears. I turned to find Eric dragging Jaden by her upper arm as she fought to keep up with him in her little flats. When they reached us, she yanked her arm out of Eric’s grasp and turned to me.

“What is this? What’s going on?” she asked me with a much harsher tone than she should have.

“Do you know this man?” I asked sharply, pointing at the gardener who began to shake uncontrollably.

She looked down and her eyes lit up with fear, shock, and recognition. Oh yeah, she knew him. She knew him far more than she should.

“No, I don’t know him,” she said with an attitude. “Why would I know him? You don’t let me talk to anyone.”

“Well, he certainly thinks he knows you. In fact, he knows you so well that he seems to think you’re a missing person,” I said very lightly.

“Well, I can imagine why he *would* think that,” she replied.

Without even thinking, I grabbed her throat and roughly pulled her to me. Her little hands wrapped around my wrist as she fought for balance and ground. “This stupid fuck decided to take it upon himself to report you to the police.” I watched her for a minute to see how she reacted. “But for all I know, you could have told him to go to the police for you. Is that what you did, Jaden? Begged this man to help you escape?” I practically roared at her. Her eyes lit up in panic.

“No! No! I swear I didn’t do anything!” she pleaded back. “Why would I even bother to tell him that when I know the police can’t help me?”

“I don’t know, Jaden, someone obviously put the idea in his head,” I growled menacingly.

“I swear I’ve never spoken a word to him!”

“You expect me to believe that?” I snarled. I was so close to snapping, it almost felt inevitable.

“Yes! I swear to you I never asked him to do anything. Please, Darren, don’t hurt him. He didn’t understand what he was doing.”

“Oh, no. This little fuck knew exactly what he was doing. He was trying to take you away from me, and that, princess, simply will not do.”

I released Jaden’s throat, watching as she stumbled back only a little before Scott caught her shoulders and forced her to still. I then hauled

around and kicked the stupid Mexican fuck right in the face.

“No!” Jaden screamed behind me. “Darren, stop it!” I sensed the lunge of her body as she moved to stop me, but I ignored her, knowing full well Scott could handle her.

The gardener fell back with a grunt as I got on top of him and started pummeling his face with my fists. Fury flowed through my blood as I released my rage onto the guy’s flesh. Just who the fuck did he think he was? Her savior? I didn’t fucking think so.

Jaden continued to yell and cuss as she began to fight with Scott to get at me, but he was steadfast. I punched the guy several more times, shattering his nose and cheekbones before standing up and addressing my guards.

“Kill his family. And bring him to the shed.”

“What?! No!” Jaden screamed and fought harder with Scott. “You can’t fucking do that, Darren. They’re innocent!”

“And you,” I roared as I grabbed her throat a second time and began dragging her backward with me to the shed. I was so pissed; I could have snapped her in half with ease. “You can kiss *your* family good-bye.”

Chapter Thirty-Three

Torture

“What?! Darren, no! Please, listen to me!” I screamed in absolute shock and panic. “I had nothing to do with-”

“Shut up,” Darren cut me off, his voice low and dangerous. “I’ve heard enough.”

“No! Just listen to me for one sec-”

Darren yanked me to him by my throat as he squeezed tighter than ever, practically lifting me off the ground. “If I hear one more fucking word come out of your mouth ...” He didn’t have to finish his threat, just glared at me with the promise of something even more horrible than what I was already going to experience. I gulped back my tears and just lowered my watery eyes to the ground. “Now move,” he ordered.

He turned me around and led me down toward the back of the house by the nape of my neck. His men followed, carting the poor gardener as he yelled and pleaded in Spanish. Terror consumed my entire being as I shook from head to toe, chills running up my spine with goosebumps forming along my arms. I didn’t say another word, fear controlling my every move now, though, I wanted to continue my protest. Something very bad was about to happen, and I had a strong feeling I was going to be a part of it.

Eventually, we made our way through the trees and came to a rather large looking shed like structure. Darren punched in a code that was to the right of the door, but the bulk of his body blocked my vision from catching it. When he pushed the door open, he pulled me inside while the miserable party behind us followed.

The room around me was dim with only a few ceiling lights to reveal the area. Concrete walls surrounded us with a dirty cement floor beneath my feet. Darren then pulled me over to the side of the room, which almost resembled a single car garage, but when he reached down to the floor, he lifted up a secret door hidden under the cement.

The two cops pulled the gardener down the steps while he struggled with every step. The man with the sheriff's badge joined them, followed by Scott, Darren, and me, and Darren's guards in tow. The stairs were long and curved until we came to the bottom of what looked like an unfinished basement. More cinderblock walls, except for a white tiled wall in the corner of the room, dimly lit ceilings, and cemented floors with a drain in the middle of it. My stomach coiled as I realized there were chains hanging from the ceiling and hooks on the walls. There was also a large iron door in the middle of the wall, but I could not tell where it led.

Two chairs were placed about ten feet apart, and a metal table of various instruments I couldn't fully make out was set up beside the chair in the middle of the room. The chairs were not the same as the other. One was metal with rusted, dirty arms while the other looked more like a damn La-Z-Boy.

The cops practically threw the gardener onto the metal chair and immediately tied his hands and ankles to the frame of the chair. Darren still had me by my neck as he headed toward the other chair and nearly shoved me to the floor in front of it. He sat down and pulled me by my hair to perfectly position me on the floor between his legs.

I was going out of my mind with panic as tremors continued to hold my body prisoner, chills crawling up my skin. I quickly pulled my knees to my chest, wrapping my arms around my legs securely. Darren held my hair in a tight grip to keep my head up to the horrible scene before me. When the cops finished securing the gardener to the chair, they stepped back and Darren's guards headed toward him, sick and twisted glints in their eyes.

"You need anything else?" the sheriff asked from behind us.

"No, I'll take it from here. Thank you, Hagen," Darren replied without taking his eyes off the gardener.

"Have fun," the sheriff said with sick enthusiasm and then headed back upstairs with his deputies. Scott remained in the corner of the room with his arms crossed as he stared ahead of us.

The room was silent except for the quiet cries of the gardener as tears began to spill from his eyes. His chest shook and his breaths came out in heavy gasps as he looked out to Darren, pleading for mercy with his eyes.

"Please, señor," he cried. "Please, have mercy. Please ..."

"You should have thought of that before you decided to meddle in my business and try to fuck with what's mine," Darren said with nothing but

pure hatred.

And then he nodded at his men.

Without a single word of verbal command, the two guards began to haul their fists into the gardener's body. I cringed into myself, my stomach sick with fear and guilt as I watched Darren's guards beat the shit out of this poor man who only wanted to help me. The gardener grunted and cried, pleading in Spanish, but his words went unheard. Eventually, the guards rested their knuckles and went for something more drastic and gruesome. They began to break his fingers with a hammer.

I instantly hid my face into the side of Darren's leg while my arms curled around his calf, clutching him tightly as the sound of the hammer on bone jerked me into a tight cringe. I kept my eyes in the general direction of the gardener but winced my eyes shut. Unfortunately, nothing could hide the blood-curdling screams of the poor man.

For the next longest six minutes of my life, I listened to Darren's men break every one of the gardeners fingers, the sound of the hammer coming down enough to nearly make me vomit all over the floor. I kept it down, thankful to have not yet had my breakfast. I shook uncontrollably, my tears soaking Darren's dress pants as I clung to him. He didn't seem to mind, as he was too entranced by the gruesome scene he controlled before us. I didn't even want to look at his face, knowing the sick and twisted smile I would find across his lips if I turned around.

When they finished breaking his fingers, I couldn't withhold my voice anymore as I watched one of the guards pick up a power drill from the tray, a cruel and sadistic smile on his face.

I couldn't take another second of this.

"Darren, please stop this! Please!" I screamed, turning around to face him, tears in my eyes, but all I was met with was a quick backhand to the face. My body jerked back in response as my face lit up with heat and pain. I brought my cold palm up to cool the side of my face as Darren yanked me to him by my hair. Out of total fear, I shrunk into myself and winced my eyes shut, too terrified to face him.

"Look at me," he snarled. I tentatively opened my eyes; my hands clutched into fists at my chest, and cringed even more as the dark evil blue of his eyes swallowed me whole. "What the fuck did I tell you?" he roared at me.

"P-please, Darren," I replied softly. "Please, I can't watch anymore."

He looked down at me and glared without a single hint of compassion in his eyes.

“At this point, Jaden, I couldn’t give a fuck less about what you want. Beginning today, I start hunting down your entire family, and I won’t stop until there’s nothing left of them and nothing left of your old life for you to hold on to. This idea of escape ends here and now. Now, shut your fucking mouth and watch the misery you’ve created because you thought you might have a chance to get away from me.”

He released my hair with a shove, and my mind officially went numb. I was in shock, yet I was in denial of what he actually said. I felt my heart race as my breathing pattern increased, panic rising in my blood while tears pooled at the corner of my eyes.

Darren was going to kill my entire family.

My horror mixed with the screams of my rescue victim was enough to completely send me over the edge. I felt my lips curl up in a snarl, exposing my teeth as I thought about Darren murdering my family. I shook with rage, the screams of the gardener ringing through my ears, and finally, I just ... lost it.

I lunged at Darren from the floor, screaming like an absolute animal as the force of my advance caused the chair he sat in to flip backward. Darren and I crashed on the floor while I rained fists and elbows down on his face.

“I’ll fucking kill you!” I screamed in total fury. “I swear to God, I will!”

I only got in a few hits before Darren threw me off him, but he didn’t throw me far. He kept a strong grip on my dress before quickly righting himself, gripping the collar of my dress with both hands, and yanked me under him with such force the fabric ripped. Terror filled me, but I continued to fight. I wasn’t backing down. Not after a threat like that.

I managed to get one more good elbow jab across his face, but it didn’t even faze him. Instead, the growl that manifested itself accompanied by the intense glare of Darren’s eyes made me feel like my entire world was about to end. He didn’t even hold back this time. He straight up close-fist punched me right in the face and that was it. Lights out.

~*~

I stood over Jaden's unconscious body, my chest heaving up and down with rage as I fought to control myself. I had lost it, completely fucking lost it, and silenced Jaden's defiance in a way I never thought I would. I knew I would probably regret it in the morning, but I was too pissed to give a shit at the moment.

The buzz of the drill silenced while the pleas and cries of the stupid fucking gardener continued and I couldn't stand the pathetic sound of it anymore. I grabbed one of the throwing knives I kept in my jacket, turned, and swiftly threw it right into the gardener's jugular. I would have shot him, but the sound of the gun without a silencer would have shattered everyone's ears. His screams instantly turned to gurgling as he began to choke on his own blood. I watched as the light faded from his eyes, satisfaction filling my soul knowing the meddling piece of shit was dead.

"Clean him up," I ordered my men as I reached down and lifted Jaden.

I threw her over my shoulder and headed out of the basement shed. I took her back into the house and down to the black room where she would remain for the rest of the day. Placing her in her cage, I made sure the side of her now bruising face laid on the cold floor of the cage in hopes of bringing down the swelling by the time she woke up. Locking the door of the cage, I stepped back to admire my beautiful girl as she slept away her pain.

Now that I had calmed down, I felt like an asshole for hitting her like that. I had warned her so long ago that if she didn't listen to me, I could snap and then I'd really hurt her. Today was exactly what I meant. I guess I couldn't really blame her for attacking me like that; I had just told her I was going to kill her entire family. I probably would have done the same thing. The problem was she should have known better. She should have known she wasn't going to win against me, yet she went after me anyway like the stubborn little girl she was.

My poor little Jaden. So much fury in such a tiny body. She probably wouldn't speak to me after this for a while, which was probably a good thing. Nothing good ever came out of her mouth anyway, unless it was my dick.

I pulled out my phone and dialed Scott, whom I had left with my guards to help clean up the gardener and ensure my orders for the miserable fuck's pathetic little family were carried out.

“Yeah,” he answered on the first ring.
“Meet me in my office,” I said, heading for the stairs and hung up.
Time to start making preparations for Jaden’s family.

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Chapter Thirty-Four

Deal

I woke up shivering with a massive headache and a dull pain throbbing in my cheek. I opened my swollen eyelids to find myself surrounded by darkness, but I knew where I was. I was back in my cage.

I curled into myself, wrapping my arms around my legs as I began to shed the necessary tears over today's events. That was the most gruesome and traumatic thing I had ever witnessed. I wasn't completely sensitive to blood and gore. After working at a personal injury law firm for so long, I had seen some pretty disgusting autopsy photos and injuries, but nothing compared to this. I could still hear the gardener's screams echoing in my ears. It was as if I was back there, in the basement, watching him suffer because of me. I cried harder then, my body shaking with grief and guilt as I blamed myself for the horror of that poor man's final moments of life. I didn't even know how it ended.

In a way, I was glad Darren had knocked me out. It meant I didn't have to continue watching the torture show that I would never forget. But now, I had a new horror to panic for. Darren had revealed he really was planning on killing my entire family. It had been a month since he last revealed the idea to me, and I thought maybe he had dropped it since then, but apparently I was wrong. The thought of him forcing me to watch them die as I had watched the gardener had me panicking all over. Time was of the essence now. I had to warn them. I had to get a message out, but I didn't know how.

I certainly couldn't use another person as my messenger. Darren would just kill them and ensure I had a front row seat to that show, too. I had to figure something out. I had to get this goddamn collar off me! I didn't think I would be able to escape Darren entirely. Even if I somehow destroyed the collar, I had a strong feeling Darren would still find me. I couldn't make this escape about me. I had to make it about them, about my family. I just needed to warn them to run. If I could do that, if I could

accomplish that one single goal, then that would be enough for me. I would take whatever punishment Darren would rain down on me for running because it would be worth it a thousand times over if it meant my family would be safe from him.

But what if that wasn't enough? What if, even after I successfully escaped, Darren still found them? I couldn't force my family into that kind of life, of running all the time, if it could be avoided, especially if it meant Darren would eventually find them anyway and then make me watch them die. I couldn't do that. I wouldn't survive it.

Maybe what I really had to do was just bite the literal bullet and accept my life as it was. Maybe if I made a deal with the devil and sacrificed myself for them, he would spare them and I could live on knowing they would, too. Maybe that would finally be enough for me.

After what felt like days later, Darren finally returned to me. I remained in the same position, curled up on my side, my arms wrapped around myself as I stared off into the distance. I refused to even acknowledge him.

I heard him release a heavy sigh as he reached down and unlocked my cage, opening the door and waiting for me to exit. I stayed right where I was. Even though my body was sore and cramped from the small space, I'd rather stay in there for the rest of the day than spend a single moment with Darren.

"Come on, Jaden. Let's go," he urged me, snapping his fingers. His voice was soft, but I could tell he was losing his patience. Still, I remained.

Another sigh escaped him as he rolled his eyes and bent down to the opposite end of the cage. He quickly lifted it up with one hand and I inevitably slid out of the cage and onto the carpeted floor. Darren was quick to seize me before I could retreat to the safety of my cage and hauled me to my feet. I tried to jerk away from him, but his hands held my upper arms, preventing me from moving.

"Stop it," he ordered softly, annoyance tagging along in his voice.

I halted my protest, finding it pointless as I stared off blankly at his chest, my lips curling back in disgust. I felt his warm hand gently grip my chin and lift my face toward him, exposing my bruised cheek so he could get a better look. He stared at it for quite some time, and I noticed something in his eyes that I had not expected to see—regret. Did he actually feel bad for hitting me like that? I'd never seen him care after he'd

backhanded me, but I guess actually punching me with a closed fist was something entirely different to him.

I took this moment to examine his cheek as well, the one I had slammed my elbow in. He had a small purple and red mark on the bone, but it apparently didn't bother him as much as mine did.

Darren lightly took my face in his hands and sprinkled tiny kisses against my bruised cheek. I felt my body tremble with anguish as he tried to comfort me for what he had done. A single tear slid down my cheek over my bruise and Darren kissed it away, his thumbs tracing along my jaw, making it that much harder not to crumble before him. It just made me sick to my stomach.

"I'm so sorry, Jaden," he whispered. "I didn't mean for this to happen."

"Like this is the worst thing you've ever done to me," I replied bitterly.

He could punch me in the face as many times as he wanted. I could take it. As long as he left my family alone, I would take it. Gladly.

"And it probably won't be the last," he replied softly, his lips against my temple. "Especially with an attitude like that."

"I want to make a deal with you," I said seriously.

Darren pulled back and looked at me, an intense look of surprise across his face.

"You want to make a deal with me," he replied, narrowing his eyes at me.

"Yes."

"I'm not sure you have much to bargain with," he said, regarding me closely.

"I have a lot more than you think," I replied with confidence.

"Well, let's hear your proposal," Darren said with intrigue.

"You have me, this much is obvious, but what you *don't* have ... is me *voluntarily*."

Darren raised any eyebrow at me, but I could tell he knew where I was going with this.

"Not yet." He smirked.

"Precisely," I replied. "If you agree to leave my family alone, to let them live out their days without harm, then I will remain yours *voluntarily* for as long as you want me."

This time, both of his eyebrows raised.

“I’ll obey every word you say without question or complaint. I won’t argue, I won’t try to run, and I won’t fight you unless you want me to. I’ll surrender my subconscious to your rules and become the perfect little princess you’ve always wanted. I’ll walk down that aisle in a white dress or nothing at all and give you as many sons as you ask of me. You’ll be able to trust me to leave your sight and return to you without command or coercion. I will be yours for the rest of my life and admit it to you every day without revulsion and replace it with pride. All I ask of you in return is that you simply let my loved ones live.”

That was it. I had officially surrendered my soul to the devil to spare my family his torment. I felt my heart break as I realized what I was giving up, but in the end, knowing they would live would be worth it no matter the sacrifice.

Darren stared at me for a good long time. I pleaded with my eyes for him to take my offer. He had to have known his life would be so much easier if I was cooperative and accepting of what he wanted from me. This was the deal of a lifetime. Fucking literally.

As I looked up into that dark deep blue of his, something shifted in them, and a slight smirk formed in the corner of Darren’s lips.

“My sweet, sweet, Jaden,” he smiled. “That is one hell of a deal you’ve presented.”

I felt my insides quiver as I waited with baited fucking breath for his response.

Take the deal. Take the fucking deal!

“But why on Earth would I agree to give up something I desire for something I’m already going to achieve?”

I felt my eyes bulge as I stared up at him. Was he seriously turning me down?

“Wait, what?” I asked, not sure I even understood. Darren still held my face in his hands, and he suddenly began to walk forward, forcing me to take several steps backward as I fought to remain balanced.

“You see, Jaden, everything you just *offered* me is already going to happen anyway, regardless of whether I agree to spare your family or not. Voluntary or not makes no difference to me. You are mine no matter what you try to rationalize and no amount of bargaining will change that. In fact, those lovely words you just declared can be considered your wedding vows to me because that is exactly what I expect from you and, in time, that is

exactly what I *will* get from you. I don't need to make a deal with you to ensure that. I hate to break it to you, princess, but I'm declining your offer because, like I said, you have nothing to bargain with."

I felt my entire being completely shut down. I felt my knees give out, but Darren caught me and held me against him. I felt myself begin to hyperventilate as I came to the realization that the devil didn't need to bargain for my soul ... because he already fucking had it. My body shivered with fear as more hushed tears rolled down my face, soaking Darren's shirt.

"Shh ..." Darren whispered, his arm tight around my body, as his hands caressed up and down my back. "You're going to be all right, Jaden. It will be hard at first, but eventually, it will get easier. I promise."

Rage instantly built up inside of me again. It would get easier? He thought it would get easier for me once my family was dead?! Was this guy on drugs?! How could he possibly expect me to forgive him for this!

I tried to contain it, but it needed an outlet. Badly.

"You ..." I started to say softly, and eventually, I finally found my voice. "You can't fucking do this to me!" I shouted at him, pulling away, but his arms remained around me. "I've already given you everything! Why the fuck do you need to take them from me, too?!"

"Jaden, stop it," he demanded sternly, his hands now gripping my upper arms tightly.

"No! Get the fuck off me! Let go of me! I fucking hate you! I can't even stand the sight of you!"

I started to cry. I couldn't help myself. I felt so weak and pathetic as I tried to break free from his hold, but he was just too goddamn strong. Irritated as shit, I finally brought my foot up to kick him. He absorbed the kick, grunting as he did and then threw me roughly on the floor. I crashed against the carpet and had no energy left to fight him. My anguish was absolutely exhausting. My face still hurt, and my body had nothing left to give. I just curled into myself, covering my face and ears with my hands in a futile attempt to hide from him.

I could feel him standing over me, could feel his rage seep from him, infecting the air around us, and it made me sick to my stomach.

"Keep behaving like this, Jaden, and I swear to God, you won't see the light of day for a very long time," he warned, his eyes gleaming down at me.

I felt my lips curl in absolute hatred. What difference did it make? It wasn't as if I would ever feel real light in my life ever again. I looked up at him from the floor, my fists curling at my chest, and I wanted nothing more than to hurl myself at him and gouge his eyes out with my thumbs. But something else entirely roared off my tongue.

"If you kill them, you'll be taking away my only reason to live. If there's nothing left of them, you will find nothing left of me in return. Then we'll see who's really won this little battle, won't we?"

My new attempt at threats was stone cold and serious. Why would I want to continue living if my only reason for living was gone? This was my personal Hell. If death was my only escape, then maybe that was the better way out. I wouldn't be able to accomplish my goal of killing Darren and bringing his criminal organization to the ground, but at least, he would have to continue living without his obsession. He could spend the rest of his miserable days in want, knowing I was free of him and resting peacefully with my loved ones. Maybe that was the only way I could truly get back at him, truly win.

Darren's hands casually shifted into his pockets as he remained unfazed by my latest threat. A little grin began to form at the corner of his lips while his eyes blazed with that intensity that made me quiver inside.

"Please," he said, amused. "Like you'd ever allow yourself to become that weak as to end your own life. And besides," he said, resting his arm on the tall bedpost and leaning over me, "I plan on giving you a whole new reason to live. And they have little feet tinier than yours."

His arrogance was beyond annoying as well as disgusting. It was as if no matter what I said, what I proposed or threatened, Darren would not budge. It was his way without even the option of the highway. Fuck, if I had that option, I'd be speeding down it so fast, I'd have the entire county police department on my tail.

So that was it then. Plan A it is.

"Now, if you'll excuse me," he said, heading for the door, "I have some work to do."

Panic rushed me as I realized the work he was referring to was probably locating my family for their execution. I threw myself forward from the floor and raced after him.

"Wait! Darren, don't!" I shouted as I ran after him, but by the time I reached the door, he had just closed it without even bothering to turn around

as the lock clicked into place. My entire body slammed into the door while my fists pounded into the hard oak. "Darren, please don't do this! Don't leave me in here!" But I could already hear him walking up the stairs.

I pounded on the door for what felt like hours, kicking it and throwing my body with as much force as I could muster, but it never fell. My entire body ached along with my fists as bruises formed all over the place.

I shoved myself from the door and paced back and forth in the black room, my hands sweaty with anxiety as I thought long and hard about how to break the fuck out of this prison that was my life. How could I get a message to my family to run?

I felt myself begin to hyperventilate. I needed to calm myself the fuck down if I was going to think clearly and figure this out. I forced myself to stop pacing and stood very still, taking long, deep breaths and exhaling them slowly. I needed to be rational; I needed to focus.

In a room surrounded by sex toys of pain and torture, I found a way to drown it all out and concentrate on one singular moment. I lowered myself down to my knees, parted them slightly in a comfortable position, and placed my hands lightly on top of my thighs. Bowing my head, I closed my eyes and quieted my mind. I silenced everything around me until the only thing I could hear was the sound of my own heartbeat.

I listened to it intently; the sound and strength of each beat resonated through me while I brought myself to an absolute calm. Nothing was around me for miles, nothing above me or below me. There was just me and nothing else.

I relaxed every muscle in my body one by one, releasing the tension from my shoulders that reached all the way to my lower back. I took long, deep breaths, sucking them in through my nose and breathing out through my mouth, releasing all my stress and anguish.

I took about ten minutes of pure solid meditation before my heart rate had slowed and I felt in control of myself again. My fear was gone, replaced with determination for a solution.

And then it all went to shit when my stomach growled like a miserable little bitch.

I had forgotten I hadn't eaten yet, and it was probably well into the afternoon. It wasn't like Darren to starve me, but maybe with today's events, he'd forgotten. I stood up from my position, my stomach now tight from hunger pains as I walked over to the edge of the bed and sat down,

facing the door. My hands gripped the edge of the mattress as I waited for Darren to enter the room. It was maybe an hour later when the door finally opened.

I nearly jolted forward, ready to rush the door when I saw Scott slide half of his body through to glare at me in warning.

“Don’t.” He pointed at me. “There are two more guards out here, so don’t bother trying anything. I’m just bringing you some food since you haven’t eaten all day.”

I just glared at him, my knuckles turning white as they continued to grip the mattress.

“Well, make it quick before I change my mind,” I warned him, a slight hint of bitchy sarcasm on my tongue.

He gave me a smirk and then walked in with a silver tray, quickly shutting the door behind him. I watched him with hard eyes as he set the tray down on the nightstand and headed back to the door.

“Tell me,” I said to him before he opened the door. He turned to look at me. “Are you looking forward to helping Darren hunt down my family or are you just following orders?”

He just shook his head at me with a glare and shut the door behind him, the sound of the lock vibrating in the pit of my stomach. I turned my head toward the tray sitting on the nightstand and walked over to it. There was a plastic bowl of what looked like a thick potato soup, a plate of Greek salad, and a cup of mixed fruit. There was also a giant bottle of water with a small folded note next to it. I picked it up and unfolded it to find Darren’s writing.

Your practice of meditation is impressive.
Use it to contain your outbursts next time
and I may not have to punish you as often.
-Darren

Fury raced through my veins as I crumpled the note in my hand and chucked it at the door. Fuck him for watching me. He was always watching, though, so I didn’t know why I was surprised. I snatched the bottle of water from the tray and gulped down nearly half of it. I nibbled on the soup and salad and had only a few bites of the fruit. With all the knots in my stomach, I didn’t have much room for anything else.

Exhausted and full, I laid my head down on the pillow and curled into myself. I closed my eyes and hoped for the first time that maybe I just wouldn't wake up and this would all be over.

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Chapter Thirty-Five

Crumble

I heard screaming. Sharp screams that pierced my ears. I could see the gardener screeching in fear, his face and body covered in blood as he watched while his family was murdered in front of his eyes. But someone else was standing in the background, someone I had forced myself to forget long ago. Megan, the girl from the warehouse, whom I had tried to instill hope in only for her to have her neck snapped by Darren right in front of my eyes. I now had two deaths to claim responsibility for and it made me weep.

“Your fault,” Megan said in the background as she watched the gardener with calm indifference.

“No,” I whispered back, my tears ready to drown me.

Then a loud bang shattered my ears and a small black and red bullet hole appeared between the eyes of the gardener.

My vision warped until I suddenly saw my family, my friends ... Jason. They were all running, running from a storm of bullets that rained down on them from all directions. Blood spilled and splattered everywhere, coating everything in a dark glossy red. I fought to save them, but I felt paralyzed, unable to move even an inch to try to help them. I watched as both of my younger brothers fell to the ground, deep crimson soaking their clothes, the light slowly draining from their eyes.

I jolted from my sleep as a scream ripped from my throat, shredding my vocal cords. My breath came in and out in heavy gusts as I fought to calm myself down. Sweat covered my body while my fingers gripped the tangled sheets around me. I tried to get a grip on myself and released the sheets before my knuckles decided to burst through my skin. I ran my hands through my hair and took several long, deep breaths, but as I started to finally calm down, I realized I was back in my room and I was not alone.

I raised my eyes to find Darren sitting on the chaise next to the window watching me. Shadowed in darkness, I couldn't see his face very

well, but I knew exactly where his eyes were.

“What are you doing here?” I asked him angrily.

“Do I really need a reason?” he answered calmly.

I suppose not.

I let the question linger before he stood from the chaise and walked over to the bed. I shot out from the covers and moved to the other side to avoid him as best I could. As I moved, my clothing felt different. I was no longer in the torn dress I wore earlier but in one of those silky nightgowns. No bra or panties.

“Now is not the time to fight me, Jaden. It’s after one in the morning. Get back into bed,” he said as he slowly sauntered toward me.

“Get. Out,” I spat, my body turning to the side as it prepared for a fight.

Darren shook his head at me disapprovingly, his light footsteps beginning to close the distance between us. I could feel the panic mixed with rage creating a storm of hatred and passion inside of me. And fuck if it didn’t drench me.

“Get back in bed,” he ordered sternly, pointing at my messy bed.

“No,” I replied harshly.

Oh, shit. The forbidden word.

Darren then lunged for me with an animalistic scowl on his face. I quickly backed up from his advance, but just before my back was about to hit the wall behind me, I brought my foot all the way up and shoved it right under his chin at his throat, nearly stopping him in his tracks. My leg was in a full split as it stretched as high as it could go to reach Darren’s trachea.

He stood there, towering over me with my foot neatly tucked under his chin as it pushed against his Adam’s apple. My fists remained in front of me, tight and defensive as I stared him right in the eye, glaring with everything I had, but all he did was smirk at me with a certain knowing smile.

Then he quickly jostled with his pants, grabbed my hips, and suddenly entered my now fully exposed opening with so much force, had he not been directly in front of me, I would have doubled over.

“Oh, fuck!” I groaned loudly from shock as his cock was now firmly nestled in my core. How fucking stupid was I to leave myself so exposed for something like that?

No panties on? Jaden, you fucking idiot!

Anger flooded my face as I tried to retract my leg from his chin, but now, he just held it in place against his shoulder and shoved me further into the wall with his giant muscular body.

“Ah!” I gasped as I felt the full force of him inside me.

“Well, this is quite the position you’ve created. We might have to try this one more often.” Darren grinned with amusement as he grazed his fingers up and down my leg before clutching my ankle in a tight grip.

I tried to make use of my hands and began to strike Darren wherever I could find his flesh, but he just grabbed my hands and pinned them above my head with one hand. His other hand then went to the back of my hip and he began to savagely pump away inside me.

I felt my eyes roll to the back of my head as Darren brought my body to heel while he fucked me senseless against the wall. My core was instantly wet at the feel of him, my body’s conditioning for him never failing to surprise me.

Darren then bent low and picked me up by my ass before swiftly turning and slamming me down onto the bed. He practically ripped his own shirt off, revealing a sexy, heavily chiseled and scarred chest and repositioned himself so that my leg was now bent over his shoulder as he continued to fuck me relentlessly. His hands then went to the hem of my nightgown and ripped it clean in half like it was paper, exposing everything.

With an animalistic growl, Darren took my wrists and pinned them on either side of my head while his head dipped low and he rubbed his face into my breasts. My back involuntarily arched as he took one of my nipples into his mouth, sucking hard until it peaked to his satisfaction. My breath came in and out in heavy little gasps as I felt myself on the cusp of one hell of an orgasm.

How I could ever find pleasure with a man like him, I have no idea. Somehow, in the midst of it all, I had trained myself to accept him because it was so much easier to accept his pleasure than to suffer his pain. There was no denying him. Ever. Otherwise, my pleasure fuck would instantly turn into a punishment fuck, and I had experienced enough of those to avoid them when I could.

I tried so hard to keep my moans down, to hide my pleasure, but somehow, he’d always find that spot of mine. That spot that could send me into overdrive in 3.5 seconds. My special little come button.

“Oh, fuck,” Darren groaned as he drilled into me, and before I knew it, I was coming like my life depended on it.

I moaned louder than I expected as the warm rush swept over me and I felt a tiny moment of bliss. Darren rode my waves and then flipped me onto my stomach, pulling my hips into his groin as he fucked me roughly from behind.

He moaned above me as he pumped in and out before gripping a fist full of my hair and jerking my head back to expose my neck. I felt his head dip low until his teeth found my throat and bit down hard. I shrieked with a moan as my fingers dug further into the sheets, grasping for something to hang on to.

When his teeth released my skin, his lips found my ear. “What have I repeatedly told you about using that word?” he growled.

Fear crept up my spine, allowing another gush of heat to rush to my core. My fear of him somehow quickly became the cause of my arousal as the two now came hand in hand. There was something so different about being afraid while you were being fucked – like fucking in public; it made everything that much more surreal. The rush I got from it was sometimes exactly what I needed. It was like fucking on a plane ... right before you knew it was about to crash.

Darren’s hand reached around my throat, his thumb lining up against my jaw as he gripped it tight, inevitably pulling me back toward him. “You’re mine,” he seethed and slapped my ass hard. I groaned loudly as he continued to pump into me, slow and hard, hitting that spot every time until I was on the verge of coming undone a second time. His hand finally made its way to my breast and pinched my nipple, causing me to gasp and jerk against him until he flipped me again onto my back without missing a beat.

Wrapping my legs around his torso, his thrusts quickly found my spot again, driving me wild and nearly begging for more. His hand shot back to my throat and held on tight as he continued to fuck me with everything he had. I had to give it to him. His stamina was incredible.

My hands wrapped around his wrist as he began to grip too tight; so tight I could feel my vision begin to blur and darken. But then I heard his voice.

“Oh fuck, Jaden. Come, now,” he rasped, loosening his grip on my throat but keeping it in place possessively.

The orgasm that came next was absolute euphoria. It washed over me slowly, but with a fierce intensity that rivaled my other orgasms. Darren found his release as he filled me up and then collapsed on top of me, his face buried in my hair that fanned out around my head.

We both laid there, exhausted and panting as we calmed down from our orgasmic state. When Darren finally lifted his face from my hair, he looked deep into my eyes, a longing within them I didn't recognize.

"Goddamn, princess, I am *never* letting you go," he said with conviction.

This much I knew, but one thing was still nagging at me that I had always wanted to know.

"Why? Why do you call me that?" I asked softly, shaking my head in wonder.

He knew how much I hated that pet name. I was no fucking princess. I never was and never wanted to be. Princesses required rescuing. And the real princess was my freedom. I was the knight in shining armor still battling the dragon that held it captive. A dragon named Darren Davis.

Darren slowly lowered his forehead to mine, resting it there for a moment before gazing down at me with amusement and adoration.

"Because your king has yet to make you his queen," he whispered simply with the slightest smile.

I didn't expect that response, yet somehow, that bit of Darren logic made perfect sense to me. And I had no idea how to reply to that.

He then gave me that sexy chuckle of his and kissed me something fierce. When he was done, and I was breathless, he pulled me toward the pillows and laid my head down on his chest. He wrapped my arm around his muscled torso and draped my leg over his thigh.

As my body melted into him, guilt flooded me like a tidal wave. I had just received pleasure from a man who was currently planning to kill my entire family. I felt weak and pathetic as a single tear slid down my cheek and fell onto Darren's chest. His arms slowly tightened around me as he could feel my anguish start to consume me. My tears fell consecutively, heavy with sorrow, guilt, and hopelessness. After everything he had done, he couldn't possibly be this cruel to me. He couldn't.

"Please ... please don't kill them, Darren," I pleaded softly, squeezing my eyes shut. "Please. I'll do anything."

I could hear Darren release a slow, heavy breath through his nose before he brought his lips to my head and kissed my temple.

“Shhh ... of course, you will,” he replied softly. “Now, go to sleep.”

Of course, I will ... because I’m already supposed to.

That night I cried myself to sleep in Darren’s arms while he comforted me with kisses and a gentle touch. I wanted to berate him, I wanted to push him away, and I wanted to fight him until the end of my days—until there was nothing left of me—but even the thought of all that was exhausting. So instead I closed my eyes and pretended to drift off to better times when I was happy and loved. Not owned and imprisoned.

Chapter Thirty-Six

Plan

The next morning, I woke up alone and sore as fuck. My entire body hurt while a sting of tenderness throbbed between my legs. I turned my body, resting my head on the pillow, and stared out the window. The sun was low in the sky, just rising above the water and creating a soft, warm glow in my room. I listened to the birds chirp and sing outside, their songs serenading me into a calm I wanted to drown myself in.

I laid there like that for the longest time, just listening and enjoying a small moment of peace that I rarely got to experience since coming into Darren's life. I never thought it was possible to hate someone so much yet need them at the same time. Darren comforted me through my tears last night, never saying a word as he rubbed my back and kissed my temple. I didn't know how he could comfort me knowing he was the cause of my pain, knowing he would continue to cause my pain when he could avoid it altogether. How he could even stand to look at himself in the mirror was a mystery to me.

He had to be a sociopath. It was the only explanation. How could he not feel a single ounce of remorse for me? There was no sympathy. No compassion. Just his never-ending will. What Darren wants, Darren gets, no matter the cost. I wanted to cost him everything—his money, his reputation, his heart, his mental status, and then his life. I wanted him to regret the day he ever laid eyes on me ... and one day soon, I swore I would see that.

Some hours later, it was past 8 a.m., and I decided it was time to get ready for the day. I rolled out of bed and stretched my body like a cat, rolling my shoulders and neck until the tension in my muscles eased away. I stood and padded over to the bathroom, used the toilet, and showered. I did everything I could to avoid my face in the mirror, but I knew I would have to look at myself eventually in order to cover the giant bruise I knew was there on the side of my cheekbone.

When I stepped out of the shower, I towel dried my hair and went to my vanity to begin the cover-up process, but when I raised my eyes to my reflection, I almost broke down in tears. Dark purple, green, and red smudged the side of my face in a massive bruise the size of a baseball, and I could see the exact spot where Darren's knuckles had made contact. They had broken the skin. I almost wanted to leave it uncovered just to spite him, to show him the damage he had done, hoping he might display a human side and express a little fucking guilt for once.

But unfortunately, I couldn't stand the sight of myself. I layered on the concealer, covering it up as best I could, but the dark shadow of purple still lingered under it all. I parted my wet hair so that my bangs would hang over the same side of my face that harbored the bruise in another attempt to hide it. I dried my hair and styled it into soft, loose curls, fanning them out around my shoulders and down my back. My hair was getting longer. It now reached well past my shoulder blades. I didn't typically grow it this long, preferring it to be only a few inches below my collarbone. It was easier to manage that way and was less annoying.

I chose a silky soft silvery blue sundress to wear and the nude flats I had finally broken in months before. I looked down at the diamond studded infinity ring from Tiffany's that Darren had gifted me so long ago. I wanted to chuck it into his mouth so he'd choke on it, but that wasn't gruesome enough of a death for me.

At 8:55 a.m., I slowly made my way down the stairs and found Darren sitting at the table with some paperwork in his hands. He was reading with a focused face when I finally sat down. When I scooted my chair in, he looked up from his work and smiled at me.

"Good morning," he said.

"Morning," I mumbled back and began to make myself some tea.

I could feel his eyes on me, scrutinizing me, but thankfully, my hair fell down the side of my face and blocked his vision from my eyes.

"Did you do something different with your hair?" he asked me.

I shrugged without looking at him. "I switched the part."

His eyes narrowed then for a moment before he finally leaned forward, reaching out with his hand and tucked my hair behind my ear to expose my bruised cheek. I didn't look at him. Not even when he gently gripped my chin and tilted my face up so he could get a better look at what he'd done. I managed to catch a glimpse of his bruise on his cheek, and it

was actually healing rather quickly. Darren was silent for a moment as he analyzed the damage, his thumb softly grazing the skin, causing me to reveal the tiniest wince. He released a heavy sigh as he stared at me, and for some reason, it sounded like regret.

“I’m sorry,” he said gently. “But I warned you what could happen if you didn’t listen to me.”

I scoffed at him. Like I actually gave a shit about his apology.

“I don’t want your sorry. I want you to let me go.”

Darren released an irritated sigh as he sat back in his chair, glaring at me.

“And that little request is exactly why I’m doing what I’m doing.”

“I’m sorry,” I said, not sure I even understood him, “but you’re going to kill my entire family because I want you to let me go? The fuck kind of logic is that?” I seethed.

“Watch your mouth,” he warned with a serious glare in his eye. “And I already told you. I’m eliminating the element that is causing you to regress from your life with me. I need you focused on the future, not the past.”

“And you think killing my family will ensure that I give in to you? Again, the fuck kind of logic is that!”

“Cuss one more time and your ass will match your cheek,” Darren growled, his threat causing me to curl my fists in my lap until they shook. “I expect that once you’re over your mourning period, you’ll realize there is nothing left for you to hold on to, no reason for you to try to escape me, and you will finally give up this senseless fight and give in to me.”

I shook my head at him, closing my eyes and fighting back tears while my fingers nearly broke from the tension in my fists.

“You have no idea how wrong you are,” I said, staring straight into his eyes with conviction. “I would *never* forgive you for this. I will always have a reason to get away from you, no matter what you do.”

“We’ll see about that.” He smirked.

“You can’t honestly expect me to just sit around and let you do this.”

“I don’t imagine there is much you can do about it,” he said taking a sip of his coffee before setting it back down on the table.

“Don’t underestimate me, Darren. That will be your biggest mistake,” I replied confidently.

His hand was on my throat before I could even blink.

“And challenging me will be yours,” he snarled with absolute malice.

His eyes blazed with an intense anger as his grip on my throat quickly became a vise. I didn’t even bother to try to stop him. I just scowled at him, holding back my tongue as I fought for oxygen, hoping he’d let go.

After what felt like hours, he finally released me and stood, putting his suit jacket on over his white dress shirt and black tie. My throat burned as I coughed and gasped for air, tears beginning to build in my eyes, but I refused to let them fall.

“I have to go away on a business trip tomorrow. I’ll be gone a few days.”

Bye, Felicia.

And then Darren’s mouth dropped real low to my ear.

“Maybe if you behave while I’m gone, I won’t make you watch,” he said, but I could taste the venom in his words as he spoke about murdering my family. He was so good at motivational speeches.

“How nice of you,” I answered, my eyes looking straight ahead.

Darren then roughly gripped my jaw and kissed me hard on the mouth. His tongue forced its way through my lips and tangled with my own. I felt the heat rush through me and melt into my core as his thumb dug into the side of my jaw while his lips made a victim out of mine. He then released my face and looked down at me.

“You’re to remain inside today,” he said and I immediately scowled at him, only for Darren to return the gesture. “Be thankful I don’t lock you in your room instead. I’ll see you at dinner.” He sneered and then walked out the door, Scott and another guard hot on his heels.

Not more than ten seconds after he left, David came out with my breakfast and placed it down in front of me before walking away without so much as a glance. My plate contained scrambled eggs, a bowl of sliced mixed fruit, and some toast. I had zero intentions to eat any of it, wanting to spite Darren as much as I could, but I had barely eaten anything yesterday and I needed to keep my strength up. I swigged back my vitamins, the burn in my newly sensitive throat making it hard to swallow, and pulled my plate forward. I angrily ate my eggs and scarfed down my fruit, nearly shoving my plate across the table when I was done.

Since I was now once again confined to the walls of the house, I got up and started to wander around, looking at random things, trying to piece together a way to get the fuck out of here. What could I use to successfully

escape this place? I needed to break out of this goddamn collar like now. I was running out of time, and I needed to figure something out fast.

I wandered for hours, sat around to think, wandered some more, and then reluctantly ate lunch in the dining room. Pascal could tell I was stressed, so he made me a bowl of homemade chicken noodle soup. Hands down the best soup I'd ever had, especially since it was easy for me to digest.

I then proceeded to aimlessly wander the house some more. I passed several guards here and there and the cleaning staff, but no one paid any attention to me. Some of the staff even seemed to hurry away from me when they saw me coming. Didn't that make me feel special? They'd probably gotten wind of what happened to the gardener and feared any sort of interaction with me would create the same fate for them. I didn't blame them. They were probably right.

I meandered into the theater and considered watching a movie, but it would only distract me rather than inspire a genius escape plan. I left the theater in a disappointed huff, cutting around a corner too fast and nearly tripped over my own feet. My toes on my right foot began to sting as I looked down to examine it. It was then that I realized I had fully ruined my shoe, the thin black rubber sole now peeling off the tip of my shoe. And then suddenly I froze.

Rubber.

Rubber could block an electric charge. It might not be able to block a GPS signal, but it might be all I needed to get the fuck out just long enough to contact my family. My heart suddenly started to pace. Why hadn't I thought of this before? I was too focused on getting the damn collar off rather than thinking of a temporary way around it.

Rubber may only be my temporary path to salvation, but maybe that was all I really needed. If I could execute a plan properly, I might be able to escape the estate, but it wouldn't stop Darren or his men from finding me. Unless by some miracle I found something to cut the collar off before the GPS gave me away. I seriously doubted it.

I nonchalantly made my way back to my room and kicked my shoes off by the bed, nearly swiping them underneath it. The only place I could think of that the cameras couldn't see. I then sat down at my vanity and looked at myself in the mirror. My eyes landed on the giant bruise on the side of my face, and as I stared intently into the mirror, focusing on

everything I currently hated about my life ... I finally lost it. I screamed and abruptly stood up, whipping all the makeup, brushes, and tools from the vanity, and knocking them all over the floor, deliberately managing to get several things under the bed.

I gripped my hair and paced the room back and forth, my chest heaving up and down, and adding further evidence to my pretend temper tantrum. I knew eventually Darren would be watching this, and I didn't want to give him any kind of suspicion of what I was doing before I was even able to accomplish it. To be honest, though, it wasn't hard to fake.

After several minutes of pacing the room and nearly ripping my own hair out, I finally collapsed on the chaise and sat with my head in my hands over my knees. I shed a few tears, which was understandably easy, and eventually tried to get a grip. When I felt I'd displayed a fine temper tantrum, I began to wipe my eyes with my hands and started to slowly pick up all the makeup I had shoved to the floor. I crawled on my hands and knees until every last blush, brush, and palette was picked up and put back neatly on my vanity. Then I bent low to look under my bed to find several missing lip gloss tubes and eye shadows, along with my broken nude flats.

I slipped under the bed until half my body was covered and immediately began pulling at the remaining glue and strings that held the sole to the shoe. It actually ripped away fairly easy. I quickly removed the other sole with the pair of tweezers and a metal nail file I had conveniently swiped under the bed. I now had two thin rubber soles in my hands, the possible key to my escape. I placed them between my collar and neck and they fit perfectly snug around my throat.

Now, I just needed to find a way to mold them together. I needed some super glue or even a sewing kit would do. I slipped out from under my bed and started rummaging through all my drawers and cabinets, but found nothing in my room, closet, or bathroom. I tried to make it look like I wasn't looking for something, but it probably wouldn't convince Darren. Eventually, I wandered back out into the halls until I found one of the offices and started randomly opening drawers, pretending I was just bored and completely disinterested, yet still found nothing of use. But when I got to the second office, my motives were finally noticed.

"Ms. Jaden," I heard a serious voice say behind me and immediately turned to the guard now standing in the doorway.

“Yes?” I said, addressing him. It was the same guy who had pulled me out of the house the other day. The same guy who helped torture the gardener.

“Looking for something?” he asked me expectedly.

Crap, they were on to me.

“Oh, I was just looking for a sewing kit or maybe some fabric glue,” I said innocently, shrugging my shoulders. “There’s a tear in my dress that I’d like to fix.”

I was sure I could find a tear in this flimsy material somewhere.

The guard aimed his eyes at me with a cautious glare.

“Mr. Davis will buy you a new dress. There is no need to repair it.”

I gave a huff of a laugh, trying to play it off. “Oh, there’s no need for a new dress. It’s just a little tear. I can easily fix it myself.”

“Miss,” the guard pressed with more warning in his voice. “Mr. Davis will buy you a new dress. Per his orders, please find something else to do with your time. Otherwise, you will have to spend the remainder of the day in your room until he returns.” With that, the guard left and disappeared from my sight.

Goddamn, Darren. Now, I had tipped him off. Fuck.

I gave up my pursuit and trudged my way back to my room. What the fuck was I going to do now? I had to find something to hold those soles in place. Otherwise, they would fall out and I’d be fucked and probably dead. Fuck, what else could I do? What resources did I have access to? My hands balled into fists as I paced my room, my fake-ass nails digging into my skin until the pain rearranged my focus. I opened my hands and looked down at my nails and a small lightbulb in my head turned on.

I might not have access to any tape or glue, but maybe some nail glue

...

I immediately went and changed into some workout clothes and headed down to the gym. I then proceeded to beat the ever-living piss out of the punching bags, no gloves required. I sent the bag flying all over the place as I kicked and punched with unwrapped hands. Darren still had yet to provide me with a proper pair of gloves so this was what he got. I threw several palm-heel strikes at the bag until my knuckles tore and bled, and even then, I didn’t stop, too pissed off and too determined to break the one thing that might actually save my family. I threw in a few elbows here and there not to make it seem so obvious I was actually trying to break a nail.

And then I finally felt the snap. It hurt like a bitch when one broke, but it had to be done. I looked down at my left hand and smiled at the busted nail. Blood and bruises covered my knuckles, but it was a spectacular kind of pain. A worthy pain that resulted in success. I then completed my workout with a five-mile run on the treadmill and headed back upstairs for a long, hot shower.

I redid my hair and makeup, caking on the concealer again to hide my bruise, and made sure my hair parted the same way. I left my busted nail sharp and cracked to make sure Darren noticed; though I had a feeling the sight of my knuckles would draw his attention first. I'd cleaned all the blood off, disinfected it with rubbing alcohol, and applied an antiseptic. He'd probably be furious since obviously he was the only one allowed to put bruises on me but fuck him. Maybe next time, he should provide me with the proper hand protection I asked for and then we wouldn't have this problem.

At 5:27 p.m., I made my way downstairs, sat at the dinner table, and waited for Darren to come home. I was all types of pissed off and anxious as I sat there waiting for him like the good little dog I was. And then finally at 5:32 p.m. the master of my universe walked through the door talking on his cell phone. His voice was short and clipped with the person on the other end, making it hard to tell if he was actually angry or if that was just his serious business voice. I'd heard it often and knew that just because he was serious didn't necessarily mean he was mad. It just meant he was dangerously close.

He ended his conversation and sat down, releasing an exasperated sigh and quickly changed his demeanor. He looked at me with absolute adoration. It was annoying as fuck.

"And how's my princess?" he said to me with a smirk.

I wanted to tell him to eat shit and die, but we were already going to fight. Might as well ease into it.

"Tired," I said lightly as I shrugged, keeping my hands deliberately in my lap for the time being.

"Did you try taking a nap?" he asked me as he stood up and poured himself a short glass of bourbon from the open bar on the wall beside the table.

"No," I said. "It's hard to sleep when all I get are nightmares."

Darren gave me a knowing look.

“They will pass, Jaden. Eventually, you will become desensitized to such things and they won’t bother you anymore.”

“What do you mean I’ll become desensitized? Do you plan to have me sit through more of those torture sessions?”

Darren took a sip of his bourbon as he casually leaned back against the bar, one hand gripping the edge of the solid marble top.

“Yes,” he said simply, lowering his glass to look at me.

“Why?” I asked, saddened and shocked all at the same time.

“I’ve recently realized it will benefit the both of us,” he replied.

“How do you figure that?”

“Because in my world, such sensitivity is considered a weakness, and I can’t have that. My world is very dark and bloody, and though I plan to hide it from you as best I can, there will be times when I simply can’t do that. You will inevitably be exposed to the gruesome and deadly moments of my life, and I’d rather have you prepared than to have to deal with you having a panic attack because you were unprepared in an unexpected situation. It could get you killed, and I will not allow that.”

I scoffed at him. “First of all, we both know I’m no little bitch.” I saw his face twitch with my cussing, but I continued quickly to distract him. “When I was taken, I reacted instinctively and refused to go down without a fight. I didn’t curl up and cower. I’m trained with guns and am plenty used to gunfire. Not to mention I took out two of your guards at the same time during the auction with ease. So don’t try to tell me I can’t handle a little blood and gore.”

“Then why did you react the way you did when you saw what was happening to that stupid fuck of a gardener,” Darren practically growled.

“Because I was the cause of it,” I replied. “He was only trying to help me and look where that got him. I could probably watch any one of your guys get tortured all day. Hell, I’d probably help. But when it comes to someone who’s innocent, that’s a different story.”

“You better be careful what you wish for, Jaden,” Darren said as he sauntered back over to his seat, his eyes never leaving mine. “I might just take you up on that.”

I gave him a barely-there smirk as he sat down.

David then brought out our dinner and set the plates down in front of us, returning silently to the kitchen. I reached out for my table napkin next

to my plate and saw Darren's eyes light up. He promptly grabbed my wrist and examined my knuckles and busted manicure.

"What the *fuck* did you do to your hand?" he scowled at me.

I shrugged. "Well, Darren, you see, that's what happens when you punch a heavy bag over and over again without proper hand protection. The same hand protection I asked you for several weeks ago."

"So you thought you'd damage your beautiful skin just to spite me?" he nearly roared. My gut was flipping around like a damn roller coaster, but I remained steadfast.

"No, that was not my intention. I was angry, and I needed an outlet. It's not healthy for me to keep all that rage bottled up, so I took it out on the bag. It's not my fault I didn't have the proper gear."

Darren glared at me fiercely, on the rise of some horrible threat, but I beat him to it.

"Oh, what's the matter, Darren? Jealous that something else left bruises on my skin and not you?" I taunted him. Yeah, I knew that was stupid, but I was in a mood.

He abruptly stood and slammed my bruised cheek down on the table. I groaned out loud as the pain radiated throughout my face. I kept my hands on the table and tried to push myself up to release some of a pressure, but Darren wasn't letting up.

"Careful, princess. I just may leave you with a couple more."

"Yeah? Go ahead. Keep reminding me of why I hate you so much."

Darren leaned in low, getting closer to my ear as he stood above me.

"You still think I give a shit about how you feel about me? Your feelings do not matter unless I decide they do. And if this is the way you're going to train to inevitably harm yourself, then your time in my gym will be revoked until you learn to control your so-called "rage." Now, keep your mouth shut, and we might actually have a pleasant dinner together for once. Otherwise, you can spend the rest of the night in your cage."

I grunted underneath him as I fought my hardest not to spit any shit back at him.

"Have I made myself clear?" he gritted.

"Yes, Darren," I seethed through clenched teeth.

"Good girl," he approved and released me, returning to his seat and unbuttoning his suit jacket.

He sent a quick text on his phone and began to eat his dinner while I sat there pissed off and stared at my water glass. I pushed my food around on my plate, my appetite now completely absent.

“Eat, Jaden,” Darren ordered with a glare.

I released an irritated sigh and took a small bite of my lemon chicken, tasting absolutely nothing as I chewed. Darren went back to eating his dinner, satisfied I had listened to him.

Dinner was quiet, awkward even, but thankfully uneventful. I somehow managed to finish most of my dinner and Darren only grumbled a little bit about it. When we were finished, he wiped his mouth and stood up.

“I have some work to do. I’ll find you later,” he said as he kissed the top of my head and disappeared upstairs.

I sat there for a while, leaning back against the chair with my hands splayed out on the table. I didn’t even care to move when David came out to clear our plates and didn’t even bother to look at him.

Eventually, I got up and went outside and onto the patio. I sat on the long, cushioned couch and laid down to look up at the sky, ignoring the guard who remained off to the side. The sky was starting to darken as the sun was already setting beyond the clouds. There was a slight chill in the wind, so I reached over to turn on the gas fire pit, watching as the flames licked at the fake wood that quickly surrounded the patio in warmth.

I felt my heart begin to race as I thought about the impending and very real opportunity of escape tomorrow. I knew Darren would schedule the Russians to come back as soon as possible. They would definitely be here tomorrow, which means I might actually get the fuck out of here. I didn’t expect to escape Darren completely, that would be too much to ask for. All I wanted was enough time to contact and warn my family. That was my only goal. If I could accomplish that, then Darren’s wrath, when he found me, would be worth it. I just prayed to God that Jason would answer the phone when I called.

I tried to decide what would be better: to flee with one of Darren’s sports cars or bikes. A car would be less dangerous but more difficult to hide and it would be easier for them to run me down. If I were on a bike, it would be more dangerous for them to apprehend me because I could fall off and die and then Darren wouldn’t have anyone to obsess over anymore. I could maneuver in ways a car couldn’t, and I could easily hide it behind a dumpster or something while I ran to find a phone. I could just imagine

revving up the engine now, the soft roaring purr echoing through my ears and bringing a smile to my face. Thankfully, the keys all hung on the wall next to the door. Easy access.

I would probably do it at night when the guards thought I was asleep and unsuspecting. I could turn the headlights off the bike and disappear into the night. Hopefully, it would be cloudy tomorrow. Darren would also already be in his new location by then, wherever the fuck that would be, so he'd be useless from where he was. He'd probably even take Scott with him and just leave me with the guards.

But there was no way I could slip away undetected. I would have to create some kind of distraction. The heat of the fire caught my attention and then I smiled. What better way than by burning Darren's house down? He did have a sprinkler system installed inside, but I didn't need to burn the whole thing down. Just enough to cause a distraction. There was a giant plastic bottle of rubbing alcohol in my bathroom. There were matches in my dresser for the candles in my room. And there was a glass bottle-like vase for the fresh flowers on my vanity.

Yep, I had everything I needed to make a Molotov cocktail ...

The wheels in my head turned with devious determination as I mapped out my entire escape plan. All I needed now was the glue to hold it all together ... more specifically, the nail glue my Russian friends would have when they repaired my broken nail.

Tomorrow could very well be one of the most important days of my life, as it could mean the life or death of everyone I held dear. Tomorrow ... I might actually save them.

After an hour of laying out and pondering my escape route and potential setbacks, the sun had finally set and the stars now speckled the sky in a diamond-like radiance and I randomly wondered if Jason was looking up at the same sky as I was right now. I kind of hoped not. I hoped he was getting some actual sleep in our bed right now since he was several hours ahead of me back home.

A few minutes later, Darren walked out on the patio and my shiver instantly returned.

"There you are." He smiled deviously.

"Here I am," I replied blankly, not taking my eyes from the stars.

"You've been out here quite a while," he said, sauntering over to me with his hands in his pockets.

I shrugged. "It's nice out."

With my body lying completely across the patio couch, there was no place left for Darren to sit, but of course, he didn't let that stop him as he lifted me up by my shoulders and sat down under them, resting my head in his lap. He nonchalantly tucked my hair behind my ears and began to lightly play with my loose strands. Fuck, if that didn't make me want to grow a tail and start purring.

I closed my eyes and enjoyed the sensation of his fingers through my hair, attempting to relax under his touch. He seemed to be in a better mood, and I did not intend to disrupt that, not when I was so close to getting out. I needed all of my privileges while I still had them. I was sure they would completely disappear again once Darren had recovered me. Things would be bad. I could feel it like a fog rolling in and surrounding me. But I didn't care about the consequences because the consequences of doing nothing would be far greater than any punishment Darren would subject me to.

"What are you thinking about?" he suddenly asked me softly.

As if I was going to honestly tell him I was conspiring my escape plan. But I had a much better lie on the tip of my tongue.

"I'm thinking about what makes you tick," I replied matter-of-factly.

"I told you that would be a waste of your time," he said, looking down at me.

"I'll decide when my time is wasted or not, thank you very much," I countered with a bit of humor in my voice.

Darren actually chuckled above me. Thank fuck. We were silent for a moment until I finally got the courage to speak again.

"You were groomed for this life," I stated as I looked out at the horizon.

"Yes, I was," he answered.

"Are you happy with it? The way your life turned out?"

Darren scrutinized me with his eyes, and I changed the angle of my head to meet his gaze.

"I suppose," he replied, yet there was uncertainty in his voice. "But for a while, something was missing and I didn't know what it was."

He started to curl a strand of my hair around his finger, but it wasn't meant to be sentimental. It was a possessive gesture. Everything he did was. Like Gollum when he held his "precious" in his hands.

"And you're hoping I'll fill the void?" I asked without looking at him.

“I think it’s pretty clear you already have.”

“And what about the void in my life?”

“I will do everything I can to fill it,” he answered with conviction.

I slowly sat up from his lap and looked him right in the eye. He was never going to fill it. He would only make it bigger.

“And what do you plan to fill it with? More rules? Chains ... blood, death?”

“Jaden ...” he warned.

“I’m not trying to fight,” I spoke quickly, my open palms up in the air in surrender. “But I do have a hard time following your logic. If I understood where it came from, I wouldn’t have to question it as often as I do.”

“Jaden,” he started, pressing his hand on his knee and leaning in on it, his eyes completely focused on mine. “I grew up in a world that breeds monsters. I was taught how to fight, fuck, and rule without fear or regrets, and I’ve never looked back. I know what I do is wrong, but I simply *do not* care. The world is mine for the taking, and I already own so much of it as it is.” And then his face got real serious. “I do not have time for weakness, Jaden. I will do whatever it takes to secure my interests and investments and should a problem ever dare present itself, I will eliminate it without prejudice.”

I just stared at him intently, trying to piece him together. His hand gently caressed my bruised face, his thumb tracing along my cheek as his eyes softened their gaze at me.

“To put it bluntly, I am simply a man who takes what he wants, when he wants, because he can, princess. I can’t make it any plainer than that.”

And then his eyes could no longer hold my gaze. I looked away from him, suddenly sad and somewhat disappointed. But Darren didn’t let my mind wander far as he slowly leaned in for a deep and sensual kiss – the kind of kiss that made me forget my own name.

Both of his large hands now held my face in place as his tongue dipped into my mouth, claiming everything it could touch. Before I realized it, he had me pinned underneath him with my hands against the side of his muscled rib cage. He kissed me with a gentle urgency, telling me that he would miss me tomorrow when he left.

After dismissing the guard, he fucked me under the stars in a way that I could almost describe as making love. He was soft and gentle, caressing

me and kissing my entire body with love and adoration. It felt strange to me, but I didn't object, preferring a light rainstorm to a thunderstorm for once.

I didn't argue with him for the rest of the night, and when we were both thoroughly satisfied, he carried me up to his room where we fell asleep without a word. He held me close to his chest for the entire night as if he was afraid to let go; as if he was afraid I might slip away. He had no idea how right he was.

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Chapter Thirty-Seven

Prepare

The following morning, Darren and I had breakfast together after another long fucking session. He informed me that the Russians would arrive around 1 p.m. to fix my nail and fill in the rest as well as trim my hair. I tried hard not to smile at the sweet smell of victory knowing my manipulation could still work.

I asked if I could pick the color again, but this time, he said no. Apparently, he didn't care too much for the dark blood red color I chose last time. Darren also confirmed that nothing in my schedule would change while he was gone. Breakfast, lunch, and dinner would still be at the same times, and I was to listen to the guards unless I wanted to spend the remainder of his absence in my room. I was to be in bed by eleven, and he forbade me to use his gym until my hands healed. Too bad I had the slowest healing skin ever. It was my stupid porcelain pigmentation.

But it didn't really matter. After today, he probably wouldn't allow me to do anything ever again.

When breakfast was finished, Darren stood, buttoning his suit jacket and reaching out for my hand. I reluctantly took it, and he swiftly pulled me from my chair to him. He looked down at me with a serious look in his eyes, and it almost made me retreat into myself, but I refused to show it. Darren then took my face in his hands and kissed me. I could sense the anxiety in his kiss as this would be the first time he would be gone for this amount of time. A lot could happen in three days, and I was going to make sure of it.

When he released me, an intense glare emanated from his eyes.

"Please, behave yourself, Jaden," he practically pleaded. "Because if you try anything while I'm gone, I swear to God ..." He let it waver for a second and continued on, shaking his head. "If you think I'm bad now, you have no idea how much worse it will get should you try anything foolish. Do not disappoint me," he finished.

None of this was a surprise and my mind was already prepared for it. What it wasn't prepared for was the loss of my family.

"I understand," I finally answered.

"Good girl," he approved, placing his lips against my temple.

He finally kissed the top of my head and pulled back. "I'll see you in three days," he said and then walked out the door.

And as soon as I heard the door shut behind him, I released a gigantic breath of relief. Come nightfall, I would be the fuck out of here. I felt all my anxiety begin to build inside of me, and I needed to get a hold of my nerves before they destroyed me. I had a couple of hours before the Russians would be here, and since Darren had uplifted my ban on going outside, I went for a run on the beach to clear my head.

I ran until I could hear my heartbeat drumming away in my ears. My blood was rushing, and I felt myself begin to panic. What if I failed? What if I got caught before I managed to get my message out? I didn't even want to think about how bad it could get then.

To cool myself off, I literally just plopped myself in the water and floated over the sand. I pulled my ponytail out and let my hair flow through the water, my wet strands now floating around my face. The water felt perfect as it cooled down my core temperature and relaxed my anxiety.

My body drifted along the shore with the water. As it pushed me toward the sand and pulled me back into the waves, I closed my eyes to listen to the sound of the ocean and the birds above me. I was calm, peaceful, and ready for what had to be done. But after a few minutes of pure serenity, I was interrupted.

"Miss Jaden!" I heard one of the guards call out to me. "You are not wearing proper swim attire! Please exit the water!"

Say what? I actually had to be in a bathing suit to go swimming? Since the fuck when?

I looked up at the guard who was standing just beyond the sand and almost told him to fuck off. But I didn't need the aggravation. Not right now. I rolled my eyes and stood up from the water, wringing my hair out and then shaking it like a dog would. I walked over toward the grass to find the guard, whom I had recognized as the same guard who addressed me yesterday, holding a towel out to me. I think his name was Eric? I took the towel from him and immediately began drying off.

“Since when do I need to be in a bathing suit to go swimming?” I asked him as I dried my hair with the towel.

“Since Mr. Davis said so. Now, come on,” he replied, ushering me toward the grass.

I swear to God, Darren cared about the dumbest shit sometimes.

“What time is it?” I asked him as he escorted me back to the patio.

“11:56. Pascal is preparing your lunch for you now,” he said sharply.

I nodded. “I’ll just have it on the patio,” I said.

“I’ll inform the staff,” he replied.

My lunch consisted of a small Cobb salad with a lot of avocado and barely any ranch dressing. I also had a cup of mixed fruit and a yogurt with granola. I fucking hated how my food selections were always healthy. I typically ate healthy even before Darren, but there were plenty of times when I would let loose and put myself in a diabetic food coma. What I wouldn’t give for a giant bacon cheeseburger and a fucking beer.

After lunch, I had about a half an hour before my appointment, so I went upstairs to wash the salt water from my hair and body. I grabbed a black t-shirt and black skort from my drawers and walked over to my bed to pretend to get a good look at the time on my clock. I then bent down, placed my clothes on the floor next to the bed and pretended to scratch and observe my ankle. I then quickly slipped my hand under my bed and grabbed the two soles of my shoes, sneaking them between my clothes and heading into the bathroom. I placed my clothes on the counter and proceeded to take a shower. When I was done, I made it seem like I simply changed my mind and put on a loose gray dress. Since Darren wouldn’t be around, I didn’t bother with much makeup, just enough to cover my bruised face.

By the time I was done and ready, the Russians were being led into my room without so much as a knock. The ladies strolled in with smiling faces while Eric gave me a warning glare from outside before shutting the door.

Don’t worry, buddy, you’ll really be loving me by the end of the night.

As the women began to set up, Irina turned to me and began combing my wet hair, but as she did, she stopped and noticed the large make-up covered bruise on the side of my face. Her eyes immediately lit up with concern as her face began to soften. Her hand reached up for my cheek and her thumb grazed just along the outside, showing me her concern.

I put my hand on her wrist and looked at her with caution in my eyes. I slowly shook my head, telling her I was okay and not to make a spectacle out of it. She then removed her hand and gave me a quick little nod, understanding my body language. She went back to combing my hair and parting it for the cut.

When Anya was ready, I sat down at the table where Irina continued to trim away at my strands while Anya took care of my nails. I eyed the nail glue that was conveniently close to me and I hoped I could swipe it without either of them noticing.

Anya made quick work of my nails, but this time, she painted them a bright Barbie pink. My face immediately turned to disgust at the hideous color. I knew Darren chose that on purpose to piss me off. Whelp, I was really about to piss him off later tonight.

When Anya and Irina finished, my hair was perfectly styled and my nails were back to their old Barbie ways. As Anya and Irina packed up, I managed to slip my hand over the nail glue and quickly put it in my pocket. Neither one of them noticed a thing. Anya was always so quick to pack everything up, her nerves always getting the best of her, so I doubted she would even notice.

Before they left, Irina gave me one last look of concern, her worry for my well-being refreshing but uncomfortable for me. I didn't want them to end up the same way the gardener had. I gave Irina a quick, sly wink, and she seemed to receive it well.

The rest of my day went without issue. I hid the glue in my bathroom cabinet and went down to the theater to finally watch the entire final season of *Sons of Anarchy*, but it just made me anxious to ride off on one of Darren's motorcycles. I had to admit the ending did piss me off, but I could see it coming a mile away.

I had dinner alone in the dining room, a guard standing watch not far behind. It felt like I was rarely out of someone's sights; the only place that didn't contain a guard was my bedroom, but I was sure they were watching me through the cameras. I just hoped it wasn't every second of every day.

Around ten o'clock, I headed back to my room, washed my face, brushed my teeth, and got ready for bed. I looked at the bottled vase on my dresser, noticing the flowers now looked somewhat old enough to throw out. I took the bottle into the bathroom, dumped out the water, threw the flowers in the trash, and left the bottle on my counter. I then returned to my

room, turned on my fireplace, and sat down in front of the flames to meditate for a while. I felt the warmth of the fire as I listened to my breathing. My body relaxed, one muscle at a time, as I quieted my mind to perfect silence.

In and out, my chest slowly rose and fell with each deep breath I took, and within ten minutes, I was calm and ready. I went to bed at 11:00 p.m. on the dot without a fuss, but of course, I barely got a moment's worth of sleep—too damn amped up.

I basically stared at the clock until 2:59 clicked to 3:00 a.m.

Game on.

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Chapter Thirty-Eight

Escape

Like a cat on a rooftop, I silently slipped from my sheets, grabbed the matches from my drawer, clutching them in my fist, and headed to the bathroom. I quickly used the toilet, making it seem like I was just going to the bathroom. I had no idea if someone was watching me 24/7. I really doubted it, but after tonight, I wouldn't be surprised if someone had to start following me around everywhere I went.

I kept the bathroom lights off as I took the two soles of my shoes and began to glue the ends together with the nail glue. They stuck together almost instantly. I allowed the glue to dry as I grabbed the glass-bottled vase and placed it in the cabinet. My heart began to pound away in my chest as I filled the bottle with a little bath oil and lots of rubbing alcohol. I then tucked a thin washcloth into the bottle, allowing it to soak in the solution and left the rest hanging out of the top. I then walked to the window of my bathroom and opened the screen.

My bedroom led out to the patio, and right below my bathroom window was the barbecue equipped with a full propane tank. I set the bottle down on the window ledge, took a deep breath ... and struck the match. This was it. No going back now.

I lit the cloth and threw the match out the window. I watched the flame claim the makeshift wick, realizing that after this, everything was going to change. All it would take was one final push and everything would quite literally explode. Consequences be damned. I wanted Darren to know he wasn't fucking with no ordinary bitch. He wanted a challenge? Well, good because I was about to turn up the heat. I took one final breath, releasing it slowly through my mouth, and finally smiled as I lightly pushed the bottle with my fingertip and watched it fall out of the window.

I listened as the glass shattered and the flames engulfed the patio as well as the side of the house. And then, not more than a few seconds later, a large boom echoed from outside sending my heart into a frenzy, as I could

practically feel the flames from my bathroom window. As if a starter pistol had gone off, I immediately ran to the counter, pulling my hair up into a high-knotted bun and quickly slipping my rubber protector under my collar. It fit perfectly snug. I soon heard the shouting of the guards as they quickly collaborated to contain the fire below my window. I then quickly changed into my clothes, laced up my Nikes, and bolted from my bedroom.

I could hear shouting and orders being given as I stealthily made my way down the stairs, through the halls and to the garage, adrenaline pumping through my veins so loud I could hear it. My senses were hyper aware now as I heard two guards coming my way, and I immediately hid in the shadows of the house, watching them pass right by me as they headed for my bedroom.

When I finally reached the garage undetected, I pressed the button opening one of the many doors, grabbed the key to the Panigale that was hanging from the hooks on the wall, climbed on the bike, and roared that motherfucker to life. Feeling the throttle in my hand, I revved the engine, more excitement and adrenaline pumping through me as I put the bike in first and tore out of the garage like a bat out of Hell.

By the time I made it down the driveway, I was already in third, and as soon as I hit the sensor for the gate below the cement, it opened like the pearly white gates welcoming me to Heaven, except I was only just escaping from Hell.

I almost squinted as I waited for the shock to come and cause me to crash, probably killing me on impact, but all I felt was a low vibration that lasted about five seconds and that was it. Relief rushed through me as I realized my plan had worked. One shock was all the collar would administer, and I hoped once Darren found out I was gone and on a bike, he would deactivate it for fear it might actually be the cause of my death.

I peeled out of the gate, nearly squealing the tires as I did, and turned right, remembering from the first day I had been brought here where we had turned. Now that I was on an open, but most likely private road, I screamed out loud in victory. I had fucking done it! No shock! No struggle! No fuck ups! I was actually out of the estate! I couldn't believe I had really pulled it off. But I wasn't out of the woods yet. I had a mission to complete and once that mission was over, it didn't matter if Darren found me again. At least, my family would know to disappear and Darren could no longer hold anything over my head as leverage again.

Kicking the bike into fourth and then fifth gear, I turned my headlights off and made my way through the winding road until I came over a hill and could see what looked like a small town up ahead with a perfect view of a lit-up San Diego beyond it. Perfect.

As I neared the town, fear rushed through me. What if one of the cops here recognized me? I'd surely be fucked. I slowed the bike down and turned off the road lights as I turned down an alley street, not far from a small quiet looking 7-11 before parking the bike behind a big green dumpster.

Darkness shrouded the little town, as there weren't many streetlights around. Constantly scanning the area, I quietly ran my way across the street and headed into the convenience store, my heart pounding in my ears. I was greeted by a young cashier; a girl barely out of her teens and obviously having a ton of fun during her midnight shift. I walked up to her and smiled.

"Hi, I'm sorry to bother you, but my car broke down, and of course, my cell phone is dead. Is there a phone I could use?" I smiled sweetly at her, acting as if I was really in a jam, and I really was as well as short for fucking time.

"Yeah, sure," she said slowly, giving me an odd look as she tucked her long blond hair behind her ears. She turned to grab the phone off the counter behind her and hesitantly handed it to me. Yeah, I must look absolutely crazy with these fucking soles around my neck and a giant bruise on my cheek. I hadn't even bothered to cover it up before I left. No time for that shit right now.

"Oh, thank you so much," I said dramatically and then sauntered away down one of the aisles to hide and began to dial Jason's number.

My body shivered with anxiety as I held the phone to my ear and prayed like hell he'd answer. It rang five times and I was beginning to grow nervous as I feared I wouldn't even get to speak to him. But on the sixth ring, and to my relief, he answered.

"Hello?" came a sad low, sleepy voice. It was him. It was his voice and my heart stopped momentarily as I had almost forgotten how it sounded. "Hello? Who is this?" came the voice again, and I shook my head in an attempt to escape the ice that had suddenly consumed my body.

"Jason?" I practically gasped.

There was a pause. I almost panicked.

"Jaden? Jaden, is that you?" He sounded confused and scared.

“Yeah, Jason, it’s me, but listen, I don’t have a lot of time-”

“Holy fuck! I knew you were alive! Where are you? Are you all right? What happened? Where-”

I had to cut him off.

“Jason, stop, I don’t have a lot of time. I’m fine, but I won’t be unless you listen to me very carefully right now.”

“What’s going on? Where are you?”

“Jason, I was kidnapped and sold into human trafficking. I was purchased by a very dangerous man who is keeping me hostage.”

“Who has you, Jaden? Who? I will fucking kill them!”

“Jason, stop and listen to me! You need to disappear. He’s planning to kill my entire family to bring me to heel. You need to warn *everyone* and tell them to run.”

“I don’t understand, Jaden. What’s this guy’s name? Who is he?”

“I don’t want to tell you, Jason. If I tell you, you will get involved, and I can’t have that. You have to disappear, please, for my sake.”

“Jaden, goddamn it, tell me who the miserable fuck is who took you so I can kill him and bring you home!”

“Jason, you *cannot* come looking for me. If he finds you, he will make me watch him kill you just to spite me. And believe me, Jason, if you don’t disappear now, he *will* find you. He has connections everywhere, including the police. Please don’t make me go through that.”

I suddenly heard sirens in the background, and my panic began to rise all over again as I kept my eyes glued to the windows.

“Listen to me. Take all of our savings and leave the country. Do not go to the police or the FBI, I don’t trust them. He has informants everywhere. Take my mom and brothers and go to Stuttgart like you’ve always wanted to. I will find you there. It may take me a few years, but knowing you’re still alive will give me the motivation I need to keep going. I risked a lot to escape him so I can warn you, but there’s a GPS tracker on me so he’ll find me soon. Please don’t make this escape to have been in vain. Please, Jason.”

Jason was silent for a few seconds, his voice shaking when he finally spoke.

“I don’t know if I can do that. I can’t just abandon you.”

“You’re not abandoning me. You’re removing the leverage he has over me from the equation. If I have nothing left to lose, then I’m that much

more dangerous. I will bring him down, Jason, I promise you, but I can't do that if he can continue to hold you against me. Do you understand?"

He didn't say anything, and I could tell he was debating with himself over this.

"Jason! I'm serious!" I yelled at him.

"Yes, all right, fine," he finally said, and it broke my heart to fucking pieces.

I could hear the sirens getting closer and panic rose all over again.

"Listen, I've got to go. Warn everyone, pack up, and leave right this fucking second. Get my family out of the country now. Don't wait. I will find you, I promise. Just don't give up on me, okay?"

"I love you, Jaden Wilder. You kill this guy and come home to me, you understand?" he said, sounding stronger.

"I love you, too, and I swear I will. Now run."

I took everything I had to hang up that phone, but I had no choice.

I placed the phone back on the counter and thanked the girl before heading out of the door and booking it back to the bike. But the moment I reached it, three cop cars with blaring sirens and flashing lights pulled into the alley.

Now that I had completed my mission, I had a new goal in mind. Time to have some fun and make myself famous.

~*~

At 6:35 in the morning, I had completed my morning 7k run and finished things off with some bench-pressing with Scott as my spotter. I was staying at my apartment in upstate New York, working the final agreements for a new contract with our arms dealer here. As Scott spotted, we discussed potential setbacks if this new contract didn't pan out the way it needed to. I knew what I expected, but I never let my guard down when it came to business.

The door to my weight room opened with one of my guards rushing in with his cell phone clutched to his chest. His face was glossy with sweat, and his eyes were lit with obvious anxiety. What the fuck happened now?

"Sir, there's been a situation," he practically squeaked.

I completed my fifteenth rep of 525 pounds and set the weights back into place, sitting up to wipe the sweat from my brow with my arm. I held

my hand out for the phone, and he quickly handed it to me.

“What,” I said sternly. It was too early for this shit.

“Sir, there’s been a bit of a situation, but I don’t-”

“I’m aware there’s a situation, asshole. Now, what it is?” I practically spat to Eric. I hated when people tried to beat around the bush with me.

“Jaden’s escaped, sir.”

My mind instantly went blank as I pondered what he had just said. She what?

As my comprehension of his words connected, rage began to simmer my blood to a boil.

“What,” I said dangerously, slowly rising from the bench.

“I’m not sure how she did, but she managed to start a fire outside of the house and took off on the Panigale. Her GPS signal shows she made it into town, so I don’t know how she made it past the perimeter with her collar activated.”

Son of a bitch ...

I pinched the bridge of my nose. “Is she, at least, wearing a helmet?” I asked beyond annoyed and pissed off.

“I don’t believe so, sir,” Eric replied. “But Hagen has already been informed. He and his men are searching for her right now, along with Colin and Tristan. Ken and I are already on the road, as well, and the fire has been contained. Though there was a significant amount of damage and several men were injured.”

I released a long irritated sigh and nearly crushed the phone in my hand. “Find her,” I ordered and hung up, tossing the phone back to Mike and dismissing him. I grabbed my personal phone and immediately deactivated the shocking mechanism to Jaden’s collar. I didn’t need it accidentally shocking her while she was on a motorcycle with over 200 horsepower and no goddamn helmet.

“What happened?” asked Scott.

I tilted my head back to stretch my neck and exhaled a heavy breath.

“My little hellcat has escaped her cage,” I replied.

“Ha!” Scott almost started laughing. “Damn, that girl is full of surprises.”

“No shit,” I said, placing my hands on my hips and beginning to pace my workout room. “Conniving little bitch,” I whispered under my breath. “How close are we to finding the rest of her family?”

We had most of the addresses already, but we were missing a few out of state, and I wanted every bit of information we could find before I decided to execute my plan.

"We're only missing two addresses. She has an aunt and uncle in Louisiana and a cousin somewhere in northern Michigan," Scott replied.

"I want those addresses tonight. No excuses," I ordered. Scott nodded.

"And let's send a couple of our guys out to pay her uncle in Muskegon a little visit, huh? I want to have something fresh for her to watch while I fuck the ever living shit out of her."

"Will do," Scott said, already prepared with his phone.

"And get Hagen on the phone," I ordered.

"Already dialing him," Scott replied as he held the phone up on speaker.

Hagen answered on the first ring.

"Hey, buddy, what's goin' on?" he said, sounding slightly distracted.

"You pick up my little runner yet?" I asked him harshly.

"Not yet, but we're hot on her heels. I gotta hand it to her. Your girl is fast on that thing."

I almost groaned out loud thinking about Jaden riding around on my bike at high speeds and without a helmet. I knew she knew what she was doing, especially since she was on the same bike she used to own herself, but mine was modified, and if she crashed I would absolutely fucking lose it.

"Apprehend her carefully, Hagen. I don't need her crashing and getting herself killed, you hear me?"

"Yeah, I hear ya. She'll be fine. What do you want me to do with her when we get her?"

"Just keep her in a secluded holding cell. I'll pick her up when I get back."

"You got it."

"I want a full report when she's safe, got it?"

"Yeah, yeah. Look, I gotta go. I'll call ya when we have her." And he hung up.

"Pull up her security tapes," I told Scott as I began to slowly pace again.

He opened the laptop nearby and fiddled around with it until he turned it toward me to reveal the last hour before she escaped. I sat down and watched intently on how she figured out exactly what would enable her to escape. I saw her go to sleep, woke up in the middle of the night, and basically created a Molotov cocktail with the shit in her own bathroom. How the fuck had I let this happen? But what really blew my mind was when she took what looked like rubber shoe soles, glued them together, and wrapped them around her throat under the collar.

“Son of a bitch ...” I muttered under my breath.

She then changed her clothes and bolted the fuck right out, bypassing all my fuck-up guards and taking off on my blacked out Panigale. I slammed my fists down on the table and rose from my chair so fast that it slammed down to the floor behind me.

“Fuck!” I roared. I paced back and forth, trying to contain my rage until I finally started laughing at the audacity of it all. I guess Jaden was right. I really had underestimated her.

“Call Moross,” I told Scott. “Tell him I want to meet an hour earlier so we can wrap this shit up. We have a flight to catch.”

Chapter Thirty-Nine

Chase

The wind whipped through my hair as I took off down the alley, burning rubber as I tore off into the town. I knew it was that sheriff on my ass, along with a few of his men. I took a quick look back as I sped down the main street and saw three flashing cop cars on my tail. Well, the gig was up, but at least, I had completed my mission, and now, I wanted to take it a step further. I wanted to see if I could make myself famous.

I tore off into the main road, making a right and headed for the big city I could see way off into the distance. It looked like it was maybe twenty miles away. I kicked the bike all the way into fifth gear, riding eighty miles an hour in a forty-mile zone, hoping it might actually cause a helicopter to enter the chase. I wanted my fucking face all over the news so the world could see me.

Thankfully, with it being past three thirty in the morning and stuck in a small town, there was no one around. No cars on the street, no walking passersby to accidentally run over. Besides the sirens blaring behind me, it was actually a pretty quiet and peaceful night, and with the wind and hair in my face, I almost felt free. Almost.

I knew the speed I was going at was dangerous. Plus, I didn't have a helmet. But fuck, I hadn't been on a bike for several months, and I missed the rush my Ducati at home could give me. I could not believe my luck in finding out that Darren had the same bike as I did. Even all the settings on the bike were perfect. Darren was so going to kick my ass after this.

The cops were closing in on me now, yelling at me to pull over, but I just flipped them off knowing they were dirty anyway. And then I noticed something black and shiny keeping up with me on the next street over. I looked to my right and saw the exact same thing. Darren's guards. They were trying to close me in.

I saw as they sped up even more, and then suddenly, they turned a corner onto the main street and blocked the entire street. I kicked it into

sixth gear and brought my speed up to 96 mph and left the cops in my dust. I could see the guards exit their vehicles yelling at me to stop, but just before I reached them, I decelerated, and maneuvered right between their cars, nearly running them over. I noticed the drivers remained in their cars and immediately took off after me.

Once I passed them, I decided to have a little fun. I pulled the clutch in just enough as I brought my RPMs to rise up to the torque peak and then quickly released, the front tire lifting and bringing me into a fantastic wheelie as I tore off down the street.

With my headlights still off, I quickly sped down another street with fewer lights, hoping to conceal myself better. Darren couldn't have made it easier with the bike completely blacked out. The only thing that really gave me away was that my engine was loud as fuck. I headed down another street that ran parallel to the main road, still hoping to make it to the city.

I could still hear the sirens and the roar of the BMWs in the background until my GPS signal finally revealed the street I was on. But then something magical happened as I felt a searchlight come over my bike, with the whopping sound of helicopter blades above. I looked up at the giant newscaster helicopter and smiled. Bingo.

But now my location was completely given away and stealth mode quickly became obsolete.

I turned my lights back on and took off, popping another quick wheelie, but only to suddenly find three black BMWs ahead of me, with the cops closing in behind me. Fuck, they might actually box me in.

I was going too fast to make a quick turn, and if I slowed down, the cops behind me would definitely box me in. If I sped up, the three BMWs would prevent my advance. Shit.

The three BMWs ahead of me were flanked in a triangle formation and all at once, they all started to hit their brakes with the cops no more than ten feet behind me, way too close for comfort. But then, eventually, everyone got too close and successfully blocked me in. I hit my brakes, both BMWs that now flanked my sides pulled in so close that they were less than a foot away from me.

As soon as we were at a dead stop, the BMWs were close enough to me that I was able to reach out with my legs and press their car doors closed with my feet. They pushed and jammed on the doors, yelling at me to knock it off, but I didn't know quite what they were thinking. There was barely

any room for their doors to open anyway with bike successfully wedged between them. One of them finally got smart and started to roll down their window while one of the guards in the driver's seat got out.

In a rush, I kicked off one of the doors and managed to leap out between the cars, landing on the top of the BMW to my right, jumping off the hood, and taking off at a dead run. All sorts of lights were on me as more adrenaline pumped through my veins while the cops ran after me, shouting my name along with orders I did not intend to follow.

One of the cops finally caught up with me and made the mistake of grabbing my upper arm. I turned and side kicked him in the gut and then retracted for a second kick right under his chin. Another cop advanced on me, attempting to strike my face, but I quickly spun low, knocking his ankles out from under him and dropping the motherfucker to the ground. I then quickly slammed an axe kick right down on his throat. A third cop came up behind me and grabbed both my arms, while another came up in front of me and tried to hit me in the face.

I instantly moved my head to the side and he ended up punching the cop behind me in the mouth. I kicked the guy in front of me in the face and sent him back a few feet while I swiftly brought my heel up between the legs of the cop who held me and shot it up into his groin. He loosened his hold immediately, allowing me to slam my elbow into his face several times before he finally loosened his grip. I was then able to take hold of his arm, lock it, and then tossed his limp ass over my shoulder, slamming his body into the ground and forcing another axe kick into his gut.

By then, the rest of the cops made it to the scene and basically dog piled me to the ground. I screamed in absolute rage as I felt something prick the side of my arm. A wave of dizziness quickly consumed me as it dawned on me that my hands were now being cuffed behind my back. I was then yanked to my feet and held up by my upper arms as my mind fought against the drug they had pumped me with.

All kinds of shouting was going on, but I couldn't make out a single word. Flashing lights blurred together in a storm of red and blue as I was dragged to a squad car. I looked on to the distance to find Darren's guards leaning up against their cars, one of them smoking a cigarette as they watch me get carted off with the cops. Two of them I didn't recognize, as they were both dressed in black suits and actually looked like the same person. I

gave them all a cocky smile and laughed. I was sure they were in just as much trouble as I was.

The ground beneath me felt like it was crumbling with each step I took. It felt like I had downed an entire bottle of tequila on an empty stomach ... in an hour. My vision blurred, sounds were nothing but noise, and my stomach felt like it was on a roller coaster.

Eventually, I realized I had been tossed into the back of a cop car and was now on my way to wherever the fuck they were taking me. I presumed back to Darren's. As we drove, I laid on my side; my legs sprawled out across the seat as I groaned from the effects of the drug.

"Where we going, boys?" I asked as if I was some child tired from a long road trip.

One of the cops looked back through the fenced window and acknowledged me. He was the sheriff who brought the gardener to Darren. Hagen, I think his name was.

"Ya know, you're in a lot of trouble, little lady," he said with a toothpick in his mouth.

"Yeah, no shit." I giggled and then finally blacked out in the backseat.

Chapter Forty

The Wait

I woke up hours later, groggy, thirsty, and with a pounding headache. I barely opened my eyes to find I was, in fact, not back at Darren's, but what looked like a prison cell for solitary confinement. I was lying on a padded bench, surrounded by cement walls, a toilet and sink, and a large door with a single small square window. Panic rushed me.

Lying back down on the bench, I tried to calm myself down. I was nearly shaking now. Darren was probably well aware of the situation, and I wondered if I had possibly ruined his important business trip. Would he come home from it because of my escape or would he continue on knowing his cop buddies had successfully apprehended me? It didn't really matter. He would be furious anyway, and my punishment would probably last weeks, if not months. Whatever—it was worth it.

Gathering my strength, I slowly stumbled my way to the sink and began dragging handfuls of water to my desert of a mouth. The water calmed my roiling stomach and brought me back to the present as I splashed it on my face. I felt a little better after quickly using the toilet and rinsing my hands and arms under the sink.

Then that sheriff fuck came in without so much as a knock as I dried myself off with some paper towel.

"Well, look who's up?" he said enthusiastically with a grin.

I glared at him from across the room, instinctively pulling my left leg back and giving him only the side of my body to face.

"The fuck do you want?" I asked with a scowl.

He let out a deep sigh before finally speaking.

"Jaden, I'm Sheriff Hagen. We've met previously, you remember?"

"Like I could forget."

"Of course," he said with a nod. "Well, I'm in charge of safety for this little town you just tried to run through last night."

I raised an eyebrow at him.

“How safe can it be if you have a criminal organization living right under your doormat?” I asked him.

“Oh, you mean Mr. Davis?” he asked casually.

“Yeah, that asshole.”

“Well, you see,” he started, “I’ve been working with the Davis’s for over twenty years now. I’ve grown to realize what works and what doesn’t work and how to keep our little town and employees happy.”

“By sleeping with the devil? You sound like a real hero.”

“When you’re in my position, Jaden, you do what you have to do to keep the peace, and if keeping off Mr. Davis’s tail accomplishes that, then I have no problem with it.”

“You mean so long as he continues to pay you for your discretion ...”

“Well, to each their own.” He chuckled as if it was no big deal.

I shook my head at him. What a piece of shit.

“Anyway, I came to tell you that Mr. Davis is aware of the situation and has requested that we keep you in our custody until he returns from his trip to collect you.”

I rolled my eyes and looked away from him. “And just when will that be?”

“Tomorrow, I believe.”

“Well, why don’t you go ahead and tell him to take his sweet-ass time. There’s no rush,” I replied venomously.

“Sure.” He smiled and started to head out, but then turned back to the door and suddenly turned the lights out. I looked over to him in a panic, but he just smirked at me.

“Oh, I was also asked to keep these off until he said otherwise,” Hagen answered and then shut the door. The only light I had was the small amount shining in from the hallway, which wasn’t much. I was then left alone in the dark and I curled into myself on the mattress, silent tears falling down my cheeks until I fell asleep.

For the remainder of the day, I was kept cooped up in that cell in the dark and was fed only once. I was given a simple plastic cup of water and a bologna sandwich with mustard. That was it; but it hardly made a difference since I ended up throwing the nasty shit up anyway. My stomach was still

too fucked up from the drug they gave me to be able to keep anything down. I didn't know why Darren was having them starve me, though. It didn't make sense since he was always so keen on my having the perfect body and keeping it healthy. Maybe now he didn't care.

I pulled the soles of the shoes out from my collar and tossed them in the trash bin. Not like I'd ever get to see those things again. I tried to spend most of my time sleeping off the shitty aftereffects of the drug, but in the end, I still felt like shit. I drank water until I thought my stomach would explode to help flush it out of me, and that seemed to help as I spent most of my night pissing it away or vomiting it up.

For some reason, I was thankful for the darkness in my cell. It provided me with a sense of clarity as I thought about what I had accomplished last night. I had finally proved Darren wrong ... and it was an amazing moment. I had showed him that he was not the master of all and that I was capable of far more than he ever imagined. Let this be a lesson to *him* for fucking with what's *mine*!

Hopefully, Jason was halfway around the world by now with my mother and brothers in tow. I hoped Jordan has disappeared to her aunt's place in Paris, France. She should be safe there. I didn't know what would happen to the rest of my sparse family or where they would go. I just hoped it was somewhere Darren wouldn't be able to find them.

The following day, I'd spent hours praying Darren's plane would crash and he'd die a horrible fiery death, but I doubted that would happen. He'd probably survive the damn thing anyway like the fucking cockroach that he was.

That morning, I had been given a small bowl of bland oatmeal and black coffee for breakfast, both of which I barely touched. I laid on the bench, staring up at the ceiling with my hands behind my head and my ankles crossed, trying to keep myself relaxed for when the time finally came for Darren to come get me. This time it wouldn't be just a little battle between us; it would be a full-on war. I could feel it in the pit of my stomach. And I knew I was going to fucking lose and lose hard. It was okay, though. I said it would all be worth it, and even though I had no idea what was coming for me, I still didn't regret a damn thing.

A few hours later, the lights suddenly came on and bright light instantly blinded me. I squinted my eyes but remained in my relaxed position as someone stepped through the door. I didn't even have to fully

open my eyes to know who it was. My entire body could sense him before my eyes could even register him. I could probably pick him out of a crowd blindfolded.

My muscles tensed as my nose caught a whiff of Darren's scent and my stomach retracted into a thorny bush of knots. Terror began to fill my body knowing he was here and I tried hard not to show my fear, but I could already feel his rage in the air like a thick reminder of how much trouble I was in.

When my eyes had finally adjusted to the light, I formed a sleepy glare on my face before I finally sat up to meet his stare. He was leaned up against the wall nearest the door, his arms crossed over his chest with the most pissed off, terrifying look I had ever seen. It made my blood run cold, and I suddenly felt myself shiver with fear.

Then randomly, he lifted his hands and began to clap slowly, as if he was applauding me. I entertained his gesture and brought my arm up, twisting my wrist and hand up and lowering my head in a bow, a slight smirk on my face.

"Well done, Jaden," he finally said, his voice low and cold as ice. "You successfully bypassed my security and made it off my estate."

I just nodded with an amused look as if it was the greatest accomplishment ever. It kind of was.

"Not only did you manage to get away," he began, "but you also attempted to burn my childhood home to the ground, caused several second-degree burns on many of the men who were there to guard you, stole one of my bikes, and put yourself in serious danger by riding around at high speeds in a small town with no helmet, drawing attention to yourself and making contact with your fucking family. Have I forgotten anything?"

"Probably cussing. I did a lot of that." I shrugged. Sarcasm always made me feel better.

"Well, now that's just a given."

I shrugged again. "Could have been worse. I considered blowing up one of your sports cars, but I didn't have the time. You should consider yourself lucky."

A soft laugh left his throat as he rubbed his face and began to pace the room slowly. His suit was a little disheveled and he looked like he hadn't slept much.

“Do you have any idea of the amount of *bullshit* I have been dealing with because of you?” he roared at me.

“Well, considering the amount of bullshit you’ve already put countless other women and me through, you cannot imagine the immensity of the fuck I do not give,” I replied harshly.

He slowly shook his head at me. He seemed somewhat collected on the outside, but inside, I knew he was boiling with rage. I couldn’t really blame him, though. But, of course, I wasn’t done fueling the fire.

“I don’t know what the fuck was going through your head when you thought you might actually get away from me. You had to have known I would find you.”

“You and I both know this was never about escaping,” I replied. “It was about sending a message, and I successfully did that, so whatever happens next doesn’t matter to me because I did what I needed to do. And ya know what, let’s just be honest here. You’re not mad at me for getting away. You’re mad at yourself because you underestimated me like I said you would. It’s okay, Darren, you can admit it.”

Darren stared at me for a short second before his mouth curved into a smile and a low chuckle left his throat.

“I suppose you’re right, princess. You are full of unexpected surprises ... but it won’t happen ever again,” he promised darkly.

“I’m sure it won’t.” I glared back at him.

Challenge accepted.

~*~

I’m not really proud of what I did next, but Jaden had to learn who was in control, that running away or even thinking about running was never an option and that she would always pay for it. For the last twenty-four hours, I had been dealing with some serious damage control. I was running on only a few hours of irritated sleep and was stressed and aggravated beyond belief.

At least, my meeting in New York turned out to be successful as fuck, with this year’s contract promising to be more profitable than last year’s. If Jaden had fucked that up, things would be even worse for her.

I had sent orders out for my men to finish tracking the rest of her family, but most of the immediate ones had suddenly disappeared. Her old

boyfriend had vanished without a trace, along with her mother, brothers, and best friend, which sorely pissed me off. I wanted that fuck's head on my fucking desk. They did manage to find one family member, though ...

I knew Jaden was weak and tired from the slight starvation Hagen had been putting her through. Normally, I would have been against it, but I wanted her to realize how grateful she should be to me for taking care of her at my home. Plus, I wanted her essentially diminished for what I was about to do to her.

The first thing I did was backhand her across the face, purposely splitting her lip. I wanted it to hurt every time I kissed her for the next few days. She groaned, slumping to the side of the bench before I grabbed her and tossed her around the room, slamming her into the walls while she fell to the floor in a heap. She tried defending herself, but when I used as much of my strength as I did, she could barely even stand. I picked her small frame up from the floor and slammed her down onto the padded bench. She groaned as I ripped her skort from her lower body in shreds, finally plunging into her so hard she screamed and immediately began to cry.

Her tears only made me harder as I fucked her with so much force I expected her to feel it for the next several days. But what made it even better ... was that she was fucking wet. I had successfully trained her body for this specific conditioned response so that every time she was afraid of me, her body would still want me. And I fucking loved it.

I ripped her shirt in pieces from her body and tore apart her bra, roughly gripping her flesh and biting into her. She tried to claw and punch at me, but I grabbed both of her wrists and slammed them down above her head causing her to shriek in terror.

Good. I wanted her scared. I wanted her absolutely terrified so she would know who she was fucking with and that she was never to run from me again. She would fear me for the rest of her life because she would know exactly what I would do to her should she ever disobey me like this again.

After about a minute, I flipped her over onto her stomach and re-entered her just as hard. She screamed again, clawing at the bench, but she had nowhere to go. I then took out my phone and began to play the video my men had sent me from a day ago. I set it down in front of Jaden's face and pulled her head back by her hair so she had no choice but to watch.

The video showed her uncle, who lived on his own in Muskegon, Michigan. After my men had tortured him for a short while, they lit his house on fire, leaving him to the flames as she had my home. Luckily, I had a sprinkler system set up for any such occasion.

Jaden screamed and cried even harder as she watched the video. She tried to fight me again, but she had nothing to go on.

“I hope it was worth it, Jaden,” I spat in her ear. “Because if you thought things were bad before, they are about to get so much worse for you. I told you running was a mistake. I told you I would always find you, and now, you’re going to pay the fucking consequences.”

A few seconds later, I came inside her and she continued to scream and cry under me, but I wasn’t letting up. I would never let up.

I picked her back up and tossed her again, fury boiling in my veins as I thought about all the other bullshit she could have accomplished had she had more time. I grabbed her right wrist, pulling her to me and squeezing hard until I felt the bone finally snap from the pressure. She screamed and thrashed as I brought her to my chest and crushed her to me. I cut off her cries as I pulled her face to mine and kissed her fiercely, tasting the fresh blood on her lip.

“Darren, stop, please!” She screamed when I finally pulled away, terror filling her voice, but I refused to back down. I suddenly had no desire to hear her speak. She had broken so many rules, and now, she would learn.

I gripped her jaw, squeezing it in my hand until I felt the bone crunch like sand. Jaden’s muffled screams sent a flurry in my chest as I held her there, her tears falling over my fingers as I kept her mouth shut. I tossed her against another wall before grabbing her again, snaking my arms around her rib cage and tightened my grip until I felt the bones crunch under my weight. Jaden tried to scream, but it only came out as tight little screeches and gasps. I then let go of her and she dropped to the floor in a heap at my feet.

She shook at my feet—fear, pain, and regret pouring from her eyes. I pulled out the needle I had in my pocket and bent down over her broken body. I plunged the needle into her arm and she groaned a little more. I then reach down and spoke into her ear before the drug kicked in.

“Run from me again, Jaden,” I challenged her. “Because if it ever happens again, I can’t promise you I’ll stop next time.”

I heard her whimper slightly before the drug finally took over and she passed out on the floor. I then gently picked her up, wrapped her naked and bruised body in my suit jacket, and carried her in my arms as I walked out of the cell and back toward the lobby. Scott, Hagen, and a few of my men were waiting there as I walked out with Jaden in hand.

“All set?” Hagen asked me as I approached, a little bit of concern in his eyes.

I nodded gravely at him. Now was not the time to ask me questions.

Scott joined me while the rest of my men followed behind. I headed out to the black armor plated Escalade that was waiting for us in the parking lot. I carefully righted Jaden in my arms and laid her in the backseat with me. I eased her head on my lap as she slept the pain I had just caused her away. When she woke up, she wouldn't be feeling much better.

Everything I did, I had already planned to do. I fractured her jaw because I didn't want to hear her fucking speak for the next month. I fractured her ribs because I didn't want her to move a single inch without the painful reminder of her stupid attempt to run. And I broke her right wrist because I wanted her skills diminished so she could see that I could easily take them away if I wanted to.

The car quickly took off as Scott got in the driver's seat and we headed for my private jet. With my house under construction and Jaden clearly capable of manipulating the shock collar, I needed her recovery to occur in a secure location – one I knew she would never be able to escape from – my private island in the Caribbean.

I already had Sid set everything up for Jaden since she'd be out of commission for a while. He was already there, waiting with a private nurse who would finish the job once Sid had to leave. I only planned to be there for the first couple of days as I had so much more shit to take care of back home. Once I had that under control, I would lay low for a while on the island with Jaden while she recovered, reminding her every day of the rules and what would happen if she didn't follow them. I was not about to let this fuck-up happen ever again.

I looked down at my sleeping broken beauty and began to string my fingers through the softness of her hair. Even with all the bruises, she was still the most beautiful thing I had ever seen and the thought of her being gone from my life had the storm inside me raging for blood. In a very short span of time, she had become my obsession, my light, my reason for living.

It was the most remarkable thing and completely unexplainable. I didn't know how to rationalize my need for her, but anything more than a moment away from her presence was absolute torture. I craved her all the time and the fact she fought me at nearly every turn always had me excited as fuck. She was the color in a white room, the sugar in black coffee, and the fire in my darkness.

My addiction.

When Jaden woke up, things were going to be very different for her. If she thought she hated me now, she had no idea what she'd soon be feeling when she finally opened her beautiful amber eyes. Jaden was mine. And I made it my lifelong goal to make her embrace it. And I knew just how to ensure it.

A dark smile formed on my lips as we pulled up to my jet, the sun setting beyond the horizon in a wave of golden embers. The wheels in my head turned a thousand miles a minute while I twirled a strand of Jaden's red hair around my fingers. So beautiful, so mine ... and so infinitely fucked.

Chapter Forty-One

Recovery

~*~

I woke up to the sounds of a slow rhythmic beep. Beep ... beep ... beep over and over again. My eyes felt heavy, my entire body roared with pain, and it felt like a jackhammer was pounding away inside my head. Forcing my eyelids to crack open, I saw the source of the beep. It was a heart monitor. I looked down to notice I was in a hospital bed with an IV inserted into my arm and the heart monitor clip attached to my finger. Groaning, I adjusted my body only to wince in ultimate pain. Everything hurt. Everything.

I tried to open my mouth to call out for someone, and suddenly realized that I couldn't. I heard the heart monitor spike as fear took over my body as I realized my jaw wouldn't open. I began to panic and nearly screamed.

"She's awake," I heard a male voice call out to someone, and I instantly turned my head to the source to find a guard dressed in a black suit and tie standing beside the door. Then a woman, whom I didn't recognize, quickly came out of another door near the guard.

"Oh, good," she said as she rushed over to me. She was older, had short, thin brown hair, with a plumper frame and bright red lips. She looked to be about in her mid-sixties as she came up to my bedside. "Good morning, Miss Wilder. I'm sorry I wasn't here when you woke up. You must be terribly confused."

No shit!

I looked at her with panic in my eyes. Who the fuck was this woman and where the fuck was I? And why the fuck couldn't I open my jaw?!

"Shh, shh, calm down before you further injure yourself. You're going to be okay. I'm Nurse Ginsby, and I'm going to be taking care of you while you recover from your recent injuries."

I tried to calm my breathing down as I attempted to get her to tell me the extent of my recent “injuries.” I wanted to know what kind of damage Darren had done to my body. I lifted my right wrist only to wince in serious pain and look down to find it was in a cast.

Motherfucker.

“Now, don’t struggle,” she urged me. “Your right wrist is broken and two of your ribs are fractured. Your lower jaw was also fractured which is why you’re mouth has been wired shut to prevent further injury. You also suffered a slight concussion along with multiple external bruising.”

Now, I was pissed. Darren had not only completely immobilized me, but he also took away my ability to speak and cry for help. He was such a cruel son of a bitch!

“Your prognosis is good, though,” the nurse beamed positively. “You’ve been asleep for a couple of days and your body is already beginning to heal itself at a fine rate. Depending on your amount of rest, you should be all healed up within a few short months and your jaw will be unwired within the next thirty days.”

I raised my eyebrows. Thirty days? My jaw would be wired shut for thirty days?! Rage started to fill me again and the beeps on my heart monitor sped up.

“Now, keep yourself calm,” she pleaded. “Mr. Davis will not be happy if you do something to slow your recovery.”

I gave her the glare of death.

“Where is he?” I mumbled without opening my mouth and then winced. Any kind of vibration I made with my throat hurt my jaw.

“Mr. Davis is away on business and is not currently on the island. He means to return as soon as he knows you’re awake. I imagine he will be here tomorrow.”

“Island?” I asked her. We were on an island now?

“Yes, sorry, you were unconscious when they brought you here. We are on Mr. Davis’s private island.”

“Where?” I spoke softly hoping I might actually have a location disclosed to me for once.

“The Bahamas, and we’re expected to have great weather this season so there should be plenty of motivation for you to get better so you can soak up some of that sun.”

The only motivation I had to get better was so I could kill Mr. Davis myself one day. I sat back against the pillow and tried to relax, looking around the room to familiarize myself with my surroundings. A few chairs were spread throughout the white linoleum floor, a small dinner table complete with four chairs, a comfy looking couch against the window, and a fridge next to what looked like a small kitchen complete with counters, cabinets, and a sink. To my left looked to be the bathroom and another door that I didn't know what it led to. Further left was another door, where the guard sat in a chair next to it, staring straight ahead. I had a feeling he was a permanent fixture in the room.

"I'm just going to give you a quick assessment, and then I'll fix you something to eat that your stomach should be able to handle."

I nodded, and it fucking hurt.

Nurse Ginsby assessed everything—checking my breathing, drawing some blood, and determined my pain scale, which was a fucking twenty, by the way. She told me the IV was for my fluids, antibiotics, and my pain medication. A lovely catheter had also been inserted, and I wondered if that was the source of the soreness I felt down there, or maybe it was from Darren.

When she was satisfied, she went over to the kitchen area and started pulling out some fruit from the fridge. I couldn't see much of what she was doing, but it looked like she was making me a smoothie, which was probably all I could eat right now. When she returned, she came back with a bottle of water and a smoothie cup with a bendy straw. She cracked the bottle of water open first and put another bendy straw in it.

"Drink this first," she said. "It'll ease your stomach."

She held the water to my mouth, and I tentatively barely opened my lips to take the straw. I lightly sucked on the straw, groaning in pain as I did, but when the water reached my mouth, I felt a wave of instant relief wash over me. The water felt so good in my mouth, and it calmed my now aching stomach. I finished half the bottle before she took it away and put the smoothie in a cup holder that was close enough to reach my face.

"I want you to sip on this for a while. It's a fruit smoothie with lots of protein and vitamins. I tried to make it as thin as possible, but you'll need to be careful with the suction so it doesn't hurt too much."

I gave her a tiny nod and wrapped my lips around the straw, sucking the thicker liquid down in my gut, the sweet taste of bananas and

strawberries on my tongue. It wasn't easy to suck the smoothie through my teeth and swallow, but when I did, I felt a small wave of nausea come over me and backed off.

"It's the medication," she said. "And the fact you haven't eaten in the last three days."

I looked at her in shock. It had been three days? What the fuck?!

"We've kept you asleep to help your body heal faster," she replied without looking at me as she checked my heart monitor. "Now, if you can manage to get a good fourth of that down, I'll let you sleep, but you really need to get some food in your stomach first."

I glanced away from her, trying to relax so I could finish more of the smoothie. I took a few more sips before the door to my left opened and I turned to see who it was. A man I recognized instantly. Sid. Darren must have brought him in to help take care of me. He walked his short, fat, old ass toward me, his hands in the pockets of his white doctor coat and addressed the nurse.

"How's our patient?" he asked her.

Uh, I'm right here, asshole.

"Doing well," she said, turning to him with a smile. "Vitals are up and her awareness is good. Just trying to get something remotely solid in her stomach so she can rest."

"Good," Sid said as he looked over my chart. I eyed him with hatred to the point where I swore he could feel it. When he finally found his balls, he looked up at me with a no-nonsense look on his face. He didn't care about me. He was just here on Darren's payroll.

"Hello, Jaden. Remember me?" he asked me.

I rolled my eyes and flipped him off with my good hand. Maybe I should start taking up sign language.

"Of course, you do." He smiled, looking back down at my chart.

I shook my head at him and looked away toward the window with white open wood blinds. I could see some vegetation growing around the windows, but they certainly weren't plants I recognized. Definitely tropical.

And then I felt the room spin. Fuck, I was groggy.

"Jaden," Sid addressed me. I turned my head to glare at him, blinking the random dizziness away. "We're going to make you better, but we're going to need your absolute cooperation, understand? Otherwise, your recovery will take longer than expected, and I know you don't want that."

If it hadn't been so painful, I would have snorted with laughter. Everybody wanted my cooperation. Whatever.

"Now, if you can finish a little more of the smoothie, I'll give you a sedative to help you sleep."

Sleep suddenly sounded like a fantastic idea. I really didn't want to be awake anymore.

I gave Sid another glare before I reluctantly turned and wrapped my lips around the straw to gently suck down more of the smoothie. At least, it tasted good. I managed to get another quarter of it down and that seemed to satisfy him. I laid back against the pillows, suddenly exhausted from the excitement and exertion. Sid walked over to my IV bag and injected something into it.

Within thirty seconds, I felt the drug kick in and my eyes felt even heavier than before. The moment I shut them, I had a feeling I wouldn't be waking up for the rest of the day.

Chapter Forty-Two

Spark

The following day, I woke up to find Nurse Ginsby fiddling with something at the kitchen counter. It looked like she was preparing me another smoothie, the irritating sound of the blender confirming my suspicion. I groaned in protest, wanting nothing more than to disappear back into the blankness of my sleep. I didn't even dream. There was just ... nothing. Quiet, peaceful nothing.

"Oh, good." The nurse turned to me with a smile. "Sorry I had to wake you, but it's time for you to eat again since you didn't eat much yesterday."

I wasn't even close to hungry. Just tired, groggy, and achy as hell. I wanted to go back to sleep, especially since I was sure Darren's stupid ass would be visiting me today. Ginsby checked my monitor and my vitals before placing the smoothie cup into the holder by my face. I took a few sips here and there, tasting pomegranate, cherries, and raspberries ... and fuck if it wasn't amazing.

"On a scale of one to ten, how bad is the pain today?" Ginsby suddenly asked me.

I brought my left hand up, exposed five fingers, and then flashed her two more. I surprisingly didn't feel as much pain today as I had yesterday. It must have just been the initial shock of things.

"Okay," she said, nodding as she pressed a few buttons on my monitor. "We'll up your pain meds just a little bit."

She then returned to the fridge and brought back another bottle of water, cracked it open, topped it with a bendy straw and placed it in the other holder. I took a few sips of that, ignoring the pain in my jaw from the suction.

"I've been informed to tell you that Mr. Davis will be here to see you within the hour. He landed on the island late last night, but you were asleep then."

Like that'd stop him.

I was sure Darren had already visited me last night; I just wasn't awake to know it and thank God for that. If I saw him a hundred years from now, it'd still be too soon. The nurse then grabbed a small tablet and set it on the table beside my bed.

"If you need to tell me anything specific, you can use this. There are also several apps on there for games, movies, and reading. No web browsing, though, I'm afraid."

Of course, not.

"Is there anything else you need right now?" she asked me.

Oh, the things I needed right now ...

The list was way too long and impossible to accomplish, so I gave her a small shake of my head and she nodded.

"Okay. Just push this button if anything changes, okay?" she said, pointing to the small red button on the left side of my bed. I nodded at her and she went on her way, picking up a book on the table and sitting down to read.

For the next thirty-five minutes, I laid there, absolutely bored out of my mind and completely disinterested in the tablet. I didn't feel like playing a game, watching a movie, or reading. I wanted my body to heal so I could get the fuck out of here. Sid came by for a few minutes to check on me, but he didn't have anything useful to say. Just that I needed to rest and cooperate.

I spent quite some time analyzing my room and the world outside of the windows. I could hear birds; they sounded different, but I liked it. I could hear the ocean, so it didn't sound like we were too far from the beach, but that was literally all I could hear. No cars, no horns, no people, just nothing. I had been isolated all over again.

A few minutes later, I heard the door to my left open, and I closed my eyes in anguish knowing it was Darren. I could feel him before he even opened the door, my body so well-tuned to his dominating presence.

"Out," I heard him say, and the mere sound of his voice brought tremors to my skin.

The guard and the nurse both immediately stood and left the room without a word, leaving me alone with him. I kept my head turned away from him as I focused on the sunlight outside the window, but the slow

rhythmic sound of his footsteps against the tiled floor made it hard to ignore.

He stopped at the left side of my bed, and I tensed from how close he was. He then leaned down and took the side of my still bruised face in his hand, rubbing his thumb along my cheek before placing a soft kiss on my temple. A wave of emotion came over me as I cringed into myself, two single tears falling down my face. Fear, rage, and pure unadulterated hatred all washed over me like a tidal wave and I instantly wished I was dead.

“How’s my princess?” Darren asked with that snide attitude of his. Yeah, he was considering this some personal victory. Fuck him.

I didn’t respond, just curled my lips in disgust while his thumbs gently wiped away my tears. He rose up then and walked toward the window, his hands resting behind his back. I glanced at him from the corner of my eye. He was in another suit of course; black jacket, black pants, white dress shirt, and black tie, clean-shaven, and hair styled to perfection.

Just go ...

He sighed heavily and finally spoke.

“I expect you to cooperate with Sid and his staff to ensure your recovery. We will not leave the island until I’m satisfied with your progression. So in essence, I’m giving you some control of when we return home. It’s all up to you.”

Oh, how sweet of him.

Darren then turned away from the window to address me, his hands remaining behind his back as he glared at me from across the room.

“I hope by now you realize escaping is not an option, and something you will never want to consider again. As I’ve said before, things can always get worse, and as of now, they will be.”

I was already aware things were going to get worse. I had calculated that long ago, but I was worried as to how bad he would make them.

“You will not take a single breath without my knowledge of it. You will not move or speak unless granted permission by me. All of your “freedoms” have been revoked and you can consider the luxury of privacy nonexistent. From now on, you will have twenty-four-hour supervision with several bodyguards, and you will not take a single step without my say-so first. Not until you can be trusted—if ever.”

Darren then headed over to my bedside and pulled a folded piece of paper from his jacket pocket. He unfolded it and tossed it into my lap, but I

didn't have the courage to move my eyes.

"And as for your little plan to save your family, you were not as successful as you thought you'd be. I have a strategy for everything, Jaden. Don't ever forget that and maybe next time you can save yourself the wasted pain and energy."

I winced my lips in absolute anger, but the pain radiating in my jaw brought more tears to my eyes. I fought against them, but they continued to well in the corners until one finally fell.

"I hope it was worth it," he said, straightening his jacket. "Because, as of yesterday, you're no longer a missing statistic. You're officially dead to the world."

I squinted in confusion as his words registered. What in the hell did he mean I was officially dead to the world? I finally looked up at him with my confusion, but he just smiled at me, leaned down, and kissed my forehead before righting himself.

"Get well soon, princess." He smirked. "I have a whole new curriculum for you, and I can't wait to get started."

With that, he sauntered out of the room with his hands in his pockets, looking perfectly pleased with himself as he opened the door and walked out, the guard and nurse returning in his stead.

I looked down at the piece of paper he placed on my lap and instantly saw my name in bold letters. I picked the paper up with my good hand and realized it was a news article, but the title had me confused and horrified all at the same time. "*Body found in Detroit Alley Confirmed as Missing 25-Year-Old, Jaden Wilder.*" My eyes widened while my heart monitor practically blasted from my pounding heart.

"Local police confirm the body found in an alley in downtown Detroit yesterday was identified as the missing woman. Severe thermal burns prevented fingerprint identification, but dental records have provided positive identification. The cause of death has been determined as a drug overdose. The remains were later soaked with gasoline and lit on fire, possibly to prevent identification. Police have been unsuccessful in locating the woman's mother and boyfriend to claim the body, but some of her distant family members have stepped forward. Funeral arrangements are being made for this Sunday ..."

My mind swam in a whirlpool of panic and terror as I couldn't even finish reading the article. I was dead. The world thought I was dead, and they were planning a funeral. A funeral where people who knew me might be, who would now unknowingly be placing themselves in danger. Not only that but another person, one whom I didn't even know, had taken my place on my deathbed and would now be buried six feet under because of me. Her family would never know the truth and neither would mine.

I suddenly couldn't breathe. My mouth instantly went dry and my vision spun like a carousel. I felt myself begin to hyperventilate while the heart monitor beeped like crazy.

"Jaden, Jaden, calm down," I heard the nurse say. "Jaden, I need you to calm down!"

My body shook in uncontrollable terror. Darren had won. I had failed my family because he knew their hearts better than I did. They wouldn't believe Jason if they were told I was dead. Thankfully, he and my mother and brothers were gone. He could keep them safe. I knew he could, but I couldn't say the same for everyone else.

Nurse Ginsby panicked around me as she tried to get me to calm down, but there was no hope there. I didn't even realize I was screaming until I noticed my tears fall onto the paper article. I crinkled the thing in my hand until Ginsby finally grabbed it and tore it away from me.

"Shit!" I heard her say as she started to pull a needle from one of the drawers nearby. I gripped and pulled at my hair as I practically thrashed in my bed. "Help me!" she yelled at the guard. He rushed over and held me down so she could stick the needle in my IV without missing.

"Shhh, Jaden. Shhh, it's okay," she said, trying to soothe me and she ran her hands through my hair, pushing it away from my face.

I felt a surge of exhaustion consume me and heard my heart monitor begin to slow again. My breathing eventually evened out as I rested my head against my pillow, tears still falling down my face, but it didn't silence the terror that resided in my heart.

It was over. I had lost, and now, I would remain on this island, broken and powerless against the hurricane I swore I would destroy. I closed my eyes and choked back a sob. What more could I do now?

Stop it.

I had nothing left. Nothing more to fight with. I was so weak and pathetic. Broken.

Stop being a little bitch, Jaden.

My fight was useless. He would always win. Always. How did I ever think I could compete with him? He was ruthless. He was cruel. And he owned me.

Knock it the fuck off and wake up. You're better than this.

What could I do? I was so weak.

You can stand the fuck back up because you're stronger than this.
Don't be such a pussy.

I took a deep breath and relaxed, nearly smiling.

There was another fight that was always useless, one I constantly lost no matter how hard I fought it ... and that was against my inner spirit. The one thing Darren could never break. She was right. I had to stop being a little bitch and stand back up. Darren chose me for my strength, and he would get nothing less. I might be broken now, but I would heal. I would regain that spark and light Darren's entire world on fire.

It was not over. It never would be until I had Darren Davis dead at my feet and his entire criminal organization decimated to ashes. Only then would I be done.

Relief and pride filled me as I closed my eyes, finally giving in to the drug the nurse had administered. I would have my vengeance ... right after this nap ...

To be continued...

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About the Author

J. Marie has been writing since she first learned the alphabet, but it wasn't until 25 years later that she finally decided to take the deep plunge into the depths of publishing. Her written work conveys the darker side of writing, bringing in to light what most may shy away from and she loves every second of it.

Her inspiration comes to her 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, it's an avalanche of ideas rushing through her head and it does not stop!

When she's not writing until the late hours of the night, she's working as a legal assistant at a prominent law firm in Michigan. She enjoys practicing and teaching martial arts in her spare time as well as tearing up the neighborhood riding around on her super fun Honda Grom.

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